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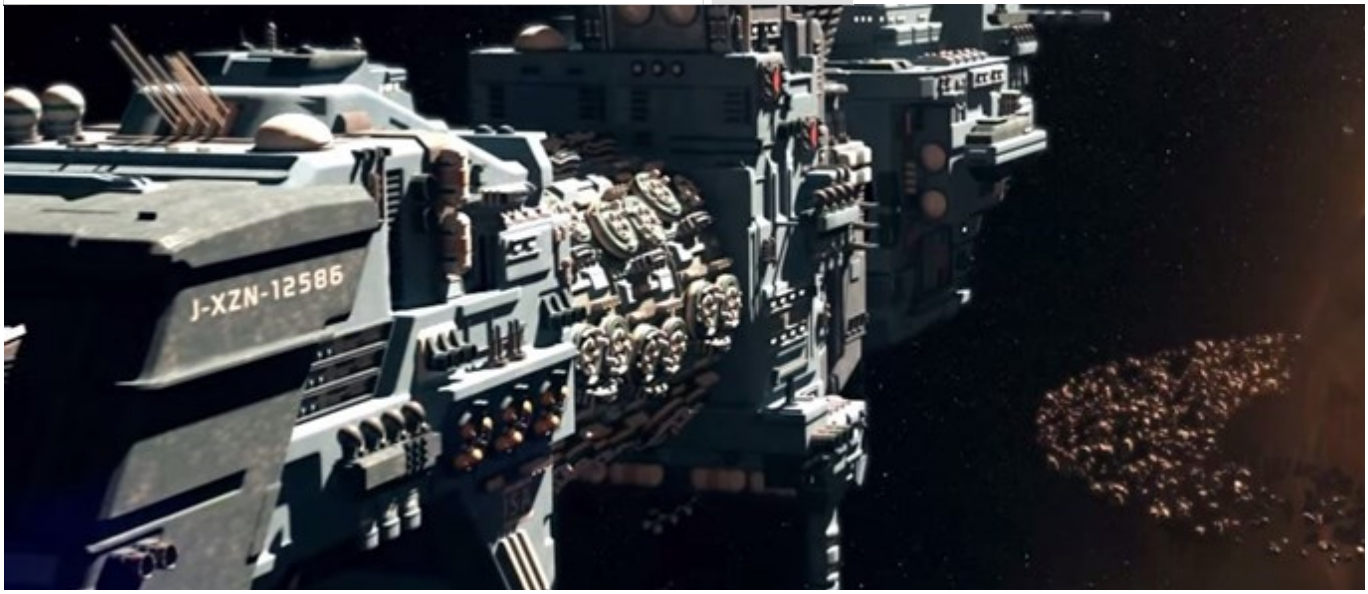

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J.U.L.I.A.: Among the Stars

is an interface-based narrative-driven adventure game developed by a two-men independent team. The game was developed thanks to a successful crowdfunding campaign. read more

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J.U.L.I.A.: Among the Stars - how the game was born

Author: KeenGamer
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Category: Other

We've got the opportunity to publish a very interesting history written by Jan Kavan who talks about the game, why it was created, how went the crowdfunding campaign, what were his feelings, expectations and fears. The game was very successful and here are some words to take a look behind the official stories and news on the web.

Enjoy the reading :-)

Jan Kavan:

Sometimes trying to fix a thing or two and then leaving game industry altogether can lead to unforeseen consequences. For example - you might end up creating an almost brand new game. This is how J.U.L.I.A.: Among the Stars "happened" to us.

(Lukáš Medek and Jan Kavan – two-men studio called CBE software)

Once upon a crowdfunding

It was February 2013 and we've just wrapped our tiring legal battle with our former publisher, whom we've sold our exclusive publishing rights to. At that point it also meant that we've invested three years of work and quite some money into our independent game J.U.L.I.A. without any possible ways how to get at least something back. As all the money we've obtained from the publisher ended up in lawyers' pockets, we've never been closer to just walk away and do more reasonable things in our lives than trying to survive in the videogame industry.

As if some fate intervened, a few days later I got an email from Indiegogo. It was an invitation for small developers to try a crowdfunding. At first I considered it and then shook that idea off. I thought to myself, we are unknown and there's no way anyone would invest in us. Besides, it's Indiegogo, not Kickstarter and back then, Kickstarter was only available to US, UK and Canadian residents. After spending a few hours going through IGG projects, I saw how developers struggled on that platform. So I decided funding a new game was entirely out of the question for me.

That same day I came home from work and my (then) four year old daughter wanted to play J.U.L.I.A. with me. While the story is a bit too complex for her, she loves the planets and traveling and she is really good at some of the puzzles. It had been almost a year from release and after we played for maybe an hour, I immediately knew how different the game would be if I was designing it that day.

Then I started thinking – What if we could fix J.U.L.I.A.'s most obvious blunders? What if we tried to crowdsource a little budget for an "Enhanced Edition"?

The next day we've brainstormed with Lukas and basically agreed that we are going to go for it. We've prepared our campaign as best as we could and launched the start button. I could be talking more about the crowdfunding, but it was just a beginning. Readers are invited to read my blog where I occasionally try to report about some aspects of our successful journey.

The crowdfunding was a tiring experience where we tried anything mentionable to bring our unknown team into the spotlight. I even, together with my wife, played a live-transmitted concert to celebrate that we made our target!

The bottom line is that we've got almost three times more money than what we've asked for and suddenly faced a serious decision. It's more than what we need for those fixes. As spontaneous as we are, we've decided to create a new game from scratch and keep only certain key plot points and some of the better puzzles the old J.U.L.I.A. had to offer.

During the development we've realized how much we veered away from our original expansion idea and for that reason we've came with a better name. Instead of J.U.L.I.A.: Enhanced Edition we named our game J.U.L.I.A.: Among the Stars.

Rationalizing Gamedesign

Unlike with our former games where everything was kind of intuitive and developed on the go, I've decided to take a rational approach to J.U.L.I.A.: Among the Stars game design. I did a review of the former J.U.L.I.A.'s gameplay elements and to my horror I realized how inconsistent everything is.

With J.U.L.I.A.: Among the Stars I've described all the key principles in my design

diary up front and we've built all the major blocks in preproduction phase. While there were some adjustments, it was immediately obvious how much had we benefitted from this clear and thought-out design. All major parts were following similar direction and the result holds much more together than the first game.

I've also placed more impact on science aspect of the game and despite one really serious blunder (no – nitrogen in the air won't explode when exposed to fire – I apologize to science) you get a lot of analyzing which is not part of the main quest. I just wanted to create a feeling that you are there and not that you just go through a story in a theatre set inactive environment.

Interfacing

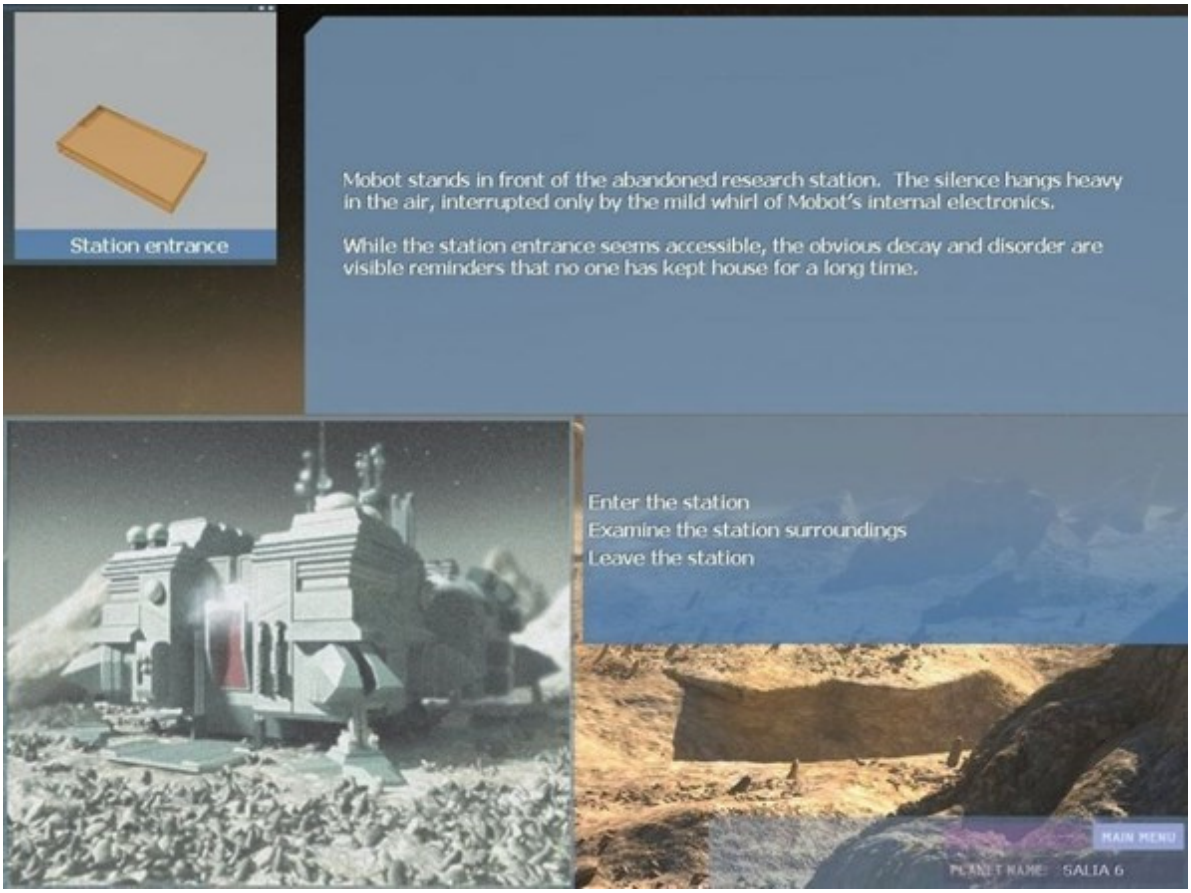
J.U.L.I.A.is an interface-based game, and for that reason we wanted to really dig deep into our interfaces and make them look believable. While our goal was to have the interfaces visually nice, we also wanted to make them functional and easy to use. We've also included built-in operation helps so the in-game software resembles a real one.

J.U.L.I.A.: Among the Stars contains interfaces for everything starting with the probe central computer but going to terminals on planetary stations, datapads, analytic stations, various mapping and additional interfaces. For that reason we've designed even a function used for revealing all active hotspots on the screen as a built-in feature of mobile exploratory unit.

Exploration on Steroids

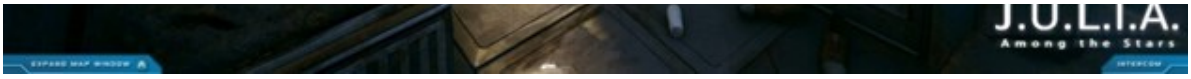
One of the most praised features in the old J.U.L.I.A. was the possibility to visit

various planets in a non-linear fashion and do some explorations. However, the exploration was akin to old interactive choose-your-own-adventure games – players had to select from interactive menus their next course of action.



(Old J.U.L.I.A. from 2012)

As the campaign started to unexpectedly pick up, one of my big dreams was to redo the whole visuals into explorable screens either as 2D or full 3D depending on a budget. I always loved the concept of various interfaces, but this time we've implemented fully interactive explorable screens with all actions contextually built into each screen.



(J.U.L.I.A.: Among the Stars, 2014)

Also pumping our resolution from 1024x768 up to Full HD let us realize our dream in a way we never expected before. Not only that, but Lukáš thanks to his never-ending enthusiasm for our game, has incredibly grown and found a great style. Half-rendered, half-digital painted, we've left the place of cold renders and I was always looking forward to see which "painting" he will create next.

Procedural Music

Another issue I was struggling with was a possibility to avoid repetitive music. For that reason I've came up with a concept of a mood composer (you can watch my talk about it at AdventureX 2013 in London here) and decomposed my tracks into atomic sound objects which are then resynthesized in a real time according to current mood. This method allowed me to have extremely fluent transitions especially in exploratory parts and still be able to have it fully player-driven.

For me personally it's a big achievement because I've validated a thought concept, which I was toying with for years. Now that I have a working prototype in our game, I know that our next games will use it as well.

Getting some help

Being non-native speaker, I know - after my lesson learned with our first game - how important a good translation is. I am always extremely happy to work with Laura MacDonald, who once again did the text adaptation of the whole script. This time I also asked her for writing some crew member stories connected to our backers and when I got the stories back I was so happy I asked her to do that. Not only that, but she also took one in-game voice acting role.

Speaking of which, our trio of main voice actors – Jennifer Helia (J.U.L.I.A.), Lucy Fillery Murphy (Rachel Manners) and Klemens Koehring (Mobot) – did a great job as well. When I compare their performance in old J.U.L.I.A., I see how much they added to the game this time around.

Talking to our backers

Right after our crowdfunding I knew that if we want to stay true to our vision, we'd have to talk to our backers. For that reason I've each month shared with our backers our fears and achievements on our private forum. I am so glad we did this, because it resulted into real-life friendships, which are definitely the ultimate highlight of the crowdfunding. At the end of a day, the money gathered through crowdfunding (minus taxes, rewards and IGG / PayPal costs) lasted less than 4 months, while the development took us 18 months. However, the friends and our fans stay and we're happy that they love the final result so much.

Conclusion

I was always nervous how our game will turn out. This time it was even more difficult because there were actual people who trusted us enough to give us money upfront. Since I wanted to be true to them I've decided to create our own on-site variant of Metacritic by aggregating all reviews and their scores. This way our backers can see behind all the flashy PR quotes we'd normally put on our page and can read also an opinion of reviewers who didn't like our game. This leap of faith eventually turned out as a good one and the biggest appraisal for us is our backers who not only love our game, but many of them are prepared to support us in the unlikely case that we'd decide to make another crowdfunding campaign.

If you want to know more about J.U.L.I.A.: Among the Stars, you can visit also a dedicated page http://www.juliathegame.com/.

J.U.L.I.A.: Among the Stars is currently available on Steam with 60% discount http://store.steampowered.com/app/257690

And one HOT NEWS in the end! CBE Software studio is working hard on another game! We have a word that more info will be released this Summer and of course you can read about it here at KeenGamer.

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