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Heuristic Evaluation

for Project FreeDroid

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Evaluation Document
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Abstract

This documentation is a part of an expert evaluation project. The documentation provides a deeper look at the heuristics that are found from literature. These heuristics are applied to our chosen open source project, FreeDroid. We had two sources for heuristics so we needed to remove some duplicates.

Each chapter of this document deals with the specific area of game usability. In altogether, this document explains the different aspects of gaming and tries to find, and solve, issues in FreeDroid.

We enjoyed this work of evaluation. The communication between us and FreeDroid worked well which helped us greatly. It has also been a pleasure to learn to know the active developers and the game itself.

Sources for heuristics:

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1. Game Story

This chapter evaluates the game story of FreeDroid. The following heuristics from literature are used as basis of this evaluation.

1.1 Understanding of the story line as a single consistent vision

Story is an important part of the game; why else would somebody be willing to go through the trouble of training his or her character in the game. There must be a certain goal to be set, which will hopefully motivate the player to get deeper into the game.

Good thing in FreeDroid is that the quests are related to the story line. This keeps the story alive and believable. The story and the history of Tux are introduced in multiple parts during game play. Building the story and characters is done well.

In FreeDroid it's a bit difficult for the player to emphasize with the story. We consider that most of the players are not familiar with the infamous penguin-like linarian. Also the background of the story is somehow out of reach. Even though player gets some pieces of information by communicating with NPCs, we can't really count on only that to get the player truly interested. What's more cliché than a character waking up somewhere in post apocalyptic future, without knowing, or remembering, anything, and then the player is supposed to start gathering the pieces from NPCs. Why would (s)he?

There are various ways of delivering better understanding of the story. How about some nice screens that contain graphics and few sentences at a time. This could be done really retro style, just to respect the old way of video game story telling. Showing few pictures once in a while can really make a difference. Naturally, animation can be also used where available.

1.2 Player is interested in the story line

The story line in FreeDroid is interesting. It's not typical, and it has some comical features, which is usually good. As it is stated above, the problems are, not with the story line itself, but rather how the story is told.

We suggest keeping the story line mostly as it is, instead emphasizing re-thinking carefully, how the story line could be delivered in a cool, interesting, and entertaining way.

1.3 Player spends time thinking about possible story outcomes

A story should always have different outcomes, otherwise it would be like watching a movie. When playing RPG, player is expected to be aware of that there are multiple ways to complete missions, quests or puzzles.

FreeDroid should make clear to the player that player's actions are free, and the game should support this freedom of choosing the way to play.

1.4 Player feels as though the world is going on

FreeDroid's world is populated by bots and human-like creatures, but still the world seems to do pretty much nothing without player's actions. This is understandable since many games lack this feature. NPCs just wonder around aimlessly and enemies just wait to be killed.

Instead of described typical setting, could there be more interactivity in the game? Maybe there could be something like progressing construction sites, daylight changes and other weather phenomena (surely futuristic apocalyptic scene looks livelier), NPCs communicating with each other, and so on.

1.5 Player has a sense of control over their character and is able to use tactics and strategies

Being able to use strategies and tactics is crucial in gaming. Player feels enormous sense of satisfaction when being able to out-wit the computer (or other player). Sometimes people even tend to cheat if it's possible, and sometimes it's difficult to tell what is cheating and what is not.

Sense of control over the character in FreeDroid is done neatly. All the basic functions work as supposed to. However, is there freedom to create tactics and strategies by player, hence making the game more intriguing? If the developers have thought of some cool ways to overcome battles, it could be pointed out in the game also.

1.6 Player experiences fairness of outcomes

This works mostly fine in FreeDroid. Most outcomes are fair to the player. The robots usually have the numbers heavily on their side and sometimes it feels unfair. When the character develops, the predominance of robots loses its value, but it still feels overwhelming at times.

1.7 The game transports the player into a level of personal involvement emotionally

It seems to be a difficult job for a human player to sympathise a walking, talking, and fighting penguin (or is it linarian?). It just takes more than sympathising a fellow species. Players expect RPGs these days to provide a fully encapturing gaming environment where player feels like he is a part of something. This, “being a part of something” -thing works by letting the game emphasize player's solutions, hence transporting the player into a level of personal involvement emotionally. Player must feel like, either he is really there, or the character he plays is really there. RPGs are not expected to be just plain fun.

Could the quests, characters or other key-objects be related to modern politics, historical events, or something like that. The game could even agitate the player, which could lead to an arisal of emotions.

1.8 Player is interested in the characters

Characters are important part of the game play, even NPCs. These characters make the game feel real, and they add depth to the gaming experience. Therefore, characters in the game should be taken seriously.

In FreeDroid, nice bunch of characters exist to create the world as the player knows it. However, we feel that the characters lack some “existence”, meaning, they feel sometimes distant and robot-like (even the when they are not bots). Attending NPCs sometimes feels like attending vending machines; you just pick the choice and something expected happens. It's obviously nice thing to have characters, but they should be more than a fuzzy picture and a dialog. Blowing life into characters is not an easy task to do, and many games fail at this point.

2. Game Usability

This chapter evaluates the general usability of FreeDroid. The following heuristics from literature are used as basis of this evaluation.

2.1 Provide immediate feedback for user actions

FreeDroid uses a sophisticated feedback system that solves most issues concerning user actions. The solution, where almost all feedback is given via console in the center of the screen, is highly usable in this case, although the console contains only three lines of text with limited space. Maybe it would be possible to smaller the font size, making it possible to show more output on the console, since the location and usability enables the console to be a handy tool.

When something changes during the dialogues the feedback is a little inadequate. For example some door might be opened and it's not at all clear where the opened door is. Maybe this kind of things could be mentioned in the log? For example "The door at the east wall that leads out of town has been opened".

2.2 Player can easily turn the game off and on, and be able to save games in different states

This heuristic is quite easy to understand, and requires no extra explaining. We found it easy enough to be able to turn the game off and on in FreeDroid. However, we would like to point out that also the ability to jump back and forth from operating system should be encouraged. Also this feature seems to work nicely in FreeDroid (tested under Windows).

Saving the game works conventional ways in FreeDroid; you can save by using the menu or by key short-cut. These two ways are adequate and serve the purposes very well.

2.3 Upon initially turning the game on the Player has enough information to get started to play

This heuristic clarifies one of the biggest issues found in FreeDroid. In the beginning of a new game, player is forced to go through the start-up sequence which tries to explain the situation which the player, and the character, are in. However, the sequence is not very user friendly; the text is just way too long for the player to read and remember, even when it is very informative. It just isn't fair to make the player go through all that. And a fast-forward button is not an excuse.

Above issue concerns the very beginning of the story, where the player actually hasn't even started to play. Problem rises when the start-up sequence finishes, and player takes over; what to do next? It is great that player is not any more forced to follow any specific chain of events, but there still should be something to get the player to feel like he or she is a part of a bigger picture. Why should the player do something?

2.4 Players should be given context sensitive help while playing

Many features of the user interface provide contextual help while playing. This is clearly a good sign. However, we would like to see more of explaining text labels. For example, the buttons marked “LOG”, “INV”, “CHA”, and “SKI” provide no explanatory text. Even though it's easy to guess the meaning of these buttons, player shouldn't spend time on browsing these through in order to make sure that “INV” really means “inventory”. Bar that shows health has this feature. Could the same feature be used also to explain above mentioned buttons?

As mentioned earlier, the console solution provides almost non-stop feedback to player, and this informative approach is a healthy sight among computer games. However, occasionally, sometimes lines like “123 was killed...” appear even when player is not engaged in a battle situation. It's not harmful, but it uses valuable information space.

2.5 Sounds from the game provide meaningful feedback or stir a particular emotion

Modern game requires music and various sound effects. FreeDroid also contains these elements which is definitely a good thing.

Music is always a question of personal opinion. FreeDroid has couple of nice tracks to get the player absorbed into the world of the game. Music is nice but maybe insufficient; it would be interesting to have a wider collection of these intriguing tunes. It seems that the purpose is to play different tunes according to character's whereabouts. This method is widely used in the industry, and it gives a nice feeling of actually moving between different spaces (such as rooms, cities etc.).

The quality of music is generally good but the sound effects lack of certain smoothness. Sometimes it feels like the sound is played through a broken speaker, hence sounding just irritable noise. The voice acting sounds cool, but sometimes it is difficult to tell from the noisiness what the line was. Of course, the sounds are supposed to sound futuristic and machine-like, but nevertheless, they should sound clear.

2.6 Players do not need to use a manual to play game

This heuristic is shown true many times. Instead of a manual, game should rely more on providing contextual help as the playing progresses.

In FreeDroid, there's an interesting solution in the beginning of the game that explains the key commands. This feature raised amusement among our evaluation team. Even if

the long list of key commands is built in the game, it is still quite manual-like. Player shouldn't be made to go through this procedure, as the studies have shown that people can usually remember only 5-9 things at a time. As a solution, we propose the usage of a key chart.

In the beginning of the game, player could be instructed to press certain key that opens up a chart of keys where player could find the command he or she is looking for. This feature should be made so easy and efficient to use that player can easily rely on the feature, even during a battle situation. In this kind of a chart, one could actually show a layout of keyboard and implement the commands in the graphics. Some people are proven to remember things better when certain feature is put into a familiar context (like a key command shown in a right place of keyboard).

2.7 Get the player involved quickly and easily with tutorials and/or progressive or adjustable difficulty levels

There is no tutorial in FreeDroid, which can be a good and a bad thing. Many people find tutorials boring and prefer to skip them. However, there could be something in the very beginning of the game to get the player familiar with the game. This kind of episode in the beginning could attach the player to the main plot. The beginning of the game is very important, because it will decide whether the player gets hooked or not. But yet again, it's about different opinions.

We think that there should be a tutorial part that is short, rewarding (maybe some kind of item or money), and easy to approach. Player should know immediately in the beginning of the game that the tutorial will be worth his or her time (or if it's not, it can be skipped). Tutorial should cover moving, using skills and items and looting at least. There is obviously some kind of idea of a tutorial in FreeDroid, since the starting scene already resembles common tutorial. We think this could be taken further by introducing player the essential skills required in the game.

2.8 Art should be recognizable to player, and speak to its function

Art is these days an important part of the gaming experience. New technologies make it possible for artists to create more and more stunning graphics. In the middle of all this, one should not forget about the importance of recognizable and clear artwork.

Art is present also in FreeDroid. FreeDroid seems to rely on older technology what comes to graphics. This limits the technical possibilities such as resolution and color depth, but still FreeDroid uses the available resources well, and art is usable enough. Sometimes it's about simplicity of things.

What could be improved is the recognition of important characters. Even though extra labels and graphical pointers ruin the mood, and the feeling of reality, it could make the game more usable. It would be nice to be able to spot the important things from distant.

The city, where player starts in the beginning of the game, is just too wide. If we are

talking about a city, we expect them to be wide and full of different buildings and places. However, this makes it difficult for player to remember, and to recognise, where important things are; if there is a similar building after another all the time, it just gets confusing. Could there be a quick-access to important vendors? Or maybe an apartment where the character could order stuff on-line, without having to run around, looking for the right shop.

3. Game Interface

This chapter evaluates the game interface of FreeDroid. The following heuristics from literature are used as basis of this evaluation.

3.1 Controls should be customizable and default to industry standard settings

FreeDroid does not allow player to customize the controls. This is not a major issue, and it could be fixed easily if wanted. We don't see a reason to customize controls in FreeDroid because they are highly standard, or close to that, and convenient to use. However, some players still might consider wanting to change something. Generally speaking, using keyboard and mouse works well in FreeDroid, and there is no reason to make things too complicated.

Controlling mouse also works well, but some players would still like to be able to adjust things like mouse speed, scrolling speed etc. These settings could be considered, even though the overall quality of controls is high.

3.2 The interface should be as non- intrusive as possible

The interface is a big part of usability in games. The interface should therefore be highly usable, efficient, good-looking, and non-intrusive.

Non-intrusiveness is a minor problem in FreeDroid. There are not so many occasions where the player feels he's tangled up with the interface. However, slight adjustments could be made. Following paragraphs explain more of these cases.

3.3 A player should always be able to identify their score/status in the game

FreeDroid has a level system that is very common among role playing games. By playing the game, completing tasks, and destroying enemies, character gains experience and eventually levels up. By gaining levels, the character gets stronger and smarter, being able to complete more demanding tasks.

The level of experience is shown all the time, and it is easy to determine when the next level up is going to be. Also other status indicators such as health, stamina and heat are visible. This feature is done well and it serves the purpose. Also the level is easy to check once player becomes familiar with the menu and the control buttons.

Apart from developing the character, player must also be able to follow up what is going on in the game. This is handled by using a logging system. The log is an excellent tool for browsing through the quests that are active, or inactive/completed, to player. The main purpose of the log system is implemented also in FreeDroid. However, the available information is minimal, and contains only the reason behind the quest. Could there be more info, like small pictures to assist the player to remember, where to find the key objects or persons, and how they look like. Upon completing the quest, the quest moves to “done quests” section, and besides that, there should also be something on console that indicates which quest is now completed. Although the game indicates quest completion by sound effect, we still recommend using console also.

3.4 Interfaces should be consistent in control, color, typography, and dialog design

Elements of the interface are generally well in line in FreeDroid. Nevertheless, some details still require extra attention.

In menus like inventory and character, there is no exit button to be found. Maybe this is intentional, and the developers designed menu-opening keys to be used. We still would like to see clear exits from these menu screens; “LOG” -menu has the feature, why other menus (“INV” etc.) don't have.

3.5 For PC games, consider hiding the main computer interface during game play

This is obviously done in FreeDroid, as it is very typical of computer games these days. Being able to play in full screen is almost a must. It is also possible to choose windowed mode if the player so wishes. This heuristic works well in FreeDroid.

3.6 Minimize the menu layers of an interface

There are not many available many layers in FreeDroid. During the game play, the most important menus are just single layered, as it should be.

Also the main menu is compliant with industry standards, and therefore simplified to its full extent.

3.7 Minimize control options

We think that this heuristic is applied rather well in FreeDroid. There are not too many ways to complete a task that involves using controls. The options are limited by using common sense, which is always great news to player.

4. Game Mechanics

This chapter considers usability of game mechanics in FreeDroid. The following heuristics from literature are used as basis of this evaluation.

4.1 Get the player involved quickly and easily

Just as a book needs to get its readers interested in the first pages, a game too has to get its players interested in the first few minutes. Otherwise player easily loses her interest and tries another game.

In Freedroid there is an intro that explains what the player needs to do and gives some motivation to reach the ultimate goal – to save the world. This background story is quite long, though, and we're afraid that by the time the player reaches the town (s)he might have forgotten most of the story. There is also a clear first subtask, to reach the town. This is good way to get the player involved. In the town, however, it's not so clear what the player should do any more. Maybe there could be a little more hand-holding and reminding of the game goals in the very beginning of the game?

4.2 Game should react in a consistent, challenging, and exciting way to the player's actions (e.g., appropriate music with the action)

When the game reacts to player's actions, it gets much more immersive.

There is much of this feeling in FreeDroid. There are several different background musics and sound effects to different places and situations. There isn't much to complain about this, but we could mention that the background music is a bit inconsistent at some points. Sometimes when walking close to the town's walls the background music changes into the one that is meant for areas outside the town's walls. This breaks the atmosphere a bit.

4.3 Make effects of the Artificial Intelligence (AI) clearly visible to the player by ensuring they are consistent with the player's reasonable expectations of the AI actor

The AI is quite obvious in most cases; robots either run away or stand and shoot while in combat. While not in combat they wander around seemingly meaningless. AI robots are very predictable, but they should be too. NPCs are a bit less predictable if conversations are considered as a part of the AI.

People don't need to move or do a lot, and what they do do works pretty well. The biggest problems with AI is in the movement of the droids and Tux. The droids don't follow Tux very well if there's any obstacles in the way. Tux also sometimes chooses quite strange paths to walk.

Consider introducing “Berserker-robots” that go in to a rage and shoot everything, including other bots to increase unpredictability. Rebuild the AI's movement logic.

4.4 Mechanics/controller actions have consistently mapped and learnable responses

Controller actions are mostly consistent within the game and the most basic ones are quite logical easily learnable. Droid minigame, however, is a bit inconsistent with this – suddenly I can't use the mouse to move but I need to use the arrows, and in the normal game up and down arrows don't do anything.

4.5 Shorten the learning curve by following the trends set by the gaming industry to meet user's expectations

Apparently this is fine – depending on what is the industry trends. At least they're similar to Diablo games.

4.6 Player should be given controls that are basic enough to learn quickly yet expandable for advanced options

There is quite nice basic controls in FreeDroid – almost everything can be done with mouse. Advanced options are also there, although we suggest that the game would inform about them more.

5. Game Play

The following heuristics consider solely on game play issues to increase the gaming experience.

5.1 Players fatigue is minimized by varying activities and pacing during game play.

There is some variation in activities in FreeDroid. Hacking versus killing robots gives some variety to most activities.

There is quite a lot of hack-n-slash to complete most of the quests; it might be a good idea to introduce more variation in them for future releases.

5.2 Player is taught skills early that you expect the players to use later, or right before the new skill is needed.

A new game is always a learning process for the player. Learning needs to be effortless so that the gaming experience can be enjoyable.

The very basic skills are easy to learn in FreeDroid. However, it would be a good idea to teach some actions better in the very beginning. For example, skill usage tutorial would be nice. Short description of a new skill, and how it's used, could be shown when the new skill is received. Maybe skill learning could happen when skills are needed and not by buying them from a skillshop (shopkeeper dies quite easily too)?

5.3 The game is fun for the Player first, the designer second and the computer third. That is, if the non-expert player's experience isn't put first, excellent game mechanics and graphics programming triumphs are meaningless.

Freedroid is firstly fun for the player, at least from the player's point of view. The graphics are decent, mechanics work and the story is continuous. Tutorial would help new players to get involved, but as you learn more the amount of fun increases quickly.

5.4 Player should not experience being penalized repetitively for the same failure.

Failures in conversations with Non-Player-Characters (NPC) can be fatal and are easy to occur. It's not a bad feature, but increases difficulty. There should be a way to calm down angered NPCs. There are no other failures that occur as often or repetitively.

5.5 Player's should perceive a sense of control and impact onto the game world. The game world reacts to the player and remembers their passage through it. Changes the player makes in the game world are persistent and noticeable if they back-track to where they've been before.

"Killable" NPCs and partially destructive environment gives some control over the environment and show the characters path around the map a little. Environment could be even more destructible (trees and bushes etc.). Robot carcasses disappear after a while but the bloodstains remain. This heuristic is quite well introduced in the game.

5.6 The first player action is painfully obvious and should result in immediate positive feedback.

The first action could be more obvious, tutorial might help with this. There is some obscurity about what to do first, should the player search the room or go straight to the city, or something else.

5.7 The game should give rewards that immerse the player more deeply in the game by increasing their capabilities (power-up), and expanding their ability to customize.

There are a lot of rewards from quests, drops from dead robots and character development on level ups and quests. Upon completing a quest, game announces it through a clear, and rewarding, text. This feature is also used upon gaining levels and skills. This is very common method of rewarding the player, and it works great for FreeDroid also. It's amazing what you can do with a cool font and a little increased font size. Maybe this feature could be even taken further by, for example, showing a picture of the character looking cool like a winner.

5.8 Challenges are positive game experiences, rather than a negative experience (results in their wanting to play more, rather than quitting).

Most quests are based on killing a roomful of robots and getting an item from there. This can get quite boring and some of the rooms are very hard to clean. Sometimes it feels a lot easier to quit than to keep trying. It could be a good idea to give some level or skill recommendations for the quests so that the player knows what she's getting into.

5.9 The game should have unexpected outcome.

Attacking NPCs are quite unexpected, they don't do that in most games. I cannot evaluate the final outcome, due to limited game play.

5.10 Game play should be balanced so that there is no definite way to win.

This works well in FreeDroid. There are various ways to develop your character and various ways to complete the quests. There is no single way to win.

5.11 The game must maintain an illusion of winnability.

The game is winnable at all times. There are hard times and easier times but at least an illusion of winnability is in the air during the game play. When the player learns more, the gaming gets more depth and winning becomes seemingly easier.

5.12 The game should give hints, but not too many.

There are not too much hints given. Quest descriptions are short and approximate so you need to think for yourself too. There's no need for more hints but perhaps the level of approximation could be reconsidered at some points. For example when the quests are given it would be nice to get a little more information about which way to go to complete the quest.

5.13 Pace the game to apply pressure to, but not frustrate the player.

Considering the quests as pacing this heuristic is quite well implemented in the game. Player can choose him-/herself how often he/she wants to complete them and in what order. There are no time limits (at least we haven't discovered one yet) so pacing relies on the player a lot. Some quests could include time limit to force the pacing.

In the minigame where the player tries to hack a droid the pacing is really fast. We assume this comes from the original Paradroid game. This is fine when the player has some idea of what's happening, but in the few first minigames this is very frustrating. Maybe there could be a little easier and slower minigames in the beginning of the game so that the player gets a chance to learn how the minigame is played?

5.14 Allow players to build content.

There is some possibilities for the player to build content, for example a map editor to edit the standard maps.

Consider renaming Tux after the player's name. Buying your own house or a room to store items and rest in safe could be a nice feature and would increase the amount of "own content".

5.15 Create a great storyline.

The story in Freedroid is great and has enough branches to include the major NPC characters in it. Tux searching his past is an effective addition to the story.

6. General comments from the evaluators

The project has clearly come a long way and it still has chances to evolve further. We hope that this evaluation helps the developers to make their game even better.

We would like to see the uniqueness and activeness of the developers transferred to the game also, hence creating a solid package of fun video-gaming experience. Lot of edge is needed from an open source game to be able to compete in the industry possessed by the big entertainment companies these days. When it is not possible to compete in resources, the game has to show its innovativeness and unique creativity.