

Usability review of PES for Xbox 360

By Ben Weedon, January 2007

Serco Usability Services ran an expert usability review of the new PES release on the Xbox 360. We wanted to see what issues were affecting the user's experience. We were particularly interested in issues that could have been uncovered and rectified during the design process. This short review is a taster of what we discovered and our recommendations on how they could be caught and prevented before release. If you would like us to tell you more about this review, what we do, and how it can work for you, please let us know. Our contact details are at the end of the document.

Concept

The concept of PES is well-known: highly realistic football games that allow the user to take control of a team and play against the CPU, friends on the same console, and recently, others over the internet.

Gameplay

We noted the following issues with the match gameplay. They were drawn from our own expert review and from interviewing current users. The issues are then followed by our recommendations for redesign for future game iterations.

User-centred issues:

1. The game has increased its level of realism. Player and ball physics are extremely realistic. However, this has increased the difficulty of the game, as it takes a lot of effort to pass, shoot on target, and time tackles. It also seems to have made the game slower.
2. The increased complexity of the game, and greater realism, makes it a game to master over a longer period of time than previous versions. Many users are finding it difficult to motivate themselves to persevere and learn the new techniques. Some are moving back to older versions of PES.
3. Users complained that the levels of difficulty were not a smooth increase, especially from the second level to the third. It goes from being quite easy, with little challenge to keep them interested, to being so difficult they can never score; giving them no immediate reward for playing.
4. Previous versions of PES had a very useful training section that allowed users to perform skills challenges such as shooting on goal, keeping possession, pressing or tackling. The CPU gave directions on how to do this at the beginning of each challenge. These allowed users to learn the basics of the game, while gaining positive feedback and points, when they performed the task successfully. These are missing from PES6. Consequently, learning the commands on the new controller involves reading the manual (which most users only do as a last resort) and trying them in a game or training match, which gives little positive feedback.
5. Shooting is a particular problem for novice users of PES6. Often the ball is booted high over the bar, and users are at a loss as to why, when it seems like it would be so much easier to simply pass it into the net. Users have found from games forums that the

shooting requires them to aim to where in the goal they want the ball to end up, but this does not seem clear initially.

6. Users found it very difficult to score against the CPU, and felt that the game was weighted towards the defence. Although this may have increased realism, most users need the positive feedback of being able to score during a game, even if they lose in the end.
7. Users also felt that the speedier players were not as effective as their speed should make them, especially against slow, stocky defenders, who seem to catch them easily. This again makes it harder to score goals, and the game feel less exciting and fun.
8. A few users felt that the CPU changed control of players at the inopportune times, or to a player that they were not expecting.

Recommendations:

1. For those users who do not want to invest the time to learn the more complicated controls, consider a simple, 'arcade' style game that users can dip into to play single games. This version could be a simple, stripped-down game, with less realism, but faster and with a feel more like earlier PES games.
2. Ensure the difficulty level increases at the right amount: reduce the great step in difficulty between the second-easiest level and the next one up. If users do not find it either outrageously easy or fiendishly difficult, but can gradually adjust the CPU level to match their own abilities, they will be more inclined to keep playing.
3. Consider re-implementing the challenge training feature from previous versions of PES, as especially with a new controller, users need a way to learn the controls in a fun and engrossing way, rather than reading through the manual.
4. It is not clear that the users have to aim their shots at the goal more precisely than in previous versions. Ideally there should be a way of informing users of this when they play the game, as many will not read the manual at all. If re-implementing the challenge training, users could discover the new method of shooting, and learn it under the direction of the CPU.
5. In future implementations, work with users to get the difficulty levels right (as mentioned above). Also aim to weight the advantage slightly less towards the defenders, to aid the scoring of goals, which are an important piece of feedback to users.
6. Consider user testing with prototypes to ensure that the balance between defence and attack is right. Users want to be able to score goals.
7. The CPU behaviour, particularly in terms of changing the control of team players during the game, needs to match up with the expectations of users. We would recommend that a prototype playthrough, with a representative sample of customers, would help identify instances where the users' expectations are not matched, from which the AI could be refined further.

Features

We derived the following list of comments about current and missing features of the game from interviews and discussion with existing users of the game.

User-centred issues:

1. The game does not have a feature to save replays of goals. This is an extremely popular feature with owners of previous PES titles, and felt to be a big omission from the current version.
2. Users were disappointed that appearances, kits, and even fake team names can't be changed. This is something that many users enjoy altering in previous incarnations of the PES series.
3. Users were disappointed that PES6 does not allow them to collect points, which they can use to 'buy' game features. This is a fun feature, which encouraged users to keep playing and continue to improve their skills.
4. The challenge training feature was very popular with owners of previous PES versions, and enabled them to develop their skills and abilities, whilst learning the controls (see also the Gameplay point 4 and recommendation 3, above).
5. A feature, which was expected in this version, and which users were disappointed not to see, was the ability to set up online tournaments with friends. This point is also covered in the Xbox Live section, below.
6. Gamerpoints are available for winning leagues and cups, but the same number of points is available for winning at the easy levels as for the harder levels. Users expected either to get a different type of gamerpoint for winning at different levels, or to receive more for winning on harder levels. Otherwise they would simply put the game onto the easiest settings and get the most rewards as quickly as possible.

Recommendations:

1. Understanding the behaviour of current players of the PES series of titles, using focus groups or user needs analysis, could have indicated the popularity of the features that have been missed off from this release, such as those in points 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 above. If time and resources were short, customers could have ranked the importance of each of the features, to give the design team an idea of how to prioritise them.
2. Consider re-implementing the challenge training feature to help users learn the controls and skills in a fun way.
3. Consider differentiating the rewards for winning at harder levels from those obtained for winning on easier levels. This will encourage users to develop their skills and keep playing through the levels.

Control Issues

Considering that there is a new controller for the Xbox 360, which users need to become used to, there were relatively few incidents of controller difficulties. This in part relates to a similar use of controls as the previous PES titles on the Xbox.

User-centred issues:

1. Sprint and player select are located on the left and right bumpers rather than the triggers. This took users a little while to get used to.
2. All users we spoke to had a great deal of difficulty getting their shots and headers on goal. Often the shot would balloon over the crossbar. For novice users, who had spent a

long time actually getting near enough to the goal to have a shot, this was very frustrating.

3. The display of basic controller actions while beginner-level games load was a good feature.

Recommendations:

1. As for Gameplay recommendation 3 and Features recommendation 4, consider re-implementing a challenge training feature, which coaches players how to perform the basics through mini scenarios and games. This would be more fun and appealing than simply asking them to read the manual, or by trial and error in a match or practice game.

Xbox Live

Participants felt that the Xbox Live feature of the game was less than they were expecting from a next-generation console, although there were also some features that they felt were very good.

User-centred issues:

1. Users were disappointed with the speed of the online game. There was a great deal of lag, causing some matches to become virtually unplayable. We recognise that this is more of a technical issue, but it is one that affects the user experience a great deal. Shots, corners and crosses were very difficult to accurately gauge because of the delay between pressing the button, and the feedback on the screen.
2. Users were disappointed that it only supported one-on-one matches.
3. The ranking of players in the online mode, and the sorting of players into several leagues, depending on their ranking, was a popular feature, as was playing in unranked games, to practice online skills.
4. Users were disappointed that they could not set up online tournaments with friends.
5. It took users a lot of searching to find an online opponent, and some only managed to do so by checking the connection in the Xbox dashboard. However, we are aware that this is a technical issue that Konami are currently working to resolve.

Recommendations:

1. Ensure that full playtesting takes place any game is launched to understand how much lag is acceptable to users. Consider also developing a feature to allow players to select how near, or how speedy the connection of the opponent, is.
2. Ensure that player's expectations are matched in each release of the game. As described in recommendation 1 of the Features section, focus groups, or user needs analysis can uncover the features and concepts that users wish to see in the game, and can also help to prioritise them, to aid development when time and resources are tight.

Multiplayer options

In general, users were very pleased with the multiplayer options, although, as mentioned in point 6 of the Gameplay section, above, they still felt that there was too much of an emphasis on the ability of the defenders, compared to the attackers, and that the pace of the attackers was not sufficiently

represented. This led to a dearth of goals and a lot of goalless draws, which were felt to be less fun than a goalfest.

Menu structures

The menu system of the game performed well.

User-centred issues:

1. The game always asks to select the disk that the saved game is stored on, even if there is only one disk available. We realise that this may be an issue with the Xbox dashboard, but for users, this is a redundant step.

Recommendations:

1. If possible, permit the game to select the disk automatically, if only one is available.

Summary

Throughout this review, we have briefly discussed the techniques that we would recommend be used in the games development process, which would have helped uncover and address the user issues that we have found with PES6.

These techniques include:

- User testing with a prototype of the game to uncover and iron out issues of gameplay, Xbox Live and controls.
- Focus groups to gather user opinions of new game features, and to discuss the priority of old favourites in the new releases.
- User needs analysis to uncover the features of the game that most appeal to users, to understand what priority they need to be given in the games development process.

This is just a selection of the techniques we use, which are always tailored to answer the questions that our clients want answered.

Conclusions

PES6 seems to have been designed to reflect a more 'realistic' look and feel of the football, making use of the extra processing power of the Xbox 360 to produce better rendering of players and action, as well as representing the flight and speed of the ball more realistically. However, it takes more effort to learn how to use than the previous versions, and as such it needs to ensure that the levels of difficulty increase at an appropriate level, while coaching users into the new style of play. At present it seems as if there is a trade-off between realism and fun, but this does not need to be the case if users are introduced to it gradually, with plenty of rewards, (such as goals).

We perform this form of user research in depth throughout the games development lifecycle. We would be happy to discuss our findings with you in more detail, to discuss other research we have performed, or to discuss future research that you would like to talk about.

About ExperienceLab

ExperienceLab (formerly Serco Usability Services), are a global experience design research agency. They help organisations optimise their customer experiences, from web to TV and mobile, from

advertising to physical environments. They've been doing this for a while, pretty much since the first computers and networks were created, so they know a thing or two about how to make people, processes and technologies work in harmony.

ExperienceLab use a wide range of techniques to tailor a research solution that fits your business objective, including ideation sessions, proposition analysis, customer needs mapping, usability testing, benchmarking and touch point integration studies. As a co-founder of the UXalliance we also provide research on a global scale.

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