'Quantum Conundrum' Game Announced by 'Portal' Co-Creator

BY COREY PHILIPP

COURTESY OF SQUARE ENIX

INVENTOR'S LAB: A screenshot shows the "Normal Dimension" in the upcoming "Quantum Conundrum" game.

Well known for her work on "Portal," the puzzle game that pioneered the genre, Kim Swift has revealed her next project, "Quantum Conundrum." After leaving Valve back in 2009, Swift joined forces with Airtight Games where she was given her own team of developers and the freedom to work on her very own project. In "Quantum Conundrum," Swift has kept to her roots and made a clever game with a very unique look and concept.

In the game, players will control a young boy who has been sent to stay the weekend at his uncle's mansion. It sounds like any other ordinary weekend, but in this case, your uncle happens to be the famous inventor, Professor Quadwrangle, who has earned millions from his creations. After an unfortunate disaster in Quadwrangle's lab, he has suddenly gone missing. Players will then find themselves traversing from one room to the next in order to find their lost uncle. This may appear to be an easy task, but keep in mind that the mansion is filled with the most complex and mentally tortuous puzzles that will challenge even the most hardcore gamers.

"We wanted to create a fun, quirky puzzle game that anyone would want to play, regardless of age or gaming experience," said Swift in a press release. "I've been working with an amazing and collaborative team on this project and look forward to coming into the office every day to hear new ideas, see what everyone has created, and dive in on my own pieces of the game. We've created something that we're all extremely proud of and hope that people will enjoy playing it as much as we are making it."

Fortunately, players will embark on their journey well equipped with one of Uncle Quadwrangle's most extraordinary inventions, The IDS (Interdimensional Shift Device). The IDS is a little black glove that is worn on the kid's arm that allows him to switch between various dimensions. Each dimension is different in it's own way and will assist the kid in his search for his lost uncle. From what I have seen, all the dimensions have a brilliant way of changing the physics of the environment, thus altering the way the game is played. The different dimensions and their characteristics are as follows:

The "Normal Dimension" will be the default and will have nothing particularly out of the normal. The "Fluffy Dimension" will transform the mansion into a cute a cuddly dwelling filled with plush objects. When converting to this dimension, all of the furniture throughout the mansion transforms from heavy, solid objects, into lightweight and maneuverable stuffed animal-type objects. Once the "Fluffy Dimension" is in effect, players have the ability to move objects that were previously impossible to lift.

Once in the "Slow-Motion Dimension," any object that was in motion will begin moving at an extremely slow pace, and will grant players much-needed time required to successfully complete some of the more tricky tasks. The fourth will be the "Reverse Gravity Dimension" that will send objects spiraling toward the ceiling and give players access to high places.

There will also be a mysterious 5th Dimension, but at this point the game developers have revealed little about it—possibly a time travel dimension?

Some puzzles will require players to quickly switch between the dimensions to pull off a single complicated assignment. For instance, when a glass wall is between the player and their destination, the glass wall must be smashed. A quick assessment of the room reveals that all of the objects in the area are too heavy to move. By simply toggling from the "normal dimension" to the "fluffy dimension," players will be able to lift and catapult the plush object toward the glass wall. Just before impact, switch to "normal dimension" and the plush object turns into a heavy object that soon crashes through the glass wall. Now that the glass wall is down, victory is yours, and you may proceed to the next challenge.

Some gameplay concepts I have seen resemble those found in "Portal." The use of the safes in "Quantum Conundrum" are operated similar to the cubes in "Portal." The safes must be placed on pressure-sensitive platforms that open a door or activate a certain device. The safes are found in practically every room, and if destroyed, are regenerated by "Dolli," who was invented by Professor Quadwrangle. Dolli is a big, goofy, spherical robot that is implanted into the walls throughout the mansion. Professor Quadwrangle has created Dolli to clone an object if it went missing from an experiment, working similar to the cube generation tubes in "Portal."

"Quantum Conundrum" has a cartoon look similar to that of Valve's "Team Fortress 2." Although the game looks as if it were derived from a children's book, the demanding tests and trials are sure to make this game one to be reckoned with. Just like the "Portal" series, "Quantum Conundrum" has taken a comical approach to the gameplay experience.

Mike Fischer, chief executive officer of Square Enix, Inc. highlighted this, saying "The team at Airtight Games is creating an engaging puzzle game complete with a charming story and witty, humorous touches throughout," according to a press release.

From what I have seen, the environment is depicted in a very humorous manner that changes from one dimension to the next. In "normal dimension," a painting of a goldfish and a cat may appear as nothing out of the ordinary, but when that very same painting is subject to the "fluffy dimension," the cat and goldfish become overwhelmed with excessive fluffyness. Switching to the "reverse gravity dimension" will illustrate the two as they awkwardly begin their rise to the ceiling. The kooky and hilarious aspect of the game is sure to spark a few laughs while playing.

Developers say the main quest will have four to six hours of gameplay, with an additional two hours of gameplay to complete the additional challenges. Judging from what I have seen so far, "Quantum Conundrum" is on the right track to being an original experience that will present a refreshing outlook on the puzzle game genre. You can look for the game on XBox Live Arcade, PlayStation Network, and PC via Steam in early 2012. Pricing has yet to be revealed, but judging by the game's downloadable content (DLC) status I'm guessing it will be no more than $25.

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Discover Music 1.6

BY TAN TRUONG
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Music identification technology is used extensively in the age of mobile computing. First there were apps like Shazam and SoundHound that can identify a song just by analyzing a few seconds of it. On a digital level, another kind of identification technology is used to identify music that is being unlawfully distributed. Then on a more beneficent level, music is also analyzed for various characteristics to build radio stations tailored to an individual's tastes. This concept was made popular by Pandora Radio.

As you can see, music data can now be manipulated much like all other data. A fairly new app called "Discovr Music" takes this data and presents it to you in a way that is highly accessible. This may sound rather geeky, but the app is actually fun and easy to use. You start by entering the name of an artist or group you like. In an instant it builds a star chart with the artist in the center with several related artists radiating from it. This chart can also be directly manipulated with your finger. Tapping twice on an artist's icon gives you a mini-biography, a song list with previews, links to videos, and links to pertinent articles and websites. There should be enough to give you a feel for whether you would like this artist.

The app makes it easy to explore, and its interface actually encourages this. Tapping once on an artist's icon opens up another constellation of related artists with lines drawn between those that are again related. The chart is very robust and can accommodate a very large number of artists with connections so complex that it looks like a spider web. You can zoom in and out and pull on the icons which will snap back smoothly.

The directions tell you to type in the name of an artist, but you can also enter the name of a song and you'll get a chart of similar songs. That function is undocumented and unsupported but it's still just as fun to discover music that way even though you won't always find matches.

There are a few areas where this app has room for improvements. For example, it would be useful if we could be informed as to why certain artists are grouped together, and it would also be helpful if an artist's signature songs were highlighted. Maybe something like that will be coming to this paid app, which sells for $1.99.

★★★★☆

TAN TRUONG/THE EPOCH TIMES

The artist screen of Discovr Music lets users enter the name of an artist and see related artists radiating from their image.

New Artificial Intelligence Computer Chips Mimic the Brain

BY VICKY JIANG
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IBM revealed a new generation of experimental computer chips that stimulate the human brain. The "Neurosynaptic Chips" emulate the interactions between neurons and synapses in the brain using advanced algorithms.

Using artificial intelligence, cognitive computers built with the new chips would move technology beyond the traditional von Neumann computer architecture. This would let them learn dynamically through experience, in addition to collecting and analyzing information from various sensory modes.

A cognitive computing system can detect temperature, pressure, wave height, sound, and smells, and could make informed decisions to issue tsunami or traffic warnings.

So far, two prototype chips have been manufactured and are undergoing testing. The chips have potential to be smaller and much more power-efficient than current designs.

The computer chips were inspired by neurobiological concepts. The neurosynaptic core of the chip is made of integrated memory, computation, and communication systems that parallel synapses, neurons, and axons in nervous systems.

The chips mimic the "perceive, process, and make a decision" capabilities of biological brains. One chip contains 256 neurons and 262,144 programmable learning synapses.

Having received close to $21 million in new funding from the U.S. military's research and development branch, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), IBM and its university collaborators are ready to embark on Phase 2 of the Systems of Neuromorphic Adaptive Plastic Scalable Electronics (SyNAPSE) project after completing Phase 0 and 1.

According to a press release,

> The chips have potential to be smaller and much more power-efficient than current designs.

in the long run, IBM intends to build a chip system with 10 billion neurons and 100 trillion synapses, consuming 1 kilowatt of power and occupying less than 2 liters of volume.