

Lobot – Project Pitch Brief

It's Ico meets Short Circuit, in a shooter-action-puzzle game!

You are Lobot XKZ171, general maintenance and loading robot. You've been in service for several years now, loading and repairing hoverdrones. Recently, you malfunctioned and the onsite Tech couldn't fix you, so you were sent back to the Ace Robotics factory for a full repair and tune-up.

Unfortunately, when you got there, you were put into the care of Tech Belfry. Tech Belfry was originally part of Ace Robotics R&D group, but after blowing more things up than he actually managed to invent, he was bumped down to maintenance and repair. He's forgetful and easily distractable, so you figured it might be a couple of days before you got back into service. It's not really the delay that worries you – you're just hoping you manage to get out of the lab with all your nuts and bolts still in the right places.

But while you were in the basement, waiting to be repaired, something happened.

Professor Markov, evil genius, managed to hack into the network at Ace Robotics, and secretly load a virus into the mainframe. That night, when all the robots hooked into the network to upload their day's work schedules and receive their programs for the following day, the virus was downloaded into every last one of them.

But you never hooked in that night, which means *you* are the only uninfected robot in the place.

The virus makes the robots aggressive and unstable. It disables the safetyguards that make sure robots don't damage people or property. Now, the robots have taken control of the Ace Robotics factory, and have killed all humans inside the building, apart from Tech Belfry. Military bots were sent in to try and control the situation, but the building is pretty well sealed tight, and so far they haven't managed to find a way in.

Player Goals

But you've come up with a plan. You think that if you can get to the control room of the factory, you can wipe the mainframe and load a complete backup, to get rid of the virus. Unfortunately, the mainframe is locked and can only be unlocked by a retinal scan of someone with the appropriate authorisation. That's where Tech Belfry comes in. If you can get him there alive, the two of you just might be able to pull this off.

There's several problems with this plan. The first is that there's an entire factory of infected robots that will try to kill Tech Belfry on sight between you and your goal. Many of the bots in the factory are armed, and one hit from a plasma gun would fry a human in an instant. Secondly, parts of the factory have been damaged and destroyed in the fighting, so the main route is blocked. Although you can climb and jump competently and lift heavy objects, Tech Belfry is just a human, and is hampered by his limited physical capacities.

So it's become your job to find an alternate path that he can take, and make sure that he's protected all the way to the control room. Being completely outnumbered would make this task near impossible, but you have one advantage that the other robots don't know about - Tech Belfry has a special device

that he's been working on in his spare time. It's a portable personal shield, and creates a spherical forcefield around the user. Unfortunately, it only works if the user is standing still. This means, however, that you can tell Tech Belfry to stay put while you go ahead to scout or disable robots, and know that he'll be safe until you get back.

Gameplay

As Lobot, you have the standard movement modules – walk, jump and climb. You can also interact with your environment – push buttons, pick up and carry objects, and put them down in different places. This means that you can create bridges for Tech Belfry to walk across, or give him a boost to a higher level that he normally wouldn't be able to jump to.

You are also armed with a 'stun gun' – it shoots enough of a jolt to temporarily incapacitate a robot, without completely frying their processor. When a robot is incapacitated, you can get close enough to access their direct input panels, and deactivate them, rendering them dormant until they are manually switched back on again at some later stage.

Deactivating Robots

When Lobot is close enough to deactivate a stunned robot, the game will switch into puzzle mode. The 'deactivation' puzzle is some kind of simple but addictive mini-game, along the lines of the coin game in FF10, or the match-three-in-a-row game of Puzzle Quest. If the player wins the mini-game, the robot is deactivated. If they fail, they are thrown back into the main game and must stun the robot again in order to re-try. Fortunately, robots recovering from stun are slower than usual, so this is not a difficult task.

Once a robot is de-activated, Lobot has the option of removing one of its modules, and integrating it into himself. The player might grab a speed module, or strength module, or even an intelligence module (which may, for example, give you hints when playing the puzzle game to try and to deactivate other robots).

Taking Damage

If hit by a plasma gun, Lobot will take damage. This damage is representative not of physical damage (Lobot models are very sturdy), but processor overload. This makes it more difficult to deactivate other robots, which manifests by having the player handicapped when playing deactivation puzzles – for example, giving the opposing robot two turns at the beginning instead of one.

Processor malfunction can be repaired by Tech Belfry.

What makes the game fun?

The game is a challenge – there is a clear goal, but it's up to the player to find the way from the starting point to that goal. The player is in conflict both with the environment, and other entities within it. The other robots will try to stop Lobot from getting Tech Belfry to the control room, the player has to prevent them from hurting their eccentric human ward.

There is enough action to be exciting, but with enough puzzle and exploration elements to keep those who aren't solely interested in full-scale slaughter interested. The player can choose the amount of risk – the longer they leave Tech Belfry alone, the more robots will discover him, and be there for the player to deal with when they get back.

The game is unusual, because most games have human (or at least, living) protagonists. When robots appear as allies, they are usually sidekicks, like Clank from Ratchet and Clank, or 'Dog' from Half Life 2.

This time the robot is the main character – he's stronger, faster, and more focussed than his scatterbrained human companion. The interaction between Lobot and Belfry is both serious and lighthearted by turns.

To increase the player's attachment to our hero Lobot, the player is able to customise him as they play. Firstly, they'll have several robot designs to choose from when they select their avatar at the beginning. Secondly, they can continue customising him as they progress, by choosing which modules to add, and therefore which stats to increase.

What would stop the game being fun, and how do we avoid it?

The game is designed to avoid the major annoyances of "escort quests".

Firstly, the other robots don't try and deactivate or destroy Lobot on sight – they have no way of knowing he's not infected too. They will only attack if they see him try to help or protect Tech Belfry. This means that the pressure of combat is intermittent, and can be somewhat controlled by the player.

Secondly, Tech Belfry is completely non-aggressive – he won't ever go into kamikaze mode and try to start a fight. He knows there's no way he can win against a robot. Conversely, if he is attacked, he immediately activates his shield instead of trying to fight back.

There are two game modes – easy mode and hard mode. In easy mode, Tech Belfry's shield has no timer limit. Once activated, his shield will remain intact until there are no more visible threats. This gives the player plenty of time to get back to him and help him. While the player will eventually have to get rid of the robots attacking him if they want to move forwards, they have time to think about how to do it – maybe lure one away at a time instead of attacking them all at once.

In hard mode, Tech Belfry's shield has a time limit. When the shield is activated, he will shout for Lobot. A shield timer will then appear in the HUD, and the player must get back to Tech Belfry and deactivate the robots attacking him before the shield runs out. The shield will recharge whenever it is deactivated, at the same rate it drops. This means that the player will need to spend more time protecting Tech Belfry, and be more conservative with their exploring.

Either way, the player can't afford to let too many robots build up around Tech Belfry, because they will need to get rid of all of them before Lobot can be repaired, so the cumulative 'damage' taken while doing so needs to be limited as much as possible, or it will become more and more difficult to get rid of them all.

The hard and easy modes let the player choose the level of challenge, depending on their own level of skill.

Art Style

The art and design of the world is realistic, but somewhat stylised. The robotics factory is a very detailed environment, with lots of buttons and panels and robot parts lying around. A lot of it is metallic or has glowing lights, which makes the environment look very 'techy', but there are also parts of it that are very grungy and damaged, with smouldering rubble making some corridors and shafts unpassable, and the charred marks of plasma guns decorating the walls.

The robots are designed partly for functionality, partly for cool factor, which means they end up looking quirky and a little steampunkish. Despite being robots, they will have some human-like features, and can change expression, as well as using gestures to communicate and impart personality and mood.

Technology

There is nothing groundbreaking or technologically difficult about the gameplay or environment of the game. The environment is limited, since the game is set entirely indoors, which simplifies the processing needed for LODing. There are only likely to be, even at maximum, a handful of animated creatures (in this case, a human and some robots) on the screen at once. The AI is fairly simplistic for the enemy robots (kill Belfry on sight, and Lobot if they see him assisting), with the AI needed for Tech Belfry being the most complex. Generally, he will be following the PC's commands (sit, stay, come, follow, etc), although in some cases he may need to think for himself.

Target Market

The game is appropriate for a general audience, but may appeal particularly to younger players, with its combination of action and puzzles.

Comparison to Other Games

The game contains elements similar to a number of other games. In terms of game goals, Ico is most obvious – instead of a young boy trying to lead a distractable girl through a ruined castle, the PC is a malfunctioning robot trying to lead a distractable scientist through a ruined robotics factory.

The game's environment is similar to a lot of other games set in post-apocalyptic futures, notably Half Life. Lobot himself is modelled on various different robots with strong personalities, including Johnny 5 from Short Circuit, and Dog from Half Life 2.

The deactivation puzzle is similar to a number of games-within-games, particular the Final Fantasy series. Final Fantasy games usually have various mini-games within the main game, with one in particular that continues to be threaded throughout the entire story. Using a puzzle game as a 'combat' system is a feature of the recently released game Puzzle Quest.