Lecture 15

Procedural Content Generation
Important Lessons for Today

• Procedural content is **harder**, not easier
  • You must already know your *design patterns*
  • Controlling *difficulty* is a potential challenge
  • *Unwinnable levels* are also a challenge

• Many procedural approaches are **ad hoc**
  • Designed for specific games
  • Limited adaptability to other games

• Procedural generation is a **stretch goal**
In the Beginning, There Was *Rogue*
In the Beginning, There Was Rogue

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Roguelike Genre

- Classic RPG style
- Procedural dungeons
- Permadeath

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Procedural Content
## A Brief History of Roguelikes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Precursors (1978)         | - *Beneath Apple Manor*  
|                           | - *Dungeon* (unfamous one) |
| Rogue (1980)              | - Like *Rogue*, but less famous  
|                           | - Limited content generation |
| Immediate Copycats        | - Multiplatform launch  
|                           | - All very close in playstyle |
|                           | - Open source development |
|                           | - Middle Earth themed |
| Island of Kesmai (1985)   | - Massively (~80) multiplayer  
|                           | - But content less procedural |
| The Modern Revival        | - Relaxing RPG requirement |

**Procedural Content**
Advantages

- Greater challenge
  - Used as a badge of honor
- Higher emotional stakes
  - Easy to instill fear & horror

Disadvantages

- Greater discouragement
  - Seen as a personal failure
- Missed game content
  - Cannot progress in story

Procedural Content
# Changing Perspectives on Permadeath

## Advantages
- Greater challenge
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### Make dying expected & inevitable

## Disadvantages
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### Make each session a complete experience

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*Permanent Death*
You have but one life, eager hero. If you should die, though your deeds will be remembered, you shall not return again.
Changing Perspectives on Permadeath

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Make dying expected & inevitable

Procedural Content

Content Generation

Permanent Death
You have but one life, eager hero. If you should die, though your deeds will be remembered, you shall not return again.
Issues with Roguelikes

- Design is often **horizontal**
  - Many verbs, game elements
  - Little coupled behavior

- Each play is a **slice**
  - Access to limited elements
  - Work with what you get

- “Expensive” to create
  - Requires a lot of content
  - But historically just text

- Difficult to balance

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**WEAPON (Table 1)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weapon</th>
<th>COST</th>
<th>WGT</th>
<th>PROB</th>
<th>MATL</th>
<th>APPEARANCE</th>
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<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>crude dagger</td>
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<td>dagger</td>
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**Procedural Content for Modern Games?**

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**Procedural Content**
Modern Roguelikes: *Spelunky*
Modern Roguelikes: \textit{FTL}
Modern Roguelikes: *Roundguard*
Main Types of Procedural Content

- Simulation
- World Generation
- Puzzle Generation
- Story Generation
- Dynamic Challenges
- Adaptive Difficulty

Procedural Content Wiki: http://pcg.wikidot.com
Simulation

- Complexity appears random
- Often a physical process
  - Fires, Fluids, Weather
  - Terrain generation
  - Artificial life
- **Teleological**
  - Run the full simulation
  - Accurate; hard to control
- **Ontological**
  - Create reasonable output
  - Inaccurate; easy to control
Simulation

- Complexity appears random

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- Teleological
  - Requires control

- Ontological
  - Accommodates full control

Scientific Computing

Ad Hoc Algorithms

Procedural Content
Simulation

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- **Teleological**
  - Run the full simulation
    - Accurate; hard to control
- **Scientific Computing**
- **Ontological**
  - Create reasonable output
    - Inaccurate; easy to control
- **Ad Hoc Algorithms**
  - Minimal effect on gameplay
    - Often largely aesthetic
  - Hard to control difficulty
  - Lot of work for little payoff
World Generation

- Often thought of as map generation
  - But really generation of game *geography*
  - Particularly broad category of PCG

- **Basic Format**
  - Start with basic geography building blocks
  - Include combination rules for blocks
  - Build until reach a stopping point

- Algorithms vary widely
Example: NetHack

Izchak the Curator    St:18/11 Dx:16 Co:17 In:18 Wi:18 Ch:17 Lawful
Dlvl:8   $:94041 HP:217(234) Pw:190(195) AC:7   Exp:30
Example: NetHack

Procedural Content
Example: NetHack

Procedural Content
Example: NetHack

Procedural Content
Example: *Vertical Drop Heroes*

- **Movement**
  - Can move left-right
  - Down arrow to stomp/fall
  - Cannot jump at all!

- **Combat**
  - Space to fire weapon
  - Weapon depends on class
  - Free cage to switch class

- **Goal**
  - Collect treasure
  - Reach (a possible) exit
Example: *Vertical Drop Heroes*
Example: *Vertical Drop Heroes*

What if a platform were here?
The Reachability Problem

- Levels are effectively graphs
  - Edges are player choices
  - Choices are discretized
  - Fully connected (why?)

- PCG might make a graph
  - with a lot of dead ends
  - with a lot of backtracking
  - that is unconnected

- Need to remember goal
  - Should always be reachable
  - Else, reset must be painless
Example: Card Crawl
Ensuring Reachability

Two Options:

- Limit generation to reachable game states
- Verify goal is reachable or regenerate
Ensuring Reachability

Two Options:

- Limit generation to possibly reachable states
- Verify goal is reachable or regenerate
Grammars: A Formal Approach

- **Notation**
  - Set $\mathcal{N}$ of nonterminals
  - Set $\Sigma$ of terminal symbols
  - Set $\mathcal{P}$ of production rules
    - Have the form $A \Rightarrow B$
    - $A, B$ are words of symbols
- To generate a value
  - Start with word $XAY$
  - Pick any rule $A \Rightarrow B$
  - Replace with $XBY$
  - Repeat until only terminals

**Example**

- $\mathcal{N} = \{ S, B \}$
- $\Sigma = \{ a, b, c \}$
- $\mathcal{P}$ is the list of rules
  - $S \Rightarrow aBSc$
  - $S \Rightarrow abc$
  - $Ba \Rightarrow aB$
  - $Bb \Rightarrow bb$
- Possible outputs
  - $abc, aabbcc, aaabbbcccc, \ldots$
Grammars on Graphs

- Symbols are colored nodes
  - Either terminal or not
  - Edges replace word order

- Words are now graphs
  - Productions on subgraphs
  - LHS is node + boundary
  - RHS alters the node

- Output built as before
  - But rule matching harder
  - Graph equivalency
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Game Geography is a graph

- Output built as before
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Puzzle Generation

- Basic puzzle structure
  - Discrete actions/moves
  - Moves applied in sequence
  - **Goal**: get correct sequence

- Identify move sequences
  - Could be a loose category
  - Represent specific strategies

- Build up from sequences
  - Start from solved state
  - Invert moves (scrambling)

- Will require verification
Example: Lyne
Example: Lyne

Backtrack Pattern
Narrative is tightly crafted
- Must have emotional arc
- Very hard to generate

But backstory is looser
- Collection of tales/subplots
- Combine to form a story
- Often displayed in a codex
- Much easier to generate

Idea: Create list of subplots
- Pick some subset at a time
- Mix with NLG techniques
Example: Dwarf Fortress
Natural Language Generation

- Function that outputs language
  - **Given**: complex set of data
  - **Outcome**: comment on data
  - Major area of CS research

- Comment requirements
  - Must be *simpler* than data
  - Should also be *natural*

- **Examples**
  - Sports commentary
  - Party combat chatter
  - Intelligent townsfolk
NLG and Story Dialogue

- Often a set of “canned” text
  - React to specific events
  - NPC picks text as appropriate

- Text is *parameterized*
  - “What do we do, <name>?”
  - “Someone killed <monster>!”
  - “That was <numb> days ago.”

- Choosing text to say
  - Favor important events?
  - Favor recent events?
  - Random (pull-toy)?
Skyrim’s Radiant Quest System

- Geography includes NPCs
  - Mobile, removable location
  - Dialogue is also a space
- System “randomly” chooses
  - Quest giver
  - Quest location
  - Location’s challenges
  - Quest redeemer
- Randomness is limited
  - Lists appropriate to quest
  - Depends on earlier actions

- Goals:
  - Send to unexplored areas
  - Adjust challenges to level
  - Can never be missed
- Largely a success
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Guarantees:
- Reachability to previously unexplored areas
- Adjust challenges to level
- Can never be missed
- Largely a success
But Sometimes a Problem

Procedural Content
Dynamic Challenges

- Challenges that can change
  - Become easier or harder
  - Just be different

- **Example**: Autoleveling
  - NPCs have statistics
  - Adjust to character level
  - Difficulty always reasonable
  - Allows true “open” world

- Not always popular
  - Can lead to design recycling
  - Sense of risk is lost
Other Types of Dynamic Challenges

• **Composite Challenges**
  • Encounter is a collection of NPCs, obstacles
  • Add or remove individuals from encounter

• **Dynamic NPC AI**
  • NPCs have a choice of AI scripts
  • Choose one that matches the player

• **Player Boosting**
  • Change result of player actions, interactions
  • Modifications make challenges easier/harder
Assigning Dynamic Challenges

**Player**

- Extract feature vector from play history

\[(a_1, a_2, a_3, \ldots, a_n)\]

**Challenge**

- Match the challenge to the play style

\[(b_1, b_2, b_3, \ldots, b_k)\]

**Procedural Content**
Assigning Dynamic Challenges

Player

Extract feature vector from play history

\((a_1, a_2, a_3, \ldots, a_n)\)


Challenge

Match the challenge to the play style

\((b_1, b_2, b_3, \ldots, b_k)\)

Parameterize challenge difficulty

Matching Function is hardest to balance
Adaptive Difficulty

Player

Parameterize challenge difficulty

Challenge

Match via machine learning

Extract feature vector from play history

\((a_1, a_2, a_3, \ldots, a_n)\)

\((b_1, b_2, b_3, \ldots, b_k)\)
Adaptive Difficulty

- Manually define the **gameplay model**
  - Metrics that identify player behavior
  - Parameters that define challenge behavior
  - Also metrics to evaluate player success or failure

  **Goal**: Use learning to find player-challenge match-up
  - Use playtesting/beta to get a large training set
  - Create an initial model from these results
  - Adjust in the game according to current player

- Starting to really take off in the industry
Summary

• Procedural content started with Rogue(likes)
  • Tightly coupled with permadeath, horizontal design
  • Becoming fashionable once again

• Many applications to modern game design
  • World Generation
  • Puzzle Generation
  • Story Generation
  • Dynamic Challenges
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