Lecture 25

Storytelling
Some Questions to Start With

- What is the purpose of story in game?
- How do story and gameplay relate?
- Do all games have to have a story?
  - Action games?
  - Sports games?
  - Role playing games?
  - Puzzle games?
# Setting vs. Story

## Setting

- Premise/motivation to play
  - Does not limit outcomes
  - “Geography” to explore
- Has many “dimensions”
  - Physical (scale, perspective)
  - Temporal (time compression)
  - Environmental (art style)
  - Emotional (horror, humor)
  - Ethical (good vs. evil)

## Story

- Creates an emotional setting
  - Defined by NPC behavior
  - Drama builds tension
- Typically has a **narrative**
  - “Voice” of the author
  - Gives direction to game
  - Gives sense of progression
  - But loss of **player choice**
Aspects of Game Design

• Games as Education
  • Train player skill and understanding
  • Focuses primarily on player capabilities

• Games as Exploration
  • Focuses on the game geography
  • Typically involves heavy storyboarding

• Games as Storytelling
  • Focuses on player progression
  • Most challenging element of game design
Players Need Discrete Progression

- **Analogy**: hiking to a mountain peak
  - Constantly making progress to top of mountain
  - Psychologically hard to recognize this progress
  - **Result**: take pride in reaching concrete landmarks

- Players need this discrete progress as well
  - Individual levels
  - Game worlds
  - Narrative or *storytelling*
Travelogues are a Kind of Story

• Focus is on journey, not the characters

• Many examples in literature
  • Gulliver’s Travels
  • Classic heroic myths (e.g. Odyssey)
  • Epic fantasy (e.g. Tolkien)

• Problem is the emotional impact
  • One landmark is as good as any other
  • Eventually landmarks lose their significance
Travelogues in RPGs
Story and Gameplay

• Want to create dramatic tension in the game
  • Heightens emotional investment
  • Story becomes integral part of gameplay

• Story structure is incredibly important
  • **Pacing:** How elements unfold in the game
  • **Dramatic Flow:** Rising and falling action

• How do we structure this?
  • And how does it affect meaningful choice?
Story Vehicle

• The **dynamic structure**
  • How is story revealed?
  • Relation to gameplay?
  • Can story be “missed”?

• **Examples:**
  • Cut-scenes
  • Character dialog
  • In-game lore
  • Game manual
Three Act Structure

- Standard for movie screenplays
  - All major movies follow it
  - Violations consider “artsy”
  - Proven formula for dramatic arc
- Accepted standard for games too
  - But less well understood
  - Suitableness is matter of debate
Act I: Set-Up

- **Exposition**
  - Introduces the protagonist
  - Introduces dramatic premise
  - Character relationships

- **Inciting Incident**
  - Sets the plot in motion
  - Half-way through act

- **Plot Point**
  - Indicates end of the act
  - “Reversal”: new direction
Act 2: Confrontation

- Obstacles block goal

- **First Culmination**
  - Just before halfway point
  - Protagonist seems close
  - Then everything falls apart

- **Midpoint**
  - Protagonist at lowest point

- **Plot Point**
  - Indicates end of the act
  - “Reversal”: new direction
Act 3: Resolution

- **Second Culmination**
  - Tension at greatest point
  - Forces confront each other
  - Often called “Climax”

- **Denouement**
  - After climax is done
  - Return to equilibrium

- Typically much shorter
  - In games: the boss fight
Example: Donkey Kong

Exposition, Act I

Rising Action, Act II
Example: *Donkey Kong*

Climax, Act III

Denouement
Example: *Mass Effect 2*
Gameplay vs. Narrative

- **Narrative**: non-interactive
  - Designer created narrative
  - Player experiences it
  - Even if there are choices

- **Gameplay**: interactive
  - Very definition of a game
  - Entirely player driven

- How do you combine these?
Elements of Game Narrative

• **Characters**
  - Protagonist: player controlled character
  - Supporting characters: NPCs

• **Storyline**
  - How does the story progress?

• **Dialogue**
  - Story vehicle in games and fiction
  - Easy way to allow player choice
Elements of Game Narrative

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For a later lecture
Characters: Agency vs. Empathy

• Like gameplay vs. narrative dichotomy

• **Agency**: Character represents the player
  • Can be utilitarian (allowing player choice)
  • Can support role playing, creativity

• **Empathy**: Develop emotional bond
  • Hard if complete player control
  • Requires some predefined personality
Characters vs. Avatars

Character

Avatar

Storytelling
Characters vs. Avatars

Character vs. Avatar

How Does this Effect the Story?
Computer vs. Player Control

Computer Control

Player Control

Storytelling
Computer vs. Player Control

Computer Control  Player Control

How Does this Effect the Story?
**Linear Storytelling**: Designer directed

- Success is adherence to story
- Very easy to design (cutscenes!)
**Storyline**

- **Branching Storytelling**: Player directed
  - *Choose Your Own Adventure*
  - Content becomes very expensive!
**Storyline**

- **Faction Design**: Modern RPGs
  - Game has “factions” each with different story
  - Simple branching story per faction
  - Player’s story is a mix-and-match of factions
• **Open Ended**: Player creates own story
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**No Narrative**: Is this Really Storytelling?
Open Ended Story: Game Ethics

• Player actions have consequences
  • Are they just success vs. failure?
  • Or is there a notion of good vs. bad?
  • Value judgements are sometimes “author’s voice”
  • Can provide direction in place of narrative

• Example: modern RPGs
  • Story lines written for “good” and “bad”
  • Some players want to see all the stories
  • But some feel the choices are emotionally painful
Ethics versus Gameplay

Storytelling
Ethics versus Gameplay

Storytelling
Meaningful Choice

- Players often claim they want meaningful choice
  - Gameplay actions have effect on storyline
  - Actions needed to achieve story outcomes
  - Must make some outcomes unattainable (why?)

- But not clear that they mean this
  - Often want to experience all of the story
  - Closing off plotlines requires a new game
  - *Morrowind* vs. *Obsidian*
Summary

- Story can simply support a setting
  - Can tell across multiple vehicles
  - Does not require it be coupled with gameplay

- Integrating **narrative** with gameplay is harder
  - **Character design**: agency vs. empathy
  - **Storyline**: linear vs. branching vs. other
  - **Dialogue**: next time

- **Authorial voice** is possible without narrative