Storytelling and Narrative

By: Thanus Mohanarajan and Diego Valdivia
Introduction

- stories have developed into rich experiences of retelling events, both real and imaginary
- Examples: classical poetry, religious and mythological text, playwrights and novelists
- things didn’t start well in video game storytelling
- long way to go if it wants to achieve literary status like novels and scripture
The Great Debate

Are stories and narrative elements necessary in video games?

Tetris, Asteroids, and Pong

However, these games have one thing in common; they were developed during the early stages of gaming.

Modern games need the complexity of narrative in order to complement the complexity of gameplay and environments.
Enhance Entertainment

- require a contextual environment in which a player needs to partake and believe in
- provide a sense of progress and accomplishment

- Sports Games – Exhibition vs. Regular Season vs. Playoffs vs. Championship Game
- RPG Games – Spawning Characters vs. Final Boss
Attract Wider Audience

- ensure more gamers; gameplay will automatically draw in gamers
- added incentive of a “good” story will attract more gamers who might have dismissed the game beforehand
- modern games should incorporate some sort of narrative
Keep Gamer Interest

- story can push gamers to play their games for longer durations of time

- smaller games that involve only high scores may not entice gamers if they had complicated stories
Marketing

- Gameplay isn’t easily marketable

- Inclusion of characters, taglines, synopsises, or environment artwork will be required to get potential gamers to buy their games
Example: Marketing
Example: Marketing
When To Put Stories In Games?

- depends on the genre of game
- Tetris, Space Invaders and Pong don’t need a story to garner any success, and can serve as a distraction
- successful game needs to find a balance between story and gameplay

*Design Rule: Gameplay Comes First*
Factors to Consider

i) Length
- Shorter games don’t need a story, just a context to play the game in.
- Longer games will need a story to keep longevity of gameplay and player interest.

ii) Degree Of Realism
- Level of abstraction to a game can affect the type of narrative used in the games.
- Characters usually decide what level of story is necessary: racing games are realistic but don’t really require a story.
Factors to Consider

iii) Characters
avatar-based, or central characters require back stories and a narrative to invest time in the game

iv) Emotional Richness
more relevant to single player games
simple achievements and gameplay tension (will be discussed later) are not enough for players to continue playing the game
characters and story are tried-and-true components
Key Concepts

- **a) Story**
  Definition: retelling or an account of a series of events (fictional and non-fictional)

- **b) Narrative**
  Definition: text or the discourse produced by the act of narration (retelling of a story by an overseer, or external agent), it is non-interactive and the player has no influence in the events to come
Story - Credibility

- accuracy of a non-fictional retelling
- believability of a fictional story are criteria that need to be met by game designers
- “suspension of disbelief”
- A good writer will set up the world in a way so the participant is integrated into the experience
- Three Dimensional characters with developed back stories and personalities
- creating the illusion of purpose and consequence with virtual beings
Story - Coherency

- thematic structure of a story and its elements must be relevant to each other and not seem arbitrary

- appropriate tangents are accepted, but nothing that will distract the gamer
Story – Dramatic Meaningfulness

- With more relevancy to characters, this technique details the importance of a story that has relatable characters that the gamer will come to care about.
- Empathy should not be forced (aka melodrama).
- Accepted form of empathy should come through naturally in the story development, as the gamer will set the tone for their experience and not be force fed how to feel.
- Game events: introduction, rising action, denouement and conclusion.
- Thematic elements of the story not connected to its characters can be used as dramatic meaningfulness,
Example: Dramatic Meaningfulness
Interactivity

Definition: a story that the player interacts with by contributing actions to it, and despite the player’s action inability to alter the plot direction, the story can still be interactive.

Active agents - player has an interactive role in the story development and progress of the game itself.

Passive agents – includes a reader or a viewer of film or TV.
actions separate from the gameplay, and have an affect on the story

Examples of this include the playable character interacting with NPCs to get information not known by the traditional storytelling methods

actively getting information that wouldn’t be mandatorily provided to them to advance the plot.
In-Game Events

- events that are part of the game, and not directly available for the player to alter
- player action can trigger an event that would happen always due to its built-in existence in the game mechanics

Examples: walking guards in Metal Gear Solid, or the player moves an item that triggers the trap door to fall
Example – In-Game Event
Narrative Events

- This will be explained in the Narrative section
- defined as events that the player has no control over
- the player will witness them; this goes hand-in-hand with game progression and overcoming certain obstacles.
Story vs. Narrative

- narrative cannot be considered interactive due to its passive nature and the fact that it is linear.
- agency = ability to change the plot direction and its events.
- video games provide an added dimension of interactivity as their contribution to the story progression creates that experience.
- allow the player to approach an obstacle in many different ways.
- events in between them that enable the player to move from the start to the end is non-linear; they get to choose how they get to their destination.
Important: events in an interactive game story should not depart from its thematic nature

violates the principles of a good story (coherency, credibility, dramatic meaningfulness)
To reiterate:

Definition: text or the discourse produced by the act of narration (retelling of a story by an overseer, or external agent)

it is non-interactive and the player has no influence in the events to come
Narrative - Role

- Role: players have no control of the narrative; it is pre-determined and cannot be prevented
- must go through the journey of the narrative development
- pre-determinism still stands, and its purpose is to contextualize the environment that player will participate in
Narrative – Common Usage

- Narrative blocks are used to present narrative to the game player
- Different methods are used to convey information to the player (depends on genre)

- The three types of narrative blocks are as follows:
Narrative – Opening Sequence

“It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.”

1) Opening Sequence:
- Introduction to the story of the game and sets the stage for the player entering the foreign environment.

- Information provided in this brief (and sometimes not too brief) sequence will need to be enough to persuade the gamer to continue to play the game.
Example – Opening Sequence
Narrative – Interlevel Sequence

"Wake up and smell the ashes."

2) **Interlevel Sequence:**

- used as a setup for the following challenge or level; it only provides enough information to give some background for the events to follow
- Variation: cut-scene, where its purpose is to develop the narrative and show possible character development
- length of the sequences vary on genre; fast-paced games have shorter sequences of up to 5 minutes, while slower-paced games like RPGs will spend more time on these sequences.
Example – Interlevel Sequence
Narrative – Ending Sequence

"I was cured all right."

3) Ending Sequence:
- wraps up any storylines after the game has “finished”
- possibly introduces potential storylines in the form of cliffhangers, or open-ended conclusions
- can make or break a game, much like a third act
- however, more of the same is a bigger trend, and customers unfortunately have shown interest in sequels
Example – Ending Sequence
Narrative – Forms

- pre-rendered movies, cut-scenes using the graphics engines (interactive but not manipulative), text-based and voiceover
- not considered narratives: consequence-based actions, like talking to a non-playable character (single line of dialogue)
- however a long monologue given by an NPC is considered a narrative
too much narrative and too little gameplay can alienate gamers as they are non-active for the better part of the game

too much gameplay and too little narrative will disrupt a flow and may come off as lazy or uninspiring

lack of a narrative perspective results in an emotionless, non-purposeful game

key part to gaming is interaction; to make the player feel like they are actively affecting the outcome of the game

illusion is necessary for any possibility of enjoyment; if the balance of narrative and gameplay is not found, the illusion will be broken
Narrative - Balance

“We cannot choose the times in which we live. All we can decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”

- if the balance, or editing, does not feel right, it can detriment the video game’s success
- each game genre will have its own acceptance of what balance is required, so using the film methods as a guideline will help game designers immensely

Design Rule: Do Not Seize Control of the Avatar.
Dramatic Tension vs. Gameplay

Dramatic Tension:
by-product of proper usage of literary techniques such as cliff-hangers, plot twists, conflict and rising action

important for any type of narrative to have dramatic tension, as it leads to desire and anticipation of any future (or past) revelations

Games that use these techniques with excellent results are: GTA: Vice City, Assassin’s Creed
Dramatic Tension vs. Gameplay Tension

- **Gameplay Tension**: playing of the game leads to gameplay tension
- gamer is stressed due to in-game challenges and obstacles
- tension is heightened in certain parts of a game, including boss battles, timed challenges, puzzle-solving
Dramatic Tension vs. Gameplay

- Programmers allow gamers to experience this by increasing the difficulty of the game, or incorporating near impossible difficulty levels in the game.

- Games that use this technique to create the most stress include: Devil May Cry 3, Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty, Demon Souls.
Example - Tension
The False Analogy

two tensions should not be considered to be related
- Important concepts: randomness and repetition
- dramatic tension cannot abide by these two terms
- repetitiveness of storylines within an overarching narrative of a game bogs it down
- Exceptions: variations on randomness and repetition, to remove the sense of sameness or lack of originality

Gameplay tension, however, can rely on these two terms
- can lead to heavy tension in gameplay, which can be both good and bad
Storytelling Engine

- module of the game that organizes the narration and execution of the story events
- keeps track of player progress during the story to trigger the appropriate event response
- only reacts to triggers in the core mechanics
- weaving the story elements together
- storytelling engine handles narrative events and the core mechanics deals with player and in-game events
communication and updates about the game status are sent back and forth
An example of this relationship: player has finished a level and the core mechanics sends that update to the storytelling engine to continue the story from that checkpoint
Once the story has progressed via narrative cut-scenes, it returns a message to the core mechanics to continue the gameplay
Game designers have to plan where these checkpoints or trigger points are located within a game’s timeline
Linear vs. Nonlinear Stories

- **a) Linear**
  - refers to the inability of the player to alter the story and its events (pre-determinism)
  - does not exclude the possibility of interactivity, as gaming provides the in-between actions that can be a subset of an infinite amount of actions to get from checkpoint to checkpoint
Linear Stories

**Pros:**
- Linear stories require less content than non-linear ones due to pre-determinism
- Storytelling engine is simpler due to less management
- Less prone to bugs and absurdities, and is relatable to film continuity errors
- Greater emotions due to controlling nature of the story

**Cons:**
- No player agency, which can argue that it is less realistic than its non-linear counterparts
- Can limit the story length and its complexity
Linear vs. Nonlinear Stories

- **Nonlinear**: refers to the ability of the player to alter the story and its events (freedom of choice)

- Multiple story paths are available, depending on their choices during their time in the game

- Two major types: branching and foldback stories
Branching Stories

- Possibility of multiple storylines and experiences depending on player actions
- Storytelling engine keeps track of the decisions players make and works with the core mechanics
- Branch point – “fork in the road”
- Two influences: overcoming challenges or story making the player choose their fate
Branching Stories - Influences

- **Immediate:** branching occurs right away (easiest to implement)
- **Deferred:** branching occurs a while after the player action has been made (e.g. the dog in Resident Evil 4)
- **Cumulative:** multiple actions have an effect on the upcoming branching of the story

Important: consequences of choices must be made clear by the game designer (e.g. RPGs and character choices) and must be rational

Buildup of choices can lead to story influences as well as change character interactions
Branching Stories - Structure

- Tree with nodes representing potential story events and branch points, multiple sub trees due to branching
- Can only go forward in progress, and repetition in story is not recommended
- Branching is not exclusive; some sub trees may intersect
- One or more start points, and definitely more than one ending
- Heavy use of agency provided by the designer
Branching Stories - Disadvantages

- **Expensive to implement:** branches and branch points need their own narrative and gameplay, can lead to combinatorial explosion

- **Tree Uniqueness:** branching introduces restrictions on future events; merging or intersection cannot occur if the branch point will introduce continuity errors

- **Game repetition:** the player will have to play through the game again if they want to see the alternate storylines
Example – Branching Story
Foldback Stories

- Compromise between linear and branching -> limited agency
- Variety of inevitable events within a narrative, combined with branching nonlinear events
- Illusion of agency provided to player; overall narrative remains “linear”
Foldback Stories

- Ensures writer can establish emotion and character development without too many tangents
- Most used method of storytelling in modern games, due to the illusion of complexity
- Critical turning points (cliffhangers, plot twists) should be designed as inevitabilities
Story Endings

- mark an important conclusion to the story
- can be the most emotional moment in the story, but writers may choose to adopt different closure styles that should complement the genre being played
- level of satisfaction and accomplishment obtained when successfully beating a game
Story Endings

- **Single Ending Stories**
  - usually used in Linear storytelling
  - power given to the writer to tell the story their way, and choose the best narrative they can come up with to tell the game’s story
  - downside is that players might get bored of seeing the same routine over and over again, so for this approach there must be a franchise/fan club backbone the story can fall back to for support (*Mario, Zelda, and Metroid*)
  - to avoid disappointment, game developers will avoid emphasizing choice making, if they plan on making a single ending
Story Endings

- **Multiple Endings**
  - used when developing with nonlinearity stories
  - player encounters many choices that will affect the final outcome
  - rewarding feeling of accomplishment when the character you watched grow really has an effect on the story and is not just playing along with a script

Examples:
- Knights of the Old Republic
- Bioshock
- Chrono Trigger

Dramatic freedom is required for multiple endings.

Heavy Rain has been reported to have 18 different endings.
Challenges & Choices

- In general, players expect to be rewarded for their accomplishment & task completion while playing a game.

- Metroid gave an alternate ending if the game was beaten within a specific time period. Awarded player with knowledge of Samus’ gender. She appears without her suit for the first time, revealing herself a woman.
Example - Challenges
Granularity

- The ratio between gameplay & storytelling whether it be in form of narrations or cut scenes.
- It is crucial to design of story
- Coarse granularity defines games with lower gameplay time and higher narration time. Diagram below resemble the rough transitions given in coarse granularity.
- The game Black displays coarse granularity
- Fine granularity defines games with harmony between gameplay & narration, and is often what designer should aim to accomplish.
Example - Granularity
Mechanisms for Advancing the Plot

Plot Advancement vary by game genre, mostly in action games like God Of War, story is triggered by reaching a certain point in the level (In-game events), meanwhile in World of Warcraft, story may only advance once the player chooses to enter a certain area or interact with a specific game character (player events).

There are three mechanisms:
- Story of Challenges and Choices
- Story as a Journey
- Story as Drama
Story as a Series of Challenges:
Not affected by time, story and time advances are proportional to the completion of mission or challenges presented. Example: most linear games, Star Fox and Fast and Furious.
Avoid using too many challenged trigger cut scenes, this might give the game even more coarse granularity, and make it jerky and too procedural.

Story as Journey:
Revolves around avatar based games, like Final Fantasy and Elder Scrolls.
Free to explore the world, moving the avatar from place to place, player trigger events are used with more frequency.
Provides Novelty: keep player interested with new enemies, weapons, vehicles.
Pace Control: player can advance at their own pace, whether they want to stay and train, or go face the next boss.
Story as Drama

- games where the plot moves forward with or without the player, and sends triggers to the core mechanics to indicate when it's time to give gameplay
- used in most real-time games, and multiplayer games
- Example: Facade puts the player in the role of a friend of Grace and Trip, who are the main characters in the story
- during a pre-party scenario, you aim to be a guest, but if the player does nothing, the game will progress and Grace and Trip will react to the players silence.
- Another example of the Story Drama mechanism in use is in the game Night Trap (given in text book)
Emotional Limits – Interactive Games

- difference between games with story and games without story
- gameplay centered games don't need a story and rely on fun to be appealing
- complex games require depth and purpose, involving emotions and attachment for success
- designer chooses to end the game based on how they interacted with the players emotions and can also restrict a nonlinear game to a closed ending,
- similar to how a movie may display a quote at the end to really drive the point home
Emotional Limits – Interactive Games

Example: To achieve emotional connection with the player, the designer may give a background to the character, have growth or levelling up, character nurturing or give the character a purpose.

- A non-linear story means accepting that the player's decisions, even though they may not be always ideal for ordinary storytelling.
- Cannot guarantee that the player will experience the most emotional connection to the story.
- Designers and writers in general have to settle on knowing that you can't always satisfy everyone.
Emotional Limits – Avatar-Based Games

- games like Elder Scrolls, Dungeon Dragon and most MMOs like World of Warcraft usually have a story written in the first person, since it follows the story of the main character.
- can change who narrates the story to be creative, examples include God of War where Athena does some of the narrating, gives subtle suggestions that Kratos is not narrating due to the chance he may not be in the whole game.
- dependency limits how drastic the story can be; in most occasions the main character will not die prematurely, since this might negatively affect the story itself.
- first person games will not severely punish the player and quick re-spawn or large life gauge usually gives a feel of immortality.
- Examples: Megaman, Metal Slug, Sonic, Donkey Kong
Emotional Limits – Avatar-Based Games

- must attempt to make the death of the character more significant than a quick revival at a save point
- **Example: Demon's Souls** is particularly challenging, since each time the player dies, the enemies will become harder and you will also lose all your soul
- allows player to become better by analyzing enemies instead of blindly trying to defeat by trial and error, leading to empathy
- A first person story may have a dark ending but the narrating character cannot die prematurely
- designer may decide to introduce a sidekick or someone close to the main character and really develop his background and story only to kill him at the end for emotional reactions
- **Examples: Planetfall, Final Fantasy VII** regarding Aeris' death

TIP: non-interactive rules on story writing do not directly apply to interactive story writing, and requires new rules and principles
Scripted Conversations and Dialogue Trees

- **Natural Language** – ordinary language spoken or written by humans
- potential problems include the artificial intelligence may find it difficult to understand and react appropriately to a natural language conversation
- Goal: have a player engage in a conversation with an NPC that is not scripted, meaning it is not activated through either the player choosing to speak to the NPC or vice versa
- players pick a sentence or word out of a list of options and the NPC responds accordingly, but really just a tree of options
Scripted Conversations and Dialogue Trees

- The process continues until the conversation reaches the end of the tree and no options are available or the player chooses to end conversation prematurely.
- Some games incorporate dialogue to provide a player with information they may have missed or extra information on certain characters or locations.
- Usually end with a variation of the sentences "I don't have anything else to tell you" or "Come see me when you need help".