


The Role of Story



Topics in Game Development

Spring 2008

ECE 495/595; CS 491/591



Stories and Games: Warring camps

- **LUDOLOGY** (from Latin, *ludus* = game): games not form of narrative; regarded as unique artifacts; study games as games
- **NARRATOLOGY** (from *narrative*): games are a form of storytelling

Traditional stories (movies, plays, novels, etc):



- Pre-constructed; cannot change
- Linear – events in fixed order (usually chronological)
- One unchangeable ending
- Audience cannot interact
- Storyteller the boss: Godlike powers
- Experienced passively

Games – a different storytelling environment

- Interactive: players participate
- Nonlinear (order not fixed)
- Different outcomes possible
- Player co-creator of story
- Experienced as active play, not passively





Use of story varies...

Depends on type of game... a continuum:

- Abstract puzzle games, arcade games.
casual games: no story or just a little backstory
- Shooters: some story to provide context
- Role playing and adventure games: great deal of story

Ideal Amount of Story?



Like *Three Little Bears*:
Just enough!

- Too little: lacks context, drama, meaning
- Too much: overwhelms gameplay
- Important: story & gameplay should be **interwoven!**



Some views of story & games

- Henry Jenkins (MIT): game designers are “narrative architects” – design worlds, shape spaces
- Celia Pearce (UC Irvine): game designers create a compelling framework for play; story should not dominate

What is a story?



- Mostly interchangeable with “drama” and “narrative”
- Depict **characters** in **series** of **dramatic events**, following action from **inception to conclusion**

Games are naturally story-like; contain basic elements of drama



- Conflict: 2 sides fighting
- Greeks: competition for a desired prize (agon)
 - The protagonist (the hero; the one going for the goal)
 - The antagonist (the opposing force; the adversary)
- Obstacles & challenges
- A resolution

Games also have:



- A structure (beginning, middle, end)
- Clear cut rules
- Rewards and penalties
- A defined playing space (court, field, track) – a setting



Nine storytelling concepts
useful to game design...



1. Immersiveness

- Become sucked into story, totally absorbed
- Provided by great plot, characters, settings
- Games even more immersive than linear stories:
 - » Player controls what happens
 - » A “live” experience
 - » Sense of being inside story
 - » Can be augmented by tactile and other other sensory feedback



2. Plot

- The “what happens” in a traditional story; the “story beats”
- Can provide surprises, the unexpected
- In games:
 - Also the “what happens”
 - Provides starting point, middle, endings
 - Less elaborate than traditional stories

3. Characters



- “Humanize” a story, bring it to life
- Strong characters can help popularize a game
- In games:
 - Often less developed than in linear stories
 - Antagonists may be abstract
 - Players control or “become” characters

4. Setting

- This is “world” of your game
- Can suggest story possibilities & characters
- Can be physical
- Can be a fantasy world
- Can be a particular time period





5. Goals and Motives

- Grow out of the main character and plot
- It is what the hero is trying to achieve
- Should be easy to understand, difficult to accomplish
- A well-established goal:
 - Will drive the player through game to end
 - Will add meaning to a game

6. Obstacles & Challenges

- Can be:
 - Physical
 - Cerebral (puzzles)
 - Other characters
- Help make story or game riveting
- In game, should not be:
 - too easy: player bored
 - too hard: player gives up



7. Rewards and penalties



- Carrot and stick
- In stories and games, help provide incentives to keep going
- In games, also a way to measure success or failure; possibility of loss adds tension
- Can be: a score; \$; powers; advancement; even jellybeans
(*Toontown Online*)

8. Emotion

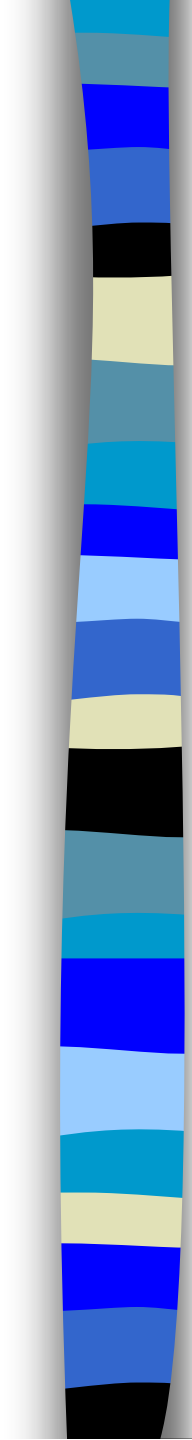
- 2 kinds: expressed by characters, experienced by audience or players
- Can make a game richer, more compelling, more memorable
- Some emotions often found in games: fear, hope, tension, anxiety
- Some more rare: shame, sorrow, compassion, empathy



9. Urgency



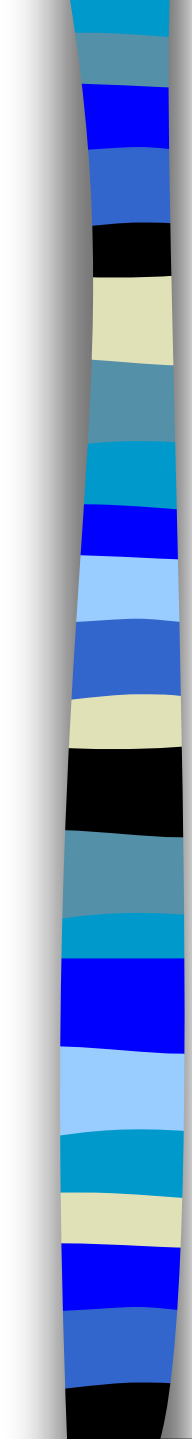
- Provided by a sense of time running out
- Device from stories: the ticking clock (must succeed at something by certain time, or disaster)



Story also used in cut scenes, cinematics

- Linear sequences just like movie scenes
- Used for:
 - Opening of game (provides backstory, motivation)
 - Wrapping up game (pulls everything together)
 - Bridging parts of game (used between levels; also used to introduce new characters, challenges)

USE SPARINGLY: can slow down game,
annoy players!



Where do ideas for games come from?

- News stories, documentaries
- History
- Mythology
- An event from real life (more common in linear stories)
- An interesting setting
- Fantasy themes
- Letting imagination run free – brainstorming
- Adaptations of books, movies (AVOID!)
- Sequels to popular game franchise (not an option)



What kinds of ideas work best?

- Stories that provide lots of action, things for player to do
- Stories with simple, understandable, meaningful goals
- Stories with exciting challenges
- Stories with colorful settings
- Stories that provide escape from “ordinary” life



Ideas that absolutely won't work?

- No such thing!
- Limitations are self imposed (by industry)
- But some ideas, themes, genres very difficult in games:
 - Complex character development
 - Musical comedy
 - Slapstick comedy
 - Complex social or political issues
 - Realistic, contemporary stories
- Innovative ideas may break new ground, be a hit



In short, stories provide games with:

- Immersiveness
- Plot
- Characters
- Settings
- Goals
- Motivation
- Obstacles
- Rewards, penalties
- Urgency
- Emotion

Exercise:

Developing a Game Concept



Rough out a game with Valentine's Day theme

- Premise? (indicate core story)
- Purpose?
- Role & goal of player?
- Types of challenges?
- Setting?
- Target audience?
- Genre and platform?