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 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
- Motivation
- Plot
- Obstacles
- Characters
- Rewards, penalties
- Settings
- Urgency
- Goals
- 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?