Lecture 7: Game Fictions

Kathleen Tuite
CM 148
ktuite@ucsc.edu
April 13, 2015
Games are not new
RPG Evolution:
Abstract war games
RPG Evolution:
Detailed war simulations
RPG Evolution: Role playing
RPG Evolution

• With D&D miniatures move from groups to individuals

• Maps move from large battlefields to constrained dungeons

• Complex processes move from the forefront of each player’s mind to the Dungeon Master

• Room to perform character and story
Computer RPGs

• The role-playing game from has migrated to the computer, at least in some ways
  – Statistical combat and character development
Computer RPGs

• The role-playing game from has migrated to the computer, at least in some ways
  – Statistical combat and character development
Computer RPGs

- Collaborative performance often replaced by rich media
  - Instantial assets
Computer RPGs

• Often a single-player experience
  – Even with MMPORGs, players connect over the network, not face-to-face
RPGs

• Make the story *playable*
• Emphasis on
  – Character development
  – Advancing the story
• Rather than
  – Shoot stuff! (FPS games)
  – Jump on stuff! (Platformers)
How to make the story playable?

• Two prominent operational logics for managing story and NPCs in RPGs
  – Dialog trees
  – Quest flags

• Star Wars Knights of the Old Republic makes playable structures out of tried-and-true narratives
Playing KOTOR

• On Dantooine, went south, met the Sandral family

• Their son Casus, missing – and they kidnapped Shen Matale in response

• Their daughter, Rahasia has fallen in love with Shen
The daring rescue
KotOR family feud

- In this version, Shen and Rahasia moved to the Jedi enclave
- The player then travels north to see rest of area
- On visiting Shen’s father, he seems confused...
A strange conversation...
More “bugs”

• Later, the PC finds the body of Casus Sandral, and returns to his family, only to find their compound permanently closed

• Upon visiting planets in an unexpected order, has conversations with Jolee Bindo

• Where do these problems come from?
Challenges

• When using spatial freedom, the narrative structure’s inflexibility is often revealed

• Simple, brittle quest flags and dialog trees vs. ambitious, flexible game design

• More broadly, the underlying system doesn’t produce the intended audience experience
How to think about digital media’s “inside”?

• Is binary arithmetic central?
• Is uncompiled source code the key?
• In Expressive Processing Noah analyzes “operational logics” — sometimes identified using source code, and sometimes higher-level descriptions

• Operational logics are abstract processes, used by authors to communicate to audiences, that can be implemented many ways
KotOR’s logics

- KotOR uses common operational logics (e.g., collision detection) to represent navigable space.

- KotOR uses widespread RPG logics for character and story: quest flags and dialogue trees.

- Logics are exposed in dialogue interface and quest journal, but not identical to them.
Quest flags

• Story broken into quests and sub-quests, flags at progress points

• Quest state exposed to player in journal (or similar)

• Game scripts update flags and journal

Journal editor for BioWare’s Aurora tools
Quest flags

• Brittle system

• Usually hand-tested

• Maybe we should use computers to make sure things make sense!
  – One starting point: Software verification

Journal editor for BioWare’s Aurora tools
Dialogue trees

- Hierarchically-nested PC and NPC options
- Active section chosen by flags, may set flags
- Important element of gameplay (quests, battles, rewards, allegiances, etc.)

Conversation editor
Dialogue trees

- Similar authoring experience to working in Twine
  - Do all the dialog choices fit with the story?
  - Are there unsatisfying branches?
  - Are there under-authored branches and lack content?
RPG story logics

- Quest flags (milestones) and dialogue trees (directed graphs)
- Easy to implement and cheap at runtime
- Conceptually simple and accessible to non-programmer designers
- Bug-prone when used ambitiously
- Vast number of possible positions in simulated graphical world, small number in fictional world.
  - This is a mismatch

This is not the answer
Writers already know this:

- To create vast literary possibilities, don’t hand-author each option and connection — **use rules**
- Which is also understood in another tradition...
You are like my father in some ways

WHAT RESEMBLANCE DO YOU SEE

You are not very aggressive but I think you don’t want me to notice that

WHAT MAKES YOU THINK I AM NOT VERY AGGRESSIVE

You don’t argue with me

WHY DO YOU THINK I DON’T ARGUE WITH YOU

You are afraid of me

DOES IT PLEASE YOU TO BELIEVE I AM AFRAID OF YOU

— Eliza/Doctor, Joseph Weizenbaum, mid-1960s
The Eliza system

- Audience input: “You don’t argue with me.”
- Substitutions: “I don’t argue with you.”
- Keyword: “you”
- Decomposition: “* I * you”
- “Why do you think I don’t argue with you”
- Operational logic: conversation as transformation
- Initially quite successful — the “Eliza effect” — leading to various responses...
Weizenbaum’s response

It’s disturbingly powerful
Suchman’s response

Expectation is the power
Murray’s response

Perhaps the premier literary artist...
Should we build Eliza-style systems?
The Eliza breakdown

• In play the experience falls apart:
  You are going to repeat what I say in the form of a question
  WHAT MAKES YOU THINK I AM GOING TO REPEAT WHAT YOU SAY
  IN THE FORM OF A QUESTION

• The power of initial expectation is great, but Eliza-style illusions break down (in a manner that reflects the underlying system shape) unless interaction is severely restricted

• Unfortunately, with Eliza, the underlying system that’s revealed is boring
The alternative

• Rather than processes for tricking the audience, we can craft processes that express ideas in the work
• But rather than shape the work of the author and/or a performance, these shape the experience of the audience
• Inventing operational logics is the art, and they themselves express the ideas of the work
To summarize

• Quest flags, dialog trees, and simple transformation logics (e.g. Eliza) are pretty shallow
  – Easily exposed/demystified to the player

• Could add more flags, branches, transformation rules to extend the illusion
  – Increases the authoring burden a lot

• Instead:
  – craft expressive processes and new operational logics
Later this week

• No office hours on Wednesday

• ARGs on Wednesday
  – Alternate Reality Games
  – Augmented Reality Games

• Required Reading:
  – The Puppet Master Problem by Jane McGonigal