Creating a Narrative Environment - Choice and Consequence in Single Player Games

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Abstract

This paper discusses the methods by which branching narratives and sandbox style environments are employed within games to create emergent narratives, concluding that whilst they both offer plenty of opportunities for developers, they are also often prohibitively expensive and complex to incorporate. There are also some major caveats raised regarding the constraints that must be levied on the game in order to keep control of a complex interactive narrative.

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Recent trends in game design demonstrate an increasing demand within the industry for games incorporating interactive story elements. Although there is already considerable academic research into the narrative techniques that are employed in film and literature, these studies do not tidily translate over to the videogame genre. When considering the theories behind conveying a narrative, it is important to note that games occupy a unique and exceptional space as they allow for the consumer, in this case the player, to interact with the narrative, allowing for it to emerge and evolve through their actions. Whilst the games industry invests heavily in systems that allow for this kind of narrative interactivity, there is little formal research into how effective these techniques are. This is of particular importance due to the significant development time and budget that must be invested into these projects.

To give an idea of the scope of this problem; which is the principal quandary that this paper hopes to address, Obsidian Entertainment recently calculated that it takes them 552 hours of development time to produce between two and two-and-a-half minutes of gameplay containing choice and consequence (Stewart, 2010). This is potentially 552 hours for the development of assets that the vast majority of players may not experience, depending on the choices that they take. It is therefore critical to ensure that either the player *does* in some way get to experience these assets, or that the simple act of presenting the player with this choice adds significantly enough to the experience to warrant this level of development. In this aforementioned case, Obsidian Entertainment calculated this investment based on their then upcoming game *Alpha Protocol* (2010), and this game actually demonstrates the point extremely well. *Alpha Protocol* was almost universally acclaimed at launch for its intriguing and transparent handling of an interactive narrative, however the game only managed to accrue a mediocre Metacritic score in the mid sixties, due primarily to the conceived underdevelopment of gameplay and graphics. It should be noted here that Metacritic is not necessarily an accurate reflection on the quality of a game, however it is seen as an increasingly important tool in the industry, to the extent that some publishers now set Metacritic scores as key objectives for developers. (Dring, 2010).

This paper builds upon a body of work dealing with defining emergent narratives in games, in particular the work of Ruth Aylett's (1999*) Narrative in Virtual Environments - Towards Emergent Narrative.* Aylett's paper provides the foundation of a fundamental conflict of interests when creating games with a rich narrative; that is the contradiction

between a pre-scripted sequence of narrative events, and the freedom and interactivity that is afforded to the player in a videogame.

I hope to build upon this foundation of academic research by looking at real world examples of emergent narratives in games. The elemental design techniques that are studied herein are *branching narratives* (Majewski, 2003) and *sandbox* environments (Ocio and Brugos, 2008). Unfortunately, there is a shortage of formal methodology by which to test a game's narrative elements by, and this paper will therefore build the foundations of this methodology before applying it to certain games within the single player RPG (role-playing-game) genre. Emergent narratives are often associated with the RPG genre, however there is no inherent bond between the two, despite their focus here. Additionally, the definition of an RPG is an ardently debated area within games design circles and some may argue that a few of the examples used herein fall outside of that definition Whilst this may be a valid argument, it reaches outside of the necessary scope of this paper.

Throughout this paper, I use the term "emergent narrative" with a broad scope. That is to say that an act of emergent narrative can have a vast array of affects on a game, for example, by creating an entirely different ending to the story, or by simply changing a single line of dialog. The term "plot" is used to refer to the foundational aspects of a story that are typically in place before the player begins any form of interaction. This includes aspects such as back-story, setting and atmosphere, along with the major, unalterable story arch. In the simplest terms, e*mergent narrative* occurs when the player makes a choice that creates or impacts the narrative in any way.

In order to study the techniques employed within the industry to create emergent narratives, it is imperative to isolate and disconnect them from one another. The detachment that is used throughout this paper is in no way meant to suggest that these techniques are of mutual exclusivity. For example, a sandbox game can comfortably accommodate branching narratives as well as many other emergent narrative techniques.

Case Studies

Since my primary argument is that emergent narratives enhance the player's experience of a game, I have used a number of well known and critically acclaimed games as studies.

The primary game that is examined within this paper is Bioware's *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009)*.* *Dragon Age* is an isometric, single player RPG, built upon the foundations of dice-based role-playing (the best known system of which is probably AD&D). It follows in the tradition of games such as *Baulder's Gate* (1998), a game to which it is in many ways the spiritual successor. The basic story of *Dragon Age* tells of a 'Tolkienesque' battle between the forces of good and evil, which ties in neatly with some of the emergent narrative techniques that the game employs. It should be noted that I am using *Dragon Age* as my primary example because it is well known and commercially successful, and not as an endorsement of the game's qualities or as an example of how to successfully implement emergent narratives. A large part of my research relies on questioning players regarding their experiences of playing the game, and it is therefore important to choose a well known game in order to maximise the potential sample set.

Research Methods

In support of the fundamental argument that games benefit from emergent narrative, it is necessary to first define what makes these game compelling and immersive experiences for a player. This paper asserts a series of key design intentions and potential pitfalls that combine to create a framework. As an example, and in support of this framework, many leading developers highlight the importance of implementing narrative techniques that utilize the strengths of the game medium. Ken Levine (2008), the creator of classic games such as *System Shock 2* (1999) and *Bioshock* (2008) states "The best narrative in games is not cut-scenes, but the worlds themselves". Here, Levine is telling us that a story should evolve through the player interacting with the gameworld; a narrative method that is entirely unique to games, as opposed to cutscenes, which are a method borrowed directly from film. Players can also shape a narrative through the decisions that they make. Alan Miranda (2009) from Bioware states "Decisions, decisions, decisions. That's supposedly the core of a great story-driven RPG". This reinforces the importance of decision making in games, a factor that is often emphasised as a key selling point (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Note the tagline at the top of the box - choice and consequence is seen as the major selling point for CD Projekt's The Witcher

Sandbox games such as *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008), and *Fallout 3* (2008) are becoming increasingly prevalent and central to the games industry. Patrick Redding (2008), the narrative designer on Ubisoft Montreal's *Far Cry 2* (2008), talks about the unique challenges of creating narrative in an open world game, saying "the most important story in any game, honestly, is the story that the player can actually play, and can actually determine the course of through his low, mid, and high-level actions and choices." Again, this imposes the significance of dealing with choice and consequence, this time within the complex framework of an open world environment.

Although creating choice and consequence in games is an important consideration, it is equally important not to lose sight of the fundamentals that constitute a strong story. Bioware CEO, Ray Muzyka (2009) discusses the importance of creating emotion through emergent narrative, stating "choices have to have consequences that are emotionally impactful". In other words, there must be a narrative purpose to creating these choices. A key aspect in many strong stories is their ability to evoke emotions, and in this case Muzyka is explaining that these choices are used to amplify this feature. This is not simply creating choice for the sake of having choice.

Following on from the stated goals of these developers, I have made a number assertions for the purposes of this paper. The primary intentions when creating emergent narratives are: *creating a sense of freedom for the player, eliciting and amplifying the players emotions,*

creating a sense of immersion and believability, and *giving the player a sense of control over the narrative.* In addition to these stated goals, there are also a number of potential pitfalls and areas of vulnerability that these games must avoid. Implementing emergent narrative elements must not: *detrimentally affect gameplay, detrimentally affect the quality of the overall story,* or *be prohibitively expensive or complex to develop.*

Building upon these assertions, a methodology for studying games can be assembled using this criteria. I began this process by mapping out the branching paths of a quest in *Dragon Age* (Figure 2). A questionnaire was then produced to assess the routes that players took through this quest (Appendix).
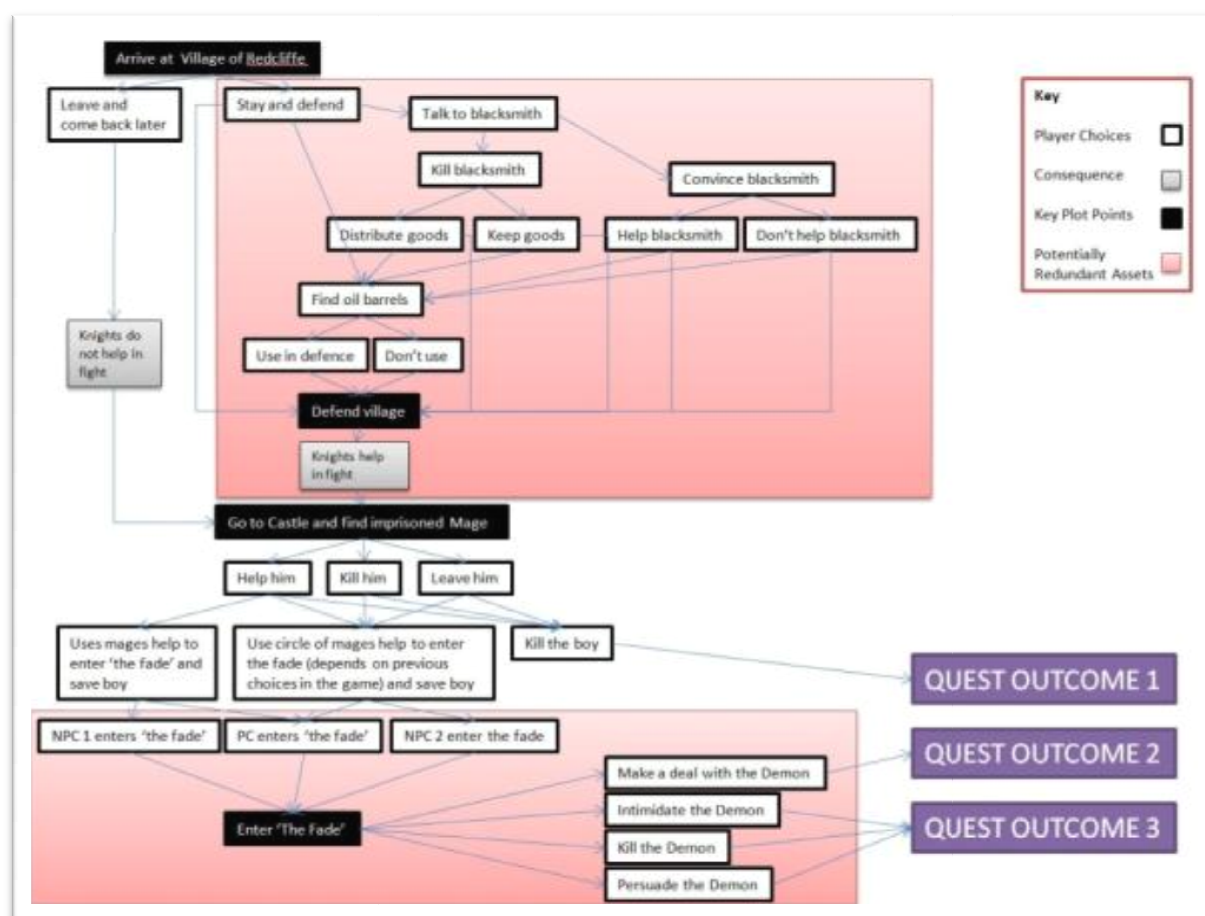

Figure 2: the branching structure of a quest in Dragon Age

This questionnaire was posted on a number of online forums. These were predominantly forums relating specifically to RPG's, and it should therefore be noted that the responses are not reflective of everybody that played this game, but more so of people who are particularly interested in the RPG genre.

In order to test a theory that it is possible for developers to predict the route that players will take through a branching narrative, the results of this questionnaire were predicted before

posting it online (Appendix). This prediction was made on the assumption that players would try to play as a predominately *good* character (that is, the archetypal hero), and that they would try and steer a path that allowed them to experience as many of the games assets as possible.

The sample set for this survey consisted of 40 people. This is not a large enough sample to draw decisive conclusions from, but it does provide clear suggestions of trends in the results. A more detailed analysis of these results can be found later on in this paper.

Branching Narratives

Figure 3 shows the traditional design concept of a branching story that can be found in many text books (Adams, 2009, pp 198). This diagrams suggests a broadly exponential increase in narrative branches per level – that is that each branch will branch again into further possible plot lines. In reality this kind of model is rarely, if ever, implemented in a game. Given the vast increases in complexity, developing a game with a narrative structure of this nature would be a huge undertaking and prohibitively expensive.

A more likely implementation in a game is represented in Figure 4. This structure is sometimes referred to as a 'foldback story' (Adams, 2009, pp 200). Although this model still contains complexity, there is no exponential increase; all paths lead back to the main route. That is not to say that there aren't any long term consequences to the actions that are taken however, as these diagrams only represent choices that have an immediate influence. Choices can also have a deferred or a cumulative influence on narrative events.
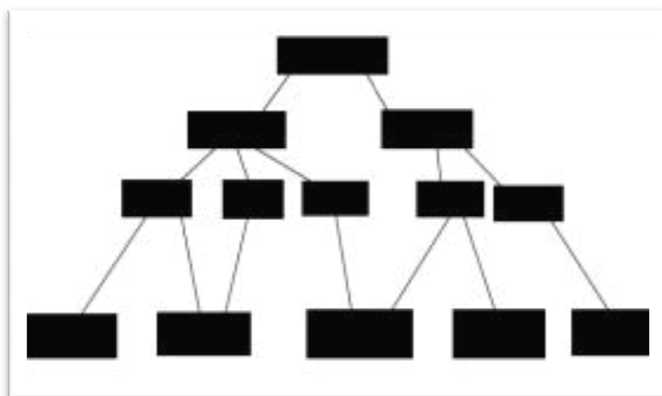

Figure 3: a traditional branching story structure

Figure 4: branching story structure as it might be implemented in a game

Deferred and cumulative influences can be handled through reactivity checks (Maclean, 2010). A reactivity check will look at a decision (or decisions) that the player has made at a previous point in the game, and alter the current path based on this decision. In effect, the player will have no immediate control over which path is taken and they will have to live with the consequences of their earlier choice. Deferred influence adds significant weight to a decision, and can be a transparent way of adding choice and consequence, due to the fact that it's very hard for the player to see what would happen differently if they had taken an alternative option (without repeating hours of gameplay). On the other hand, these decisions can frustrate and feel unfair if the player hasn't been made aware of the consequences. As a general rule, deferred influence events that have a small effect, such as altering a dialogue, will add depth and believability to the game. Deferred influence events that have a major effect must be handled with extreme care, and the effects should be clearly communicated to the player.

The question of how to develop a branching narrative that contains choice and consequence, without increasing the complexity and cost of development, is of vital concern for developers. One way that developers can cope with this is by creating a branching narrative in which they can predict the path that the player will take. Through this prediction, developers can focus their development time and budget on the path that will be most commonly taken. This creates an illusion of complexity for the player by suggesting that they are missing out on more content than they actually are.

The previously outlined survey strongly backs up the claim that developers can predict the route that a player will take through the particular quest from *Dragon Age* (Figure 5). This is a powerful tool for developers as it allows them to tap into some of the benefits of emergent

narrative, for instance by allowing the player to shape the story (or letting them believe that they are), but it is not prohibitively complex or costly to develop.
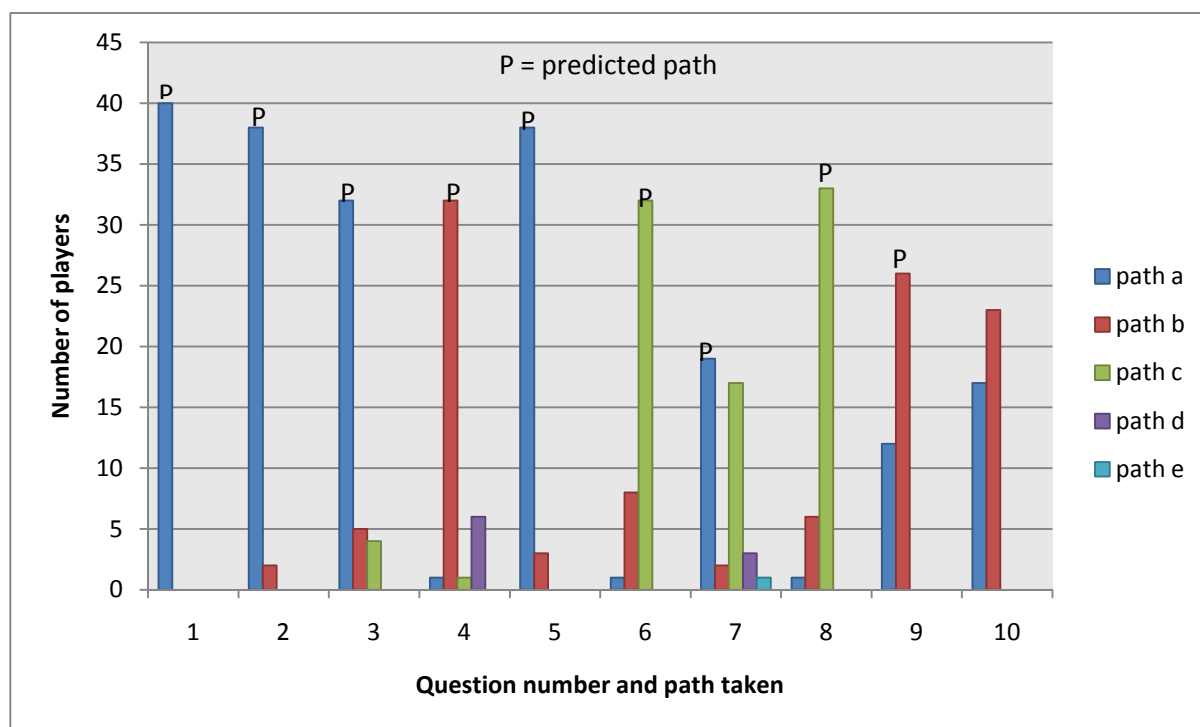

Figure 5: The majority of players took the predicted route through this quest

A common criticism of games containing branching narratives is that whenever a choice is offered, the choices are constrained to a moral collection of 'good', 'evil' and occasionally a 'neutral' option. There is little ambiguity. This is certainly true in *Dragon Age*, where every option can be easily broken down into one of these categories (appendix). Looking again at the results from the survey (Figure 6) we can see that the vast majority of the people questioned took the 'good' option at each decision point, suggesting that this technique can be used successfully to channel players down particular paths. In the case of this quest, the 'good' path is significantly more detailed, suggesting this is the way that the developers intended for it to be played. The problem with this approach is a lack of transparency, which in turn affects immersion by reminding the player that they are constrained within particular moral paths.
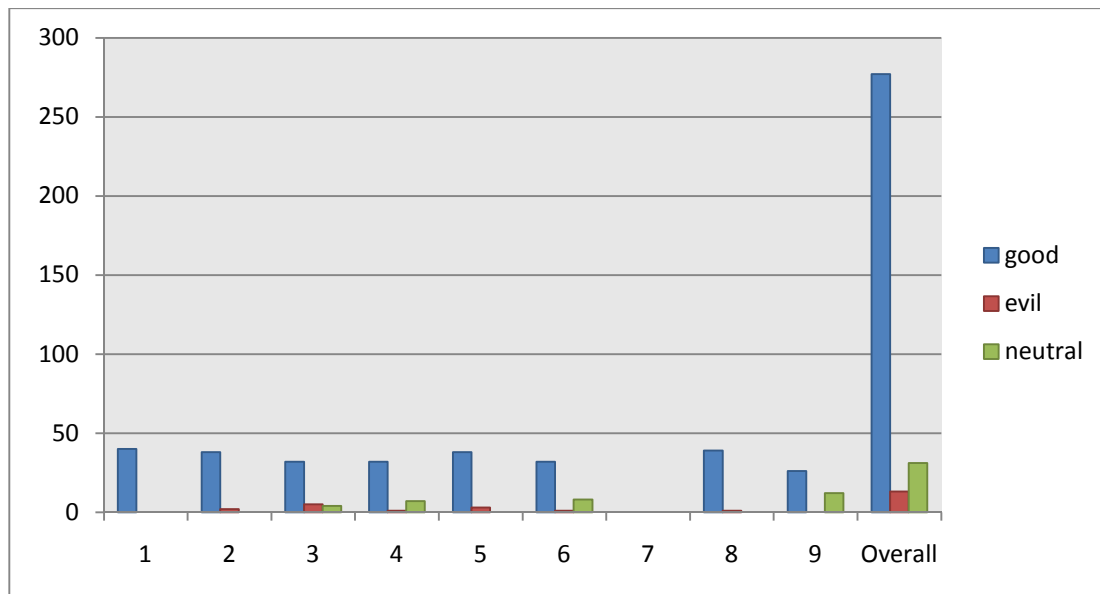
Figure 6: the vast majority of players play as a 'good' character

In this case, the unambiguous approach suits *Dragon Age* well and never feels out of place, due to the nature of the story. It should be noted however, that constraining choices to these moral extremes can have the effect of diminishing the scope for developers to create interesting and complex characters; an attribute often considered a cornerstone to creating a high-quality story (Riedl and Stern, 2006).

Game developers who take a more ambiguous, 'shades of grey' approach to moral choices, find it harder to develop their game due to the difficulties predicting the player's path. CD Projekt's *The Witcher* (2007) garnered considerable critical acclaim for taking this approach and won many fans for its perceived deep and complex plot. It could be argued however, that the actual gameplay was underdeveloped as a consequence of this. The same is true of Obsidian's *Alpha Protocol.*

One of the great advantages of branching narratives is the way in which NPC's can react to the players choices. In the critically acclaimed *Mass Effect 2* (2010), many of the branching elements in the game relate to the ways in which NPC's react, and this works as an effective method to amplify the players emotions. Explaining this approach, Ray Muzyka (2009) says "Just like real life you make a decision and you have to live with it and because you have to live with it you feel that emotion."

Returning to the surveyed *Dragon Age* quest as an example, there is a point at which the player is faced with a decision over how to deal with a boy who is 'possessed' by a demon. One option open to the player is to kill the boy and therefore kill the demon. If this option is taken the boy's mother will plead with the player to find another way of dealing with the

situation. Because the player is responsible for *choosing* this narrative event, as opposed to being forced down a particular path, this works to create an emotion. In this case the player should feel guilt. Compare this instance to another storytelling medium such as literature or film; guilt is an emotion that is virtually impossible to create as it implies regret over a decision that has been made. Similarly, games can use branching narratives to generate other emotions that are virtually unique to the medium, such as betrayal or even friendship. Choices can also be used to amplify and add depth to other emotions, such as sadness, fear or joy.

When it comes to creating and immersing the player in a realistic gameworld, the concept of choice is surely a realistic model, as we are constantly making decisions throughout life. The crucial difference however is that, by definition, branching narratives give the player a set number of options concerning the way in which they can continue. This can cause frustration if the player can think of an alternative solution that the game doesn't allow for. In this respect, branching narratives can be counterproductive, as they merely draw attention to the fact that certain choices are *not* available. In such a case, frustration can quickly turn to a fracture in the players immersion.

Another consideration is the perception of there being a correct path through a story (Majewski, 2003). The player may worry that they are 'breaking' the game if they don't make the correct choice, or that they won't receive the most satisfactory ending. Emergence is an important factor that can be used to combat this. By allowing the choices that the player takes to emerge naturally and transparently through gameplay (rather than through optional choices), the sense of immersion and believability is maintained.

Concerning the issue of maintaining the playability of a game, the main concern with branching narratives is that they are time consuming to develop and therefore erode production time that could potentially be invested in other areas. On the other hand however, it could be argued that the choices presented in a branching narrative are a form of gameplay in themselves. For example, the gameplay in Quantic Dream's *Heavy Rain* (2010) consists virtually entirely of making choices and watching the consequences unfold. There is some debate as to whether *Heavy Rain* should be classed as a game or as an interactive movie, which is perhaps a topic for another paper, but its commercial success is beyond dispute.

The question of ludology versus narratology (Jenkins, 1999) is a long running debate and falls outside the reach of this paper, but it should be noted that creating complex plots and narratives can potentially act as a constraint on gameplay, for example by making it

impossible for a player to perform a desired action in case it breaks the plot. The more complex the narrative and plot, the more constraints there may need to be in place.

Sandbox Games

Sandbox style games are becoming increasingly widespread in the games industry. This is partly due to their popularity, and partly due to the fact that technology is making it possible to create these games through techniques such as the procedural generation of environments (Nareyek, 2007).

The basic premise of a sandbox game is to give the player a highly interactive environment full of plot points, characters and interesting locations. The player is then set free to explore this world at their leisure. Sandbox games score highly when it comes to making immersive and believable game environments. The ability to go virtually anywhere at any time is precisely the way that we would expect to interact with a realistic virtual world.

Gameplay is at the heart of many sandbox games and many of their mechanics are tied closely to emergent gameplay. This combination can create snippets of highly successful emergent narrative, often in a way that the developers never foresaw. Sandbox games, by their nature, create strong emergent narrative events. Nevertheless, problems often arise in trying to tell a larger story, with pacing being a major issue. Creating a sense of urgency is almost entirely at odds with the core design of a sandbox game. Players are usually given the choice of when to tackle quests or objectives, removing the developer's control over pacing. When dealing with this, developers must bear in mind the previous experiences of players. Imposing a mechanic whereby a quest can be failed because it wasn't completed quickly enough will seem unfair for the simple reason that it is not the conventional way that games handle such a situation.

Another major difficulty in developing a sandbox game comes in dealing with the consequences of the player's freedom. The challenge is not so much in *creating* choice and consequence, as it is *dealing* with choice and consequence, and this is often where the sense of immersion in a sandbox game is broken. In the real world it is possible, within reason, to go wherever we want, do whatever we want, and to do so at any time we want. Importantly though, our actions are restrained by complex repercussions. Take for example the act of committing a minor crime. In the real world this would set in gear a complex process involving police reports from witnesses, gathering of evidence such as finger prints,

consultation of cctv cameras, questioning suspects, and so on. Within a game environment this is far too complex to recreate and therefore tight restrictions and extreme game mechanics are often employed to constrain the player and prevent them from 'breaking' the plot, for example by killing an NPC who has a pivotal role later in the game. To this end, sandbox games may employ an exaggerated version of real world laws in order to control the player, such as the police in the *Grand Theft Auto* games. Another common technique that virtually all sandbox games employ, is to place triggers in the world, so that certain assets only appear when they become pertinent. This could take the form of a door becoming unlocked, or an NPC spawning.

Side quests are an important tool in sandbox games in order to make exploration of the world worthwhile to the player. Unfortunately, rewarding the player for completing these side-quests can lead to further design difficulties. An RPG will usually reward players with experience points, but this leads to complications with balancing the game for players who complete every side quest, as opposed to players who just want to focus on the main plot; making the game too easy or too hard respectively. *Just Cause 2* (2010) takes a fairly novel approach to this problem. Virtually every action that the player can take in the game causes 'chaos' points to be accumulated, and the next part of the story will only be triggered once enough of these points have been accumulated. On the one hand this works extremely well by allowing the player to play the game however they want and rewarding them fairly for doing so. On the other hand, it is a rather heavy handed approach and would feel out of place in a game with a more realistic tone. Story takes a distinct (and intentional) backseat role to gameplay in *Just Cause 2*.

Level scaling is another solution to this problem. This mechanic effectively scales the game's difficulty to the level of the player. So the more powerful the player becomes, the more powerful the enemies in the game become. If level scaling is to be used, then developers must be extremely careful not to remove the sense of accomplishment for the player. This was a common criticism levelled at Bethesda's *Oblivion* (2007), and was subsequently changed by community 'mods' after the game's release. Level scaling is a fiercely debated topic in gaming communities and a proper discussion falls outside the scope of this paper.

Environment takes a central role in many sandbox games. Locations will usually be visited on many occasions, and can often be seen throughout the gameworld. Allowing the player to shape and control the environment is one powerful way that developers can fuel a game with emotion. In *Fallout 3*, one of the game's main locations can be destroyed early on

by triggering a nuclear bomb. If the player chooses to do this then an entire town in the game is reduced to a crater. This crater then acts as a constant reminder of the players actions, creating a sense of remorse, or possibly satisfaction, depending on the players point of view.

Environment can also be used to create a strong atmosphere in a game, which in turn creates emotion. For example dark, foreboding environments can be used to create tension and fear. A vivid environment is particularly important to keep a sandbox game from becoming tired and turgid. In fact, it could perhaps be said that the stories in sandbox games are at their strongest when it is the environment itself that tells them. A good example of this is Piranha Bytes' *Gothic* (2002). At the start of this game the player is placed into a prison camp surrounded by a magical barrier. The basic premise of the story then involves the player trying to find a way out of this camp. The player quite literally never loses sight of their final objective because of the constant visual reminder (Figure 7), and before long becomes embroiled in a deeper, more complex plot.

Figure 7: Gothic uses its environment (in this case the sky) as a constant reminder of the players ultimate objective. Other major plot points (such as a tower in the distance) are also visible

Conclusions

Continuing along the line of research presented within this paper, the ultimate aspiration is to design a gameworld and set of game mechanics that fit naturally within an interactive narrative environment. A foundation has been created exploring many of the benefits and pitfalls surrounding emergent narratives in both a branching narrative model and

a sandbox environment. However, despite laying this foundation, this paper does not begin to propose any tangible answers or solutions to the issues raised, leaving considerable room for further research and potential game design proposals.

There are also substantial avenues besides from branching and sandbox models that could be explored. For example, the ways in which a player can interact with an NPC is a vital aspect in creating a truly emergent narrative that is only touched upon here. Advances in technology, in particular AI and voice recognition, will eventually allow players to interact with NPC's in far more realistic ways, opening up a whole new array of interactive narrative possibilities.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

The following is the questionnaire that was posted in forums questioning players about the path that they took through the Dragon Age quest. In Addition to the questionnaire, where applicable the answers have been labelled with the following:

(G) - this was deemed to be a morally 'good' decision

(N) - deemed a morally 'neutral' decision

(E) - deemed a morally 'evil' decision

(P) - This is the decision that was predicted to be the one most commonly taken

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Questionnaire on branching narrative in Dragon Age - Redcliffe

Note: If you have played through the game multiple times please select the options you took on your *first* play through. If you loaded the game as you played through it to try out different options, please select the option that you decided on before continuing playing.

If a question is not applicable (some branches of the story will depend on previous options), please answer 'N/A'.

Plot outline: you arrive at Redcliffe village to see Arl Eamon. The castle has been overrun and the village is under attack (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olxCmN4Fe-M)

Question 1: Did you stay and help defend the village?

a)   yes, I stayed and helped in the defence **(G) (P)** (
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XT4D6hzPY0g)

b)   no, I left the Village and moved straight onto the castle **(E)**

(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHb-JCHWVoo)

Question 2: Helping the blacksmith (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jrcTHkD053g)

a)   I promised to help the blacksmith by returning his daughter, Valena **(G)** **(P)**

(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4zwAhBCEnVM)

b)   I killed the blacksmith, took the weapons and distributed them **(E)**

(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Ty99EuCwpg)

c)   I killed the blacksmith, took the weapons and kept them **(E)**

(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Ty99EuCwpg)

d)   I left the blacksmith alone **(N)**

Question 3: Dwynn (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yeBM3f85p7E)

a)   I persuaded Dwynn to help in the defence of the town **(G)** **(P)**

b)   I killed Dwynn **(E)**

c)   I left Dwynn alone **(N)**

Question 4: The Imprisoned Mage, Jowan (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_xm-RtAIcj8)

a)   I released Jowan and let him escape/run away **(G)**

b)   I released Jowan in order for him to help **(G)** **(P)**

c)   I killed Jowan **(E)** (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8yt9bxlrns)

d)   I left Jowan imprisoned **(N)**

Question 5: Valena (the blacksmiths daughter)

(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nDUbuJ3GcI)

a)   I found and freed Valena **(G)** **(P)**

b)   I left Valena **(E)**

Question 6: Connor (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ovbj5tV49M)

a)   I killed Connor in order to defeat the Demon **(E)**
(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZnFskB1ZFc)

b)   I let Jowan use Blood Magic on Isolde (Connors mother), killing Isolde and entering 'the fade' **(N)** (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LnW9jF3UqU)

c)   I went to the circle of Magi to get help to enter 'the fade' **(G)** **(P)**
(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oi6OKdgvBgE)

Question 7: Who entered 'the fade'?

a)   Me **(P)**

b)   Jowan

c)   Morrigan

d)   Wynne

(e)   Irving

Question 8: Confronting the Demon (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qONP-1ZEVD0)

a)   I made a deal with the Demon **(E)**

b)   I intimidated the Demon into leaving **(G)**

c)   I killed the Demon **(G)** **(P)**

Question 9: The fate of Jowan (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFltvPh1sVM)

a)   Jowan was executed for his crimes **(N)**

b)   I persuaded the Arl to hand Jowan over to the circle of Magi **(G)** **(P)**

Question 10: What character class did you play as? (used to determine if certain options were open to your character)

a)   Mage

b)   other