Telling stories via the gameplay reflecting a player character's inner states

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Abstract. In this paper we present our effort to combine an internally focalized narration with simple game mechanics using a silent narrative game in which player interaction possibilities are connected to the protagonist's state of mind and changing along with it as the story progresses. A preliminary user study indicates that our game successfully delivered a story during the activity of playing.

Keywords: Narrative-oriented gameplay, internal focalization

1 Introduction

According to the narrative theorist Genette [2], a narrator's perspective can be focused either on objective information distribution (i.e., external focalization) or on the portrait of the subjective viewpoints of the story characters including their perception of the world and the events happening in the storyworld (i.e., internal focalization).

A few research on internal focalization has been made in games and interactive storytelling. Porteous et al. [3] presented a way to generate different narrative discourse using different viewpoints of characters in interactive storytelling. Bae et al. [1] made an analysis on multiple internal focalization, where the story events occurred during a particular period are retold by multiple characters, with a computational approach. Zhu et al. [4] presented an example of how a video game can include internal focalization, where the game world is rendered in a range of colors depending on the mood of the game's main character.

Inspired by Genette's concept of internal focalization and other previous works, particularly the work of Zhu et al.[4], our underlying research question is as follows - Can designed gameplay be the main vehicle of narrative conveyance as well as reflecting a main character's inner state of mind?

To test the idea of game mechanics and levels serving as a direct presentation of how a protagonist experiences a situation, we made a story-oriented game including variations of game mechanics and settings that can reflect a main player character's inner states [5].

[5] A gameplay example of our game can be seen here: http://youtu.be/xpQsAcVy0EQ

2 Game Design and Implementation

Stan, the protagonist in our game, is a caricatural nobody leading a life based on routines. The only fluctuant things in his life are his mood and the people around his environment. The three days of his life presented by our game start with the way to work, climax with the lunch break, and end with the way home. Cut-scenes displaying dialogues including facial expressions without explicit speech between Stan and his co-worker are shown after each lunch break. These cut-scenes were intentionally designed to not deliver crucial story information by themselves alone.

The First Day As the game starts, Stan is briefly introduced and no instructions are given. The unwilling Stan is facing backwards and he is drawn towards work by x-axis gravity. The player has to get Stan to work by negating the x-axis gravity. During lunch break, Sophie, Stan's co-worker, is introduced and starts a conversation with Stan who is not listening. This is represented by the player's controlling a pong-board in order to repell Sophie's words. On every hit that Stan receives text fragments appear until displaying "She said something". Once the sentence is complete, the game progresses and the first dialogue is shown, where Stan fails on Sophie's request to take part in the conversation. He discovers that he did not want to upset her, which leads to the way home being free fall into his personal abyss. The player has to make Stan hit a randomly appearing small platform. If hit, Stan bursts into pieces - symbolizing his self-realisation. Otherwise, the fall continues until the platform is hit. The depth of the abyss was supposed to be calculated out of the displayed evaluation of player effort.

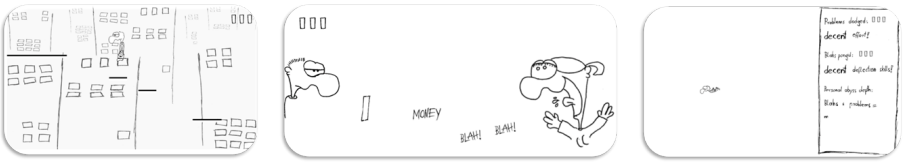

Fig. 1. The First Day (Left: Way to Work; Middle: Blah-Pong; Right: Way Home). Stan is facing in backward direction and going downhill, implying his reluctance to going to work; in Blah-Pong the player can block what Sophie says as in the traditional Pong game; on the way home Stan is free-falling and literally bursting into pieces, implying his rude awakening metaphorically.

The Second Day Feeling bad, Stan decides to make things right the next day. The player is in full control of Stan's movement due to removed x-axis gravity. The jumps are higher; the platforms start to tremble and disappear shortly after being touched. The second lunch break presents the same as the day before,

but with switched roles this time. The player controls a gun shooting "Sorry" at Sophie, who is protected by a computer-controlled pong-board repelling the player's effort. The dialogue in the next cut-scene shows Sophie accepting his apology. The way home on this day now is a fall braked down by a parachute and the landing platform cannot be missed.

Fig. 2. The Second Day (Left: Way to Work; Middle: Sorry-Shooter; Right: Way Home) Stan is now facing in the forward direction and going uphill with more controllability, implying Stan's positive inner state; in Sorry-Shooter the player can shoot the word Sorry to Sophie who is continuously blocking the words; on his way home Stan is falling safely with a parachute, implying the environment around Stan is getting better.

The Last Day After having taken action, Stan wakes up with a clear mind and experiences the way to work as a regular work towards a bus stop. Jumping is deactivated and the way to work is just flat. The lunch break game presents the same setting as in the first lunch break, but now Sophie's words centre around the middle of the screen. The player controls a little Stan, who is able to jump between three platforms with words below and chooses what Stan is going to reply. The goal of the game is to match the words for a perfect result and progresses after ten turns. However, the game cannot be lost since a healthy conversation does not require all the words to fit each other. Stan and Sophie enjoy their time and the last way home, rendered in colourful meadows with flowers, turns into the end screen.

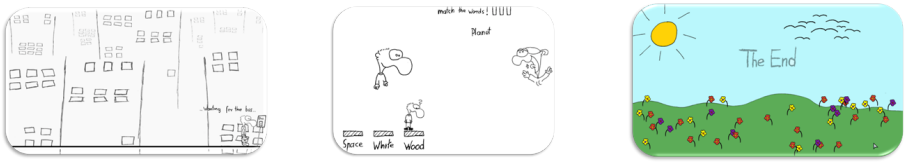

Fig. 3. The Last Day (Left: Way to Work; Middle: Matching-Words; Right: Way Home) The way to work is now smooth and flat, implying Stan's peace of mind; in Talk-Together the player can select matching words to what Sophie suggests, implying the two-sided conversation finally; there is an ending scene with colorful flowers, implying Stan's inner thought on his bright future with Sophie.

3 Pilot Study and Conclusion

We conducted a pilot study with 15 participants (male 13; female 2). Each participant played the Flash game in private followed by an one-on-one interview. Goals of the study were to assess whether the players were able to recount a story matching the one intended; whether they would perceive Stan as an individual disconnected from the player and where they drew most of their information from gameplay or graphical display. Participants were divided into four groups based upon their willingness to find a story in however little information. First, story-oriented (3 participants) were considered being very likely to recognize the game's story and its impact on gameplay. Second, mechanic-oriented players (6) were the opposite to the story-oriented. Third, balance-oriented (4) formed the middle of the two. Last, the group of non-players (2) was assumed to give subjective feedback free of too specific expectations, experience, or knowledge of the game medium.

Results show that all groups recognized the story and its impact on gameplay in relatively short time with high empathy for Stan. On average, mechanic-oriented players were confused by the lack of information regarding what to do and why. A non-player stated explicitly that the dialogues were unnecessary and that the mini games would speak for themselves. Explicit need for the dialogues was never stated.

Limitations of this study are the number of participants and the uneven gender distribution. A further study with more participants equally distributed across all groups and genders would allow to approximate a more general conclusion. A more complete and polished version of the game would add to this, as well as various story states.

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