A Storytelling Game with Metaphor

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Abstract. In this paper we present a cartoon-like 2D storytelling game utilising metaphor and symbolism with a form of framing narrative. The game and the story were designed in an abstract and satirical manner, providing the player room for interpreting her gameplay in various ways.

Keywords: storytelling game, metaphor

1 Introduction

The primary goal of this work is two-fold. The first is to design a storytelling game in which narrative and gameplay are tightly coupled. The second is to make a short game using simple game mechanics as metaphors to tell a story. Hereby we define 'game mechanics' as the rules that governs the gameplay. Examples of game mechanics being used in our game are as follows: the player can jump by pressing a button; the player can move by pressing buttons; the actors fall when they aren't standing on a platform; other actors can push the player and the other actors can mimic the player's actions.
design.

This project was inspired by several games and literature. The gameplay for this project was inspired by The Game [1]. While being a funny game, it didn't utilise its great humour or metaphors to tell a cohesive story. The story and feel was slightly inspired by the game Loneliness [2]. It manages to make the player feel a deep sympathy for a simple cube, only through gameplay and music. This work utilizes the framing narrative device similar to the one used in 1001 Arabian Nights, where 1001 stories are embedded into one long overarching story[3, p. 28].

2 Game Design and Implementation

The game is a simple 2D game where the player controls one character through 10 levels or scenes. At the most superficial level, the game is about a grandpa who is telling his grandchild a story, or several small stories, about his life and the world. Each mini-story (that is, each level or scene) recounts a constituent event with one major topic like friendship, marriage, religion, etc. In the end, the story slightly confuses the grandchild and the two leaves to get some ice cream.

We designed the game mechanics simple (move, jump) to prevent the player from being distracted from interpreting the story by having to learn complex rules and controls. A level is terminated when any actor jumps or falls off the platform; most often it is the player who does this. Falling or jumping off the platform could be interpreted in different ways. Creating multiple scenarios using the same mechanics was essential to keep the player focused on the story.

The colours and shapes represent the mentality of the storytelling grandpa. Everything except him is represented in monotone (black, grey and white) because he thinks that the world is a sad place. To him, religion is only about blindly following a prophet like a sheep. All the actors are also almost literally and figuratively squares, as opposed to being rounded characters. The actor that represented grandpa in the 10 scenes was coloured blue, so that the player could remember him as re-occurring actor. The main problem is finding a way to glue together the different scenes in a cohesive way.

To combine different scenes in a natural manner, we designed a story that embedded the 10 mini-stories (or levels) where a grandpa tells stories to his grandson. Using this framing device allows the game to jump around in time without confusing the player. The most important purpose of the framing narrative, about grandpa and his grandson, is that it allowed experimentation of combining gameplay mechanics, metaphors, and storytelling. The implementation itself only had to be a simple dialogue, shown as text. Even though there is no explicit clock in the game, players could feel the passing of time though the events. This 'chrono-logic of narrative' [3, p. 16] allows the discourse of the game to be conveyed in 2 minutes, while the story itself is about a life-time long.

The following is a breakdown of each scene where the most important design decisions are accounted for. The point was to use game mechanics as metaphors to tell a story.

Scene 1 - Childhood The Childhood scene contains grandpa as a very young child and his parents. The player does not control grandpa, but rather his father. The purpose of the scene was two-fold: teaching the player how to walk and setting up the beginning of grandpa's story.

Scene 2 - School The School scene contains player-controlled grandpa and a teacher who points to a blackboard that says: "Jump". Again, the purpose of this scene was two-fold. Teaching the player how to jump, but also give an impression of grandpa's attitude towards the public education system. The authoritative teacher tells us to jump off a cliff, and then we jump off a cliff without any idea of why we did it.

Scene 3 - Friends The Friends scene contains player-controlled grandpa who is being pushed off the edge by other kids. The push and fall here represents the resistance, but inevitable subjection to peer pressure.
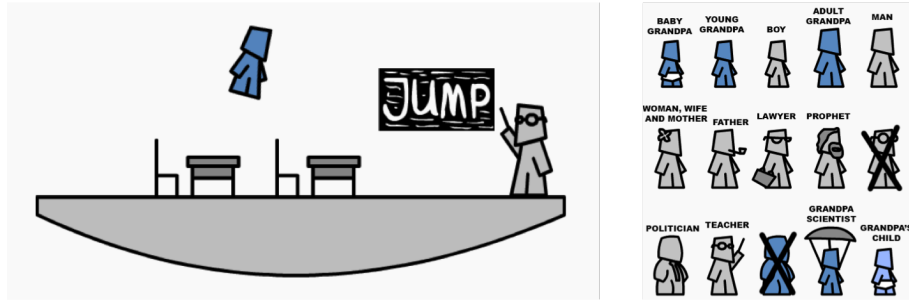
Fig. 1. Left: Screenshot of the second scene (School) in the game; Right: Design of the game characters. The two figures marked cross were not chosen in the current game.

Scene 4 - Relationships The Relationships scene contains a grown-up, player-controlled grandpa, and two groups of female actors on both sides. When the player attempts to go near them, they simply move away until they fall off the platform. The scene was inspired by the phrase: *"I rather die than to go on a date with you!"*, or in this case, jump off a cliff.

Scene 5 - Marriage The Marriage scene contains player-controlled grandpa and a woman who runs around on the platform, shoving grandpa aside if he stands in her way. This is essentially the same scene as Friends, although grandpa has gained a bit more control.

Scene 6 - Divorce The Divorce scene is an extension of the marriage scene. It contains the same things with the addition of a running lawyer who will be positioned on the left side of grandpa.

Scene 7 - Religion The Religion scene contains a prophet, whom the player controls, and a big crowd of people facing him. The group does not move until the prophet has jumped over the edge of the platform, which is the point where the group will follow suit like sheep or lemmings, even if it gets them killed by wandering off a platform.

Scene 8 - Politics The Politics scene is built similarly to Religion. It contains a politician and a big crowd of people facing him. Unique to this scene, the player controls all the actors. They all move in perfect synchronisation. The only detail is that the politician is unable to fall over the edge of the platform. The crowd can be controlled and moved to drop over the edge like lemmings, again.

Scene 9 - Science The Science scene only contains player-controlled grandpa. It is the first scene which was intended to say something positive, and can be interpreted in a lot of ways because of its high level of abstraction. When grandpa goes over the edge, a parachute unfolds and he gently descends.

Scene 10 - Parenthood The Parenthood scene contains player-controlled grandpa and a slightly bluish child which reacts with love when grandpa walks near, which will also end the scene. Alternatively, grandpa can end the scene by jumping over the edge. The player has a choice to make grandpa follow in his father's steps and leave his child, or simply stay.

3 Pilot Study and Conclusion

A pilot study has been conducted with 6 (male 5; female1) students from IT University of Copenhagen, Denmark. Each participant played our game on a laptop and then had an one-on-one interview about the overall play experience.

All the players agreed that the story was about the life of someone, at least up until Scene 7 (Religion), but two of the players did not realize that it was the grandpa's life. The players were also asked about their three favourite scenes. Five of the Players chose Religion and four of those also went with Politics. The reason was that they were funny and worked well together. They liked the similarities between the two scenes. After naming their favourite scenes, they were then asked to interpret them. Two of the players did not think that there was any greater purpose to the fact that (almost) every scene ended with falling down. They simply thought it was a way to advance the story.

In conclusion, there is still information to be extracted from more user testing. To improve the sense of agency and the feeling of playing a game, more choices, or just the illusion of having more, could be incorporated. To some people, the game mechanics enhanced the story by allowing them to feel the main character's powerlessness, simply by sharing what limited control he had over his life. To others, it simply felt like an interactive story where you only had to press buttons to advance the story. However, most players recognised the overarching, framing narrative about grandpa who tells his own life story, and were able to interpret at least some of the scenes as designed.

References

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