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Leveling Up Your Storytelling on the Web


Posted on: November 2nd, 2010 *by* Georgy Cohen 2 Comments

Last week, at the Stamats Integrated Marketing and Technology Conference in Las Vegas, I had the privilege of hearing Dr. Susan Weinschenck, author of “Neuro Web Design: What Makes Them Click?” deliver a keynote. (Check out this review of her book by my friend Tim Nekritz.) One of the things she touched on was the power of storytelling.

People process information in story format, she explained. Stories are powerful because they activate the empathic part of our brain; the readers insert themselves in the narrative. That’s why, for instance, profiles are particularly effective forms of content on a website. That kicked off a good conversation in the back channel about the value of storytelling, brand vs. task storytelling and other dimensions of the topic. It was a great talk, and it made me excited for an event I had lined up for this week.

October, it turns out, was Interactive Fiction Month at Tufts. According to the adventure game website Brass Lantern:

In interactive fiction you play the main character of a story. You type commands which determine the actions of the character and the flow of the plot. Some IF games include graphics, but most do not: the imagery is provided courtesy of your imagination. On the other hand, there’s a wide range of action available.

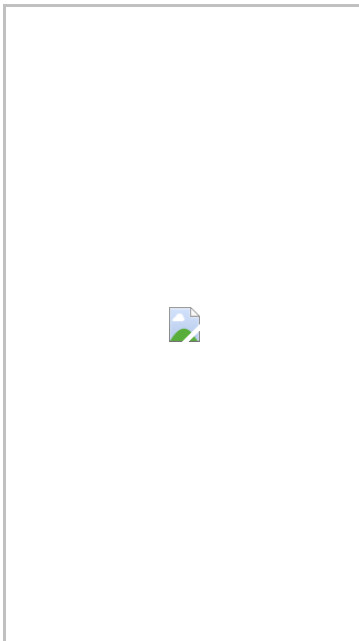
The last event of the month was a lecture by Clara Fernández-Vara, a postdoctoral research at MIT’s GAMBIT game lab, on storytelling in small games. The lecture was delivered by  n Intro to Game

Development computer science class, where students develop small games as part of their coursework.

I'm not as hardcore a video gamer as my husband, but back in the day, I wiled several hours away on my Sega Master System and Genesis (and, in college, Sega emulators). So I was curious to see how storytelling would be explained in the context of video games — and I was curious to see how that lined up against the storytelling I am most often concerned with on the web. (And as a bonus, my husband came with me!)

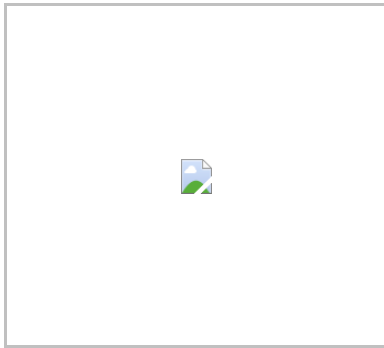
Storytelling in Games and on the Web: The Parallels

I was fairly certain there would be similarities, but I was pleasantly surprised by how analogous storytelling in a video game is to storytelling via web content. Fernández-Vara did a great job of outlining the different elements and variations of storytelling in video game development. I will list out her points here and add my own web-specific context/commentary.

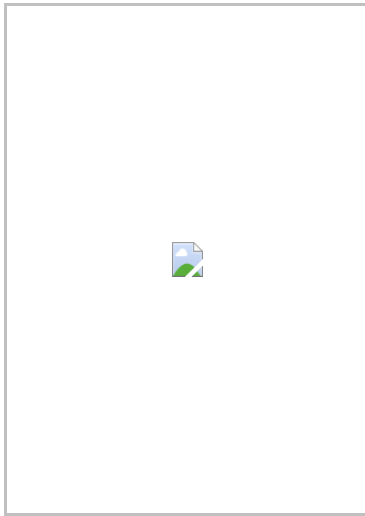


- Storytelling is prevalent in video games. Franchises like Final Fantasy have succeeded over time in part because of their powerful narratives. Of course, the games you buy at GameStop cost small fortunes to develop. Can undergraduates working with just the code at their fingertips tell stories as effectively without the the assets (art, design, music, writing) at the disposal of the major game manufacturers who create intricate cut scenes (mini movies within the game) to move plot along)? Is it even worth pursuing storytelling in games without these assets available to us?
 - We face this question all the time. “We can’t afford a team of freelance writers; should we sacrifice content?” “We have no budget for a videographer and only a flipcam at our disposal; is it worth pursuing video content?” Fernández-Vara made the point that the earliest interactive fiction games, which were driven entirely by text, could still tell rich stories — it’s the user’s ability to take a variety of actions that give the story depth and

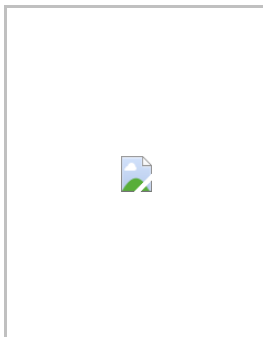
value. When I think of video game cut scenes, I think of the age of Flash intros. A lot of time, effort and money went into producing those splashy Flash movies, but those most often aren't where the real story gets told.



- Not all video games need to tell stories — look at Tetris, for example. But even then, said Fernández-Vara, **people tend to “storicize” abstract shapes and reflect ourselves in the objects around us.** (She says that yes, there is Tetris fanfiction out there.) She also gave the example of electrical sockets, a thoroughly inanimate object devoid of story. But if you cock your head, a socket looks like a face. Objects can tell stories.
 - Just like Weinschenck said: we process the world in story form. And stories are all around us.
- Fernández-Vara described her theory that what we do in games is not storytelling, but rather **storybuilding**. The differences between the two: storytelling is continuous one way communication, while storybuilding is **fragmented collaboration between narrative design and the player**; in storytelling, the order of events and disclosure of info is determined by the author, whereas **in storybuilding, the order of events is generated by the player’s interaction.**
 - So, user experience, in essence, is storybuilding. The user shapes the narratives through the decisions they make on the site. User experience, if you think about it, is a “fragmented collaboration” between narrative design and a user. There is no single path; it is very much choose-your-own-adventure. In the majority of scenarios, the website creator cannot dictate a single order of events (though s/he may hope for one). The user has control of the experience; all the website creator controls is the world in which they navigate. The user builds the story out of the fragments s/he interacts with.
- There is a difference between **games that have a story** (like the fighters’ utterances in Soul Calibur, which divulge details that hint at a story but are irrelevant to the point of the game) and **games that are story-driven** (like Grand Theft Auto, where how the player solves the missions builds the story).
 - I would argue that the vast majority of websites are like story-driven games. In a web context, I think of a story as the decisions and experiences that advance a user toward a goal. A profile of a student has the goal of getting you emotionally invested in the institution. An admissions website creates an experience that ultimately hopes to guide the user toward the application.



- There are **two types of stories**: the first is a **story of the world**, which cannot be changed because it already happened. The player discovers this story through gameplay (e.g. Myst). Some elements of a story of the world are the **title** (e.g. Zombies Ate My Neighbors), **character design** (e.g. the portrayal of Manny in Grim Fandango) and **environmental design** (e.g. Portal, with “the cake is a lie” scrawled on a wall).
 - The intent of the content and the design of a website tell a story, and that story is impressed upon the user as they explore the site. This is accomplished through copy, SEO, information architecture, color choice, images and photography.
- The second type of story is the **story of the player**, and there are two varieties: **an embedded story**, which is pre-established by the game, or **an emergent story**, which is the result of the player interacting with the system (e.g. The Sims). The components of a story of the player are **game premise/goal** (e.g. the premise of the hacker game Uplink), **game events** (e.g. Final Fantasy’s Rydia the Summoner, who only obtains a critical fire spell needed to advance in the game after overcoming a past trauma) and **micronarratives** (e.g. an at-rest Sonic the Hedgehog tapping his foot impatiently — this reminds us how Sonic thrives on speed and urges the player to keep going).



- I think most of the web experiences we create are emergent stories. The outcome of the story is shaped by the decisions the user makes. We, as the website creators, have a goal in mind, whether it is to gain newsletter subscribers, applicants or buyers. We create events (personalization options, audience-based navigation, basic user paths) that inform the subsequent storybuilding. And micronarratives can appear all over a site — for

example, the website for a company that develops iPhone apps can aim to tell the story about the value of these apps, but a micronarrative can be derived from elements that indicate the company has a punk sensibility, or is very interested in environmental issues — that enhance and complement the central story. If we fall down in any of these respects — unclear goals, ineffective events, lack of micronarratives — the story loses depth and power.

- What do we gain from bringing storytelling into a game? 1) Since people understand experiences as stories, **stories help people understand the game**. 2) **Stories explain the world** and/or encourage the player to explore the world and learn more. 3) **Stories help maintain consistency** in a world.
 - Stories are a tool for helping our audience understand a message or a set of actions, and accomplish a particular goal. They should remain consistent and true to the world in which they exist in order to reinforce that message and ensure completion of the task(s) at hand.

So what's the moral of *this* story? Bring your Xbox to work and tell your boss it's for professional development? Well, not quite. But what I think this demonstrates is that the principles of storytelling (or storybuilding, as it were) as a means of connecting people to experiences and moving them toward goals are universal — and powerful. And it doesn't take significant assets to tell a powerful story — if games can do it in text, we can do it with the oft-limited resources at our disposal, as long as we keep the core principles in mind. Don't forget, inspiration to improve your story craft is right at your fingertips — or thumbs.

What do you think? I'd love to hear different thoughts on this topic in the comments.

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2 Responses



Katie says:

1. November 2, 2010 at 9:45 am

Funny — we **do** have an XBOX at work for professional development. Great post; I'm passing this one around the office.

Reply



Andrew Whitacre says:

2. November 4, 2010 at 9:13 am

Georgy! Every Friday, 4pm..."Games at GAMBIT". Take the red line down here and hang out with Clara and me.



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