

From The Ultimate Guide to Video Game Writing & Design. By Flint Dille and John Zuur Platten, Lone Eagle Publishing Company, 2007.

[Taken from Chapter 2: Video Game Story Structure & Work Approach]

Types of Branching Narratives, Story Styles

TYPES OF BRANCHING NARRATIVES

As the name implies, think of branching narratives like the branches of a tree. The trunk forms the spine of the story, and events within the narrative reach outward in a number of different directions at specific decision points, or branches, along the journey.

LIMITED BRANCHING

Limited branching stories tend to revolve around a series of “yes/no” or “black/white” objectives. Depending on the outcome, or the choice of action that the player takes, the game will branch to the appropriate story thread. Many early adventures games relied on this structure. Today, it has fallen out of fashion. Limited branching usually will only go one or two branches deep before it returns to the main story arc. This often means a story contrivance that puts the player back on the “correct path.” This type of branching can lead to more than one ending.

OPEN-ENDED

Open-ended branching stories are the complex and ambitious version of this type of storytelling. The player may be faced with a multitude of storylines to follow in the game, and each of these may have multiple permeations. This type of game story can very quickly get out of hand. It's pretty simple to do the math, and see how quickly the various branches and variations can get out of hand. Another major problem with this type of story is that often you are devoting creative energy,

time and money to elements of the game and the story that will not be seen by the player (he takes another branch and entirely misses it).

FUNNELING NARRATIVE (CHOKEPOINTS)

Using a funneling or chokepoint structure for game stories is fairly common, and the reasons are obvious. First, you have a controllable and definable way to set the player back on the

narrative arc of the game. Second, you give the player more freedom to explore, but ultimately, you can elegantly determine where and when you will allow story and game progression to take place. For example, you can allow the player to move throughout an environment, and explore multiple story-threads, but he will not be able to progress deeper into the game until he visits the bartender at the edge of town. The bartender becomes a gameplay and story chokepoint, and ultimately, all the gameplay will begin to funnel the player toward his conversation with the bartender. Chokepoints in this type of structure tend to be the story set pieces for the game.

CRITICAL PATHS

Similar to limited branching, a critical path game has one success path, and allows the player to deviate from it in very small ways. However, nothing of consequence in the game or story happens outside of a predetermined path that winds its way through the experience.

NODAL STORYTELLING

Many open-environment games utilize this type of story. Nodal stories are either location and/or objective dependent. Each node of the game story is a self-contained piece, with a setup, midpoint, and payoff. In totality, each of these story nodes may lead to a larger reveal, or they may be just cool things that you play and see on your journey through the game. Usually, this story structure doesn't function as a traditional

branch (and it is valid to debate whether or not it belongs here), but since moving from node to node of the

story is often dependent on a previous element of the story, we believe that nodal structure does function as a pseudo-branch.

STORY STYLES

There are several story styles currently in use. All of them, interestingly enough, can be compared to other mediums that preceded video games.

EPISODIC

Think of episodes of an old-time TV series like *The Cosby Show*, which basically hits a reset at the beginning of every show. This phrase “episodic” has taken on a pejorative meaning in the movie business that basically means: “This is a series of episodes that doesn’t add up to a story.” Well, have you ever played a game that was truly episodic, in which each level starts out exactly the same way as the previous level? Though there is a lot of talk about episodic content what they really mean is that you sell a game a level at a time online as opposed to selling a giant game product.

FILM STYLE

This is a common game structure. Basically, you take the structure of an action film and use the game parts to play the action sequences. You use cinematics to mimic the dialogue scenes in the movie (and maybe a few big payoffs).

SERIAL

Serial exists somewhere between episodic and film style. Many games are structured this way. You are following a distinct story that ends in

one level and then teases you at the end of the level with a cliffhanger that leads you to the next level.

The truth is that there is no right or wrong kind of story. Many players are perfectly happy just working their way through a story—sort of like watching a movie while playing the action scenes. There should always be games out there for these players. Likewise, other players are sold on an RPG style (which has a multitude of mutations and variants) in which the player builds their character in order to face ever more challenging objectives.

The more role playing a game goes, the more your player determines who their character is, the less applicable this is to licensed or franchise characters. For example, it is unlikely that DC Comics will allow any version of a Superman game in which the Man of Steel is allowed to wantonly kill civilians.