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Games, Storytelling, and Breaking the String

by Greg Costikyan

2007-12-28

Greg Costikyan revisits the narrative versus game-play debate that continues to be a staple of both Game Studies and Game Design. He presents a spectrum that ranges from game-focused forms to narrative-centric models, and suggests that free-form role-playing may be the most desireable marriage of narrative and game-play.

Before 1973, if you had said something like "games are a storytelling medium," just about anyone would have looked at you as if you were mad - and anyone knowledgeable about games would have assumed you knew nothing about them.

Before 1973, the world had essentially four game styles: classic board games, classic card games, mass-market commercial board games, and the board wargame. None of these had any noticeable connection to story: There is no story in chess, bridge, Monopoly, or Afrika Korps.

But in the early 1970s, two things happened: Will Crowther's computer game adventure Colossal Cave,[1] and Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson's tabletop role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons.[2]

Colossal Cave, and Adventure, the more refined form of that work that Don Woods created in 1976, were considered "interactive fiction" (IF) from the start, a term that creators of text adventures (no longer a commercial medium) still use today. When I first encountered Adventure (on minicomputers set up by MIT computer club members at the Boskone science fiction convention in the mid-1970s), Adventure was in a directory named "Interactive Fiction," which is why I started the application. I had no idea what "interactive fiction" was or could be, but I was interested in finding out. I quickly realized that, in fact, it was a pretentious way of referring to a new kind of game. I spent several hours playing before they kicked me off to make room for other people.

In fact, text adventures have real flaws both as games and as fiction - but they are games and do offer many of the aesthetic pleasures of fiction.

While the text adventure now survives only as the creation of hobbyists and digital artists, it spawned both graphic adventures (e.g., Grim Fandango) and the action/adventure hybrid (e.g., Psychonauts), which are still relevant genres today.

Dungeons & Dragons, originally created by Dave Arneson and refined by Gary Gygax, was an outgrowth of the Chainmail rules for playing fantasy battles with miniature figures. Chainmail already had rules for special "hero" characters on the battlefield, single individuals equally (or more) powerful than a whole military unit. Arneson took those rules, elaborated them, and set the game, not on a battlefield, but in a "dungeon," an underground domain populated by monsters. In one sense, this was a simple extension of an existing game; but in another, it was a wholly novel form of game.

You played a single character with the ability to grow and gain in power over time; and while (initially) Dungeons & Dragons, as a set of rules, did little to encourage plot complexity, true role-playing, or anything like real storytelling, the mere fact of a character persisting in an imaginary world over multiple sessions of play offered a clear opportunity for a tighter

NOTE 1.
The date of the original Colossal Cave is subject to some dispute. William Crowther has put the date at 1975, "give or take a year." (see link after works cited)

NOTE 2.
The first commercial version of D&D was actually published in January 1974, but some pre-release copies were in circulation toward the end of 1973.

connection between gameplay and story. D&D was innovative in another regard too as it dispensed with the need for miniatures, a board, cards, or other physical game assets. It transpired entirely in the imagination - turning the tightly constrained nature of previous games on its head. If you could imagine it, and the gamemaster was willing to go along, it could happen. This opened an exciting vista of more free-form and flexible games.

Tabletop role-playing remains a vital and innovative commercial genre today and has directly influenced a whole slew of other genres, including computer/console RPGs, MMOs, LARPs, and the esoteric "indie" RPG movement (as discussed at The Forge).

The Clash of Games and Stories

Almost from the inception of "games with stories," there has been an ongoing culture clash between those who view story as perhaps important but tangential to understanding the nature of games, and those who view it as essential. In 1977, the Game Manufacturer's Association (GAMA), a group of publishers of board wargames, tabletop RPGs, and other non-digital games aimed at an enthusiast audience, officially decided to name their industry the "adventure gaming industry" (something that later caused confusion for fans of text and graphic adventures). This decision was bitterly contested by some members of GAMA, including those companies whose main business was the publication of wargames; they did not see how Third Reich or Napoleon at Waterloo could remotely be called "adventure games." Redmond Simonsen,[3] then art director for SPI, a major wargame publisher, proposed "simulation games" as an alternative - but this proposition was soundly defeated.

NOTE 3.
Not incidentally, the man who coined the term "game designer."

The clash between those who viewed games as formal systems and those who viewed them as storytelling media persisted with the rise of digital games; if you view the program of any Game Developers Conference (or before it, the Computer Game Developers Conference), you will find panels or presentations debating the role of stories in games. You can even identify the proponents of opposing views clearly: Chris Crawford[4] and Dan Bunten in the "games as systems" camp, and Hal Barwood and Mark Barrett on the "games as story" side.

NOTE 4.
Paradoxically, since Crawford is now embarked on a quixotic attempt to develop what he views as true interactive fiction - which he nonetheless insists must be distinct from and quite different from "games."

And of course, today there is an ongoing and contentious debate among game studies academics between "ludologists" and "narrativists" - a debate that recapitulates an argument developers have been having for decades (Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan 2004).

Why does this debate exist? And why does it continue?

A story is linear. The events of a story occur in the same order, and in the same way, each time you read (or watch or listen to) it. A story is a controlled experience; the author consciously crafts it, choosing precisely these events, in this order, to create a story with maximum impact. If the events occurred in some other fashion, the impact of the story would be diminished - or if that isn't true, the author isn't doing a good job.

A game is nonlinear. Games must provide at least the illusion of free will to the player; players must feel that they have freedom of action - not absolute freedom, but freedom within the structure of the system. The structure constrains what they can do, but they must feel they have options; if not, they are not actively engaged. Rather, they are merely passive recipients of the experience. If they are constrained to a linear path of events, unchangeable in order, they'll feel they're being railroaded through the game, that nothing they do has any impact, that they are not playing in any meaningful sense.

In other words, there's a direct, immediate conflict between the demands of story and the demands of a game. Divergence from a story's path is likely to make for a less satisfying story; restricting a player's freedom of action is likely to make for a less satisfying game. To the degree that you make a game more like a story - a controlled, predetermined experience with events occurring as the author wishes - you make it a less effective game. To the degree that you make a story more like a game - with alternative paths and outcomes - you make it a less effective story. It's not merely that games aren't stories, and vice versa; rather they are, in a sense, opposites.

Or at least so I argued in an article in Game Developer magazine back in 2000 (Costikyan 2000). But clearly, there are innumerable game styles that do combine stories and gameplay successfully, in ways that evidently appeal strongly to wide audiences. Perhaps a more sophisticated way of looking at the issue is this: To get a good story out of a game, you have to constrain gameplay in a way that ensures that a story is told through play. There are direct conflicts between the demands of story and the demands of gameplay, because constraints that benefit the story aspect of the game may sometimes make the game aspect less interesting; yet any game is a system of constraints. Players have free action only within those constraints; there are always limitations on behavior, and indeed, gameplay often emerges precisely because of those limitations.

To see this, consider chess (a game utterly lacking in story, and which would not be improved by, e.g., a cutscene explaining that it's a war between brothers or some such). If, in chess, every piece could move any distance in any direction, it would not be an interesting game. It is because the moves of each piece are highly constrained to specific patterns that the complex interplay of forces - making chess so fascinating a game - emerges.

In other words, since a game is a system of constraints, and since if we want a story to emerge from a game we must constrain it in such a way that it does, it is not a priori impossible to imagine constructing a set of constraints that both produces a story and also fosters interesting gameplay. Solving the problem is not easy, but it is conceptually possible.

And yet so far, almost all games that involve stories (or stories that involve some aspect of game) can be viewed along a single, linear axis, from those that are highly linear with minor gameplay to those that are quite open-ended but with story a minor appendage. Let's look at that spectrum - and then at some more recent games that may point the way to alternative approaches.

Cortázar's Hopscotch

Julio Cortázar's 1966 La Rayuela (published in English as Hopscotch) (Cortázar 1987) can be read in the same fashion as a conventional novel - from beginning to end - but in addition, in his front notes, Cortázar suggests an alternative reading: to read it in a different chapter order, which he provides. And indeed, if you read it in that fashion, you gain a rather different insight into the characters' motivations and the evolution of the story than if you read it in the normal order. In fact, to fully understand the novel, you need to read it both ways.

In other words, this is what you might consider the minimalist story-game hybrid: It's a branching narrative with one branch.

Of course, it's a hat-trick - it's interesting, but it's hard to imagine a whole genre of Hopscotch-like novels emerging. And while it's more gamelike than most stories, it's still a long way from what we generally call a game.

Hypertext Fiction

From Hopscotch, we move up the spectrum to hypertext fiction, of the type promoted by Robert Coover at Brown University (Coover 1992), perhaps best exemplified by Michael Joyce's afternoon: a story (Joyce 1990).

While there are Web examples, the hyperfiction movement predates the Web, and most hyperfictions are implemented in proprietary systems such as Eastgate's Storyspace engine. You begin by reading a text passage (perhaps with an accompanying image) within which there are (usually) multiple links. Selecting a link takes you to another passage. In other words, there are multiple paths at each node, creating a Web-like narrative.

Of course, any single exploration of the web is "linear," in the sense that you reach passages in an order determined by your selection of links - but unlike traditional narrative, you cannot sustain a single, linear, driving narrative arc. Instead, with the best hypertext fictions, you ultimately have explored enough of the narrative tree to reach some kind of epiphany.

While this is interesting, it is perhaps harder to create a satisfying story this way than with more traditional narrative - and from a gameplay perspective, it's not great. There are no trade-offs to be made, no reason to choose one link over another, no objective to pursue. The elements that make for interesting games are missing, other than some limited freedom of action.

Game Books

Game books (such as Choose Your Own Adventure and Which Way books) were most popular during the late 1980s, when the Fighting Fantasy game books from Ian Livingston and Steve Jackson [5] were international best-sellers. In some ways, they're actually quite similar to hypertext fiction; you read a passage of text, at the end of which you are called upon to make a choice (the lady or the tiger), then turn to another passage elsewhere in the book that describes the outcome of the choice. In some game books, that's all there is; but in others (including the Fighting Fantasy books) there's a rudimentary game system to handle combat and some other actions - so that, instead, the text might instruct you to resolve a battle with such-and-such a monster and turn to page X if you win and page Y if you lose.

NOTE 5.
The British Steve Jackson, not to be confused with the Texan Steve Jackson.

This is certainly more gamelike; you do have some goal (there's at least one positive ending to work toward), and at least when there is a rudimentary system, outcomes are not arbitrary. There are problems, of course; many choices that are reasonable to the player lead to unsatisfying story outcomes (you plummet off the cliff and die), and repeat playability is minimal.

Finally, in some ways, it's almost identical to hypertext fiction (read a passage, select a link, read another passage) except that hypertext is the purview of the literati, and game books are viewed as degraded hackwork.

Paragraph-System Board Games and Solitaire RPG Adventures

Paragraph-system board games and solo RPG adventures are attempts to take the basic game book paradigm and push it toward deeper and more satisfying gameplay. A solitaire RPG adventure is essentially structured like a game book, but depends on the existence of a richer tabletop RPG system independent of the adventure booklet itself, which allows for more variety of outcome.

In a paragraph-system board game (Eric Goldberg's Tales of the Arabian Nights is the best example), the players move pieces about the board, and occasionally are called upon to turn to a passage of text in an accompanying book. This passage offers some sort of choice, possibly mediated through a game system - essentially leading the player through a brief game book-like scenario. Many such scenarios exist in the book, of which only a small fraction are used in a single session of play, and they may be encountered in any order, which makes the game quite replayable.

In other words, this is a step further along the axis from story to game.

Dragon's Lair

Just as there are tabletop analogs to the game book, there are arcade game ones. When Dragon's Lair was introduced in 1984, it was a smash hit at the arcade, because arcade game graphics were relatively primitive at the time, and it boasted cinematic-quality animation from Don Bluth - it was perceived as an amazing visual experience. As a game, however, it sucked. Essentially, you watched an animation clip lasting a few seconds, and had to quickly make a choice by moving a joystick in one direction or another. One choice led to death. The other triggered another few seconds of animation and another choice. You played by feeding in quarter after quarter and learning which choices didn't make you die through a process of rote memorization. Not surprisingly, the sequels failed.

Adventure Games

Text and graphic adventures are, in some ways, much like game books, too; you read a passage of text, or view an area of the gameworld, and make a choice that leads you to another passage or area of the world. Rather than being an explicit branching narrative, however, players often return to areas in the world, and an inventory system and set of puzzles provides more gameplay. But the narrative is still quite linear; adventure games tend to be "beads-on-a-string": small areas where there is some freedom of action until some event occurs, at which point a transition to the next bead is opened. While there is some freedom within the beads, the overall game is a linear progress through the beads.

In principle, it would be possible to implement a game of this type that doesn't conform to the "beads-on-a-string" model; in practice, it makes little sense to do so. Content development is expensive, and if a player is only exposed to part of it in the course of a game, you've wasted development money. And the more branches you have, the less of the overall game a player will see.

In essence, adventure games are not all that dissimilar from game books - except that, because they are digital, they can be more interactive, with new areas opening up and new items becoming available as the game progresses.

In graphic adventures, gameplay is often interrupted by cutscenes, and when skillfully used, this helps advance the story. In the worst cases (as with Tex Avery: Overseer), the result is essentially a lame movie interrupted by uninteresting bits of gameplay. But in the best cases (as with Grim Fandango), the net effect is perhaps among the best extant combinations of game and story.

Computer and Console RPGs

Adventure games are still quite limited in the freedom of action they offer players. Digital RPGs offer a bit more freedom; a richer character design and inventory system allows more options at each point, and quite often there is a choice of which path to take next, reducing the degree of linearity. They are still tied intimately to story - the story progresses during the game and reaches some eventual denouement - but there is more freedom on a moment-to-moment basis. Digital RPGs, however, have limited repeat playability because they are tied to an ultimately linear story.

MMOs

The line of descent from tabletop RPGs to massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) is clear - both have character design systems, elaborate variations in equipment, skills, and spells, and in both cases most games in these genres are built around killing monsters and taking their treasure, with a consequent advance in character power.

While tabletop RPGs have, over time, evolved more toward true role-playing and the telling of stories, MMOs are almost devoid of story. That's because these are "never-ending games": story ultimately depends on change, and players cannot be permitted to make real and meaningful changes to the game world.

Why is that? Imagine that an MMO comes to some sort of story climax, which could go either way, depending on the actions of the players. The live team must develop content to handle both outcomes. And on some servers, the event will go one way, and on others, the other. Suddenly, you have a fork in the game world - and your new content development problem is now compounded by the need to develop different new content for the two different worlds on an ongoing basis.

MMOs often claim to have stories: the manual might have badly written sword-and-sorcery at the front, and each new content update is supposed to "advance the story" in some fashion. But by and large, players don't give a crap about this; they're interested in the new content, new monsters, new areas to explore - but whatever supposed connection to an ongoing story is

involved is irrelevant to the way they play. That there's a story is a conceit of the developers; it has no impact on actual play.

Interestingly, however, MMOs intersect with story in another fashion - via quests, which I'll discuss later.

In essence, MMOs are "story settings" - but have almost lost the connection to story in exchange for becoming good social environments as well as good games.

Tabletop RPGs

The game systems of tabletop RPGs are in some ways very similar to those of digital RPGs - sometimes identical, in fact, in the case of computer RPGs licensed from tabletop games. They are, however, vastly more free-form. The rules of the game provide a structure for resolving player actions: rules for combat, magic spells, skills, and so on. Unlike digital RPGs, there is no pre-established story line, although most paper RPG rule books contain one or several stories for new gamemasters to use. The expectation is that a gamemaster will invent his or her own stories for players, using the rules system as needed.

Paper RPGs, unlike electronic ones, are social affairs; players get together periodically to play, and spend at least as much time role-playing for their friends as they do trying to maximize their character's effectiveness in a purely structural context. It's common for a group of friends to get together for years, playing the same characters in the same game world with the same gamemaster. In the process, they establish long character histories, flesh out the world background, and so on. For long-term role-players, the stories they create through play can be as emotionally powerful and personally meaningful as anything you find in a novel or movie - perhaps more so because the players are personally involved in their creation.

These "stories" are meaningful to players precisely because they are intimately involved. Players frequently write "expedition reports," in which they retell the story of a particular session of play, or several sessions. Expedition reports almost invariably make dull reading for those who are not involved in the campaign, because they do not have the same intimate familiarity with the setting and the same long history with the players and their characters.

Many role-playing gamers never give "story" a second thought; they get their kicks from solving problems and playing roles, and they don't mind terribly whether the things they encounter knit together into some kind of coherent story. For them, that isn't their main interest in the game.

Additionally, traditional tabletop RPGs, while they often exhort players to roleplay and tell stories, don't generally provide a structure to shape them; their rules are concerned more with determining the success or failure of individual actions, and they leave it up to the gamemaster and players to shape the tale.

From Hopscotch to Tabletop

From Hopscotch to tabletop role-playing, we've moved along the spectrum I talked about: from a narrative with a single branch to the branching structures of hypertext, game books, solitaire role-playing adventures, and Dragon's Lair; to the beads-on-a-string of adventure games; to the slightly open-ended structures of digital RPGs; to the more free-form nature of tabletop. And in the process we've moved from stories with minor game elements to games that still have an attachment to story.

Only with the final game style, tabletop, do we escape the demands of linearity - and we do so, ultimately, only by relying on the creativity of a live gamemaster.

Clearly, one way to ensure that a story is told in a game is to make the game essentially linear, since, after all, stories are by nature linear. And designers have found some compromises that allow reasonable freedom of action for players within the constraints of linearity. But are there ways of breaking out of those bounds?

Embedded Stories

One way is to embed stories in the game, rather than the game in a story. We saw this with Tales of the Arabian Nights: mini-stories told in the course of an encompassing board game. But we can see it today also in the quests of MMOs. A player encounters an NPC, is told the background of a story, is given a task to accomplish, does so, and returns for a reward (and quite often the next step in a story consisting of several quests). In the course of a character's career in an MMO, he may play through dozens, even hundreds of these mini-stories - and at least when they are well-written and implemented, they can be entertaining and greatly increase the appeal of playing. Indeed, the excellence of its quest system is one of World of Warcraft's greatest strengths.

Each of these mini-stories may itself be linear, but they are encountered by different players in different orders, so each player's experience is different. Moreover, since these stories are small, their individual development cost is also small, and there's no need to ensure that all players are exposed to all content - increasing repeat playability, something you basically don't get with any linear game.

It's a technique that can clearly be taken to game styles other than MMOs and board games - and an obvious area for designers to explore.

Algorithmic Systems + Multiple Approaches to Problems

Traditionally, both digital RPGs and adventure games present players with a series of challenges - with one, and only one, solution (generally hard-coded) for each. To open the gates to Hell, you must use the bell, the book, and the candle in a prescribed order. To get past the level boss, you must kill it, and there's some little trick to doing so.

As you move away from hard-coded systems to algorithmically driven ones (games set in 3D spaces with skill-driven combat, for instance, and games with physics engines), it becomes increasingly possible for players to discover ways to interact with the physical environment to solve problems, instead of relying on a single solution determined by the developers. Emergent complexity comes into play.

Naturally, developers will want to ensure that at least one solution for each problem exists - but an even better approach is to ensure that more than one solution exists for each problem. Deus Ex is an example here; in almost all cases, players can get through a level in at least three ways: by shooting everything in sight, by sneaking around, or by using cybernetic skills to hack through obstacles.

Deus Ex is still a "beads-on-a-string" game, with an invariant sequence of levels with predesigned obstacles., but it offers far more variety of play than most such games - and a degree of replayability, despite its linear story, since it can be interesting to try to complete the game with a different strategy the second time around.

This doesn't break us free of the tyranny of linearity - and it's more work for developers, since they have to plan those multiple paths and potentially develop more content to allow for them. But from an artistic perspective, at least, it's worthwhile.

Ending the MMO

I argued that an MMO cannot tell an overarching story because players cannot have a real impact on the gameworld. But that stops being true if the game itself has an end. A Tale in the Desert demonstrates this; it's now being run for the third time. It runs for one calendar year; during that time, the "people of Egypt" (the players) must assist Pharaoh in his struggle with "The Stranger" by completing certain tasks. If they succeed, Pharaoh (and by extension, all Egypt) "wins," and if they fail, they all fail. Some of these tasks, like building a pyramid, require a truly amazing amount of collaborative effort on the part of the player base. In the process, they materially affect the landscape of the game. And "Pharaoh" (Andy Tepper, the game's developer) often appears in-game.

The point is that you can impose a real narrative arc on an MMO - but only if the game, like all stories, comes to an end.

There are good business reasons not to do this; if you end a game, some portion of your subscribers will decide not to renew and play again. But again, from an artistic perspective, perhaps that loss is worthwhile.

Narrativist RPGs and Free-forms

Even as digital games have become more and more stereotyped, "indie" RPG designers and hobbyists have been exploring ways of creating games and scenarios that are designed specifically to produce well-defined story experiences, often by inverting or eliminating the conventions of older RPGs.

The indie RPG movement takes as its guidepost what they call "Gamist-Narrativist-Simulationist theory," which holds that role-playing gamers seek traditional gameplay experiences, excellent stories, or some form of realism. Though Ron Edwards, the theorist's leading exponent, claims not to give moral weight to one play style over another (Edwards 2001), it's clear that the whole "indie" project is aimed primarily at devising "narrativist" games.

One example is Paul Czege's My Life with Master (see also Czege's contribution to this collection). This game has an invariant narrative arc; each player is a servant of "the Master," and by the end of the game, the Master will be destroyed, typically by enraged villagers but sometimes in some other fashion. In the course of the game, each player will either be destroyed by the self-loathing brought on by the tasks he is forced to perform by the Master, or will find some form of love or hope and escape the coming cataclysm.

Unlike conventional tabletop RPGs, My Life with Master does not have specific rules for task resolution; a character either succeeds or fails a task, as the player wishes. The game is played in "scenes," and at the beginning of a scene, dice are rolled to determine whether the outcome of the scene is positive for the character or not. The player, with gamemaster assistance, narrates the scene and its outcome.

In other words, My Life with Master is not concerned with providing a system to resolve tasks; it is concerned with providing a system that results in narrative resolution. The details of the events within a scene are freed up, to be determined by the players as they wish - but the ultimate outcome is not.

In other words, My Life with Master is a perfect example of what I mean by "constraining" a game to produce a story.

Not all narrativist games take this approach - indeed, the appeal of this genre lies in the divergent and imaginative approaches taken by its practitioners. Another example is Ron Edward's Sorcerer, which does have rules for determining the outcomes of specific tasks, but whose primary focus is on individual psychology and a particular mood: a mood of subtle dread and ultimate horror. Its motto is "How far will you go to get what you want?"; each player-character is a person with inner demons - literally so, for each is a sorcerer, living in the modern world, with a demon bound inside him or her. And each can draw on the demon to use paranormal powers, at a large personal cost.

While the indie RPG movement has taken conventional tabletop RPGs in the direction of games that shape narrative, a group of hobbyists, mostly in Scandinavia and Australia, have created a game style known as "the free-form," which can either be seen as taking RPG away from the tabletop and in the direction of improv theater, or as taking Live Action RolePlaying (LARP) and divorcing it from its fruity "dress up and hit each other with rattan sticks" origins.

A free-form is a scenario for some number of players, ranging from a handful to several dozen, designed to be played in a few hours or (at most) days. Typically, it has no (or minimal) rules for task resolution, but it does have one or more people who fulfill something of the same role as a gamemaster in a tabletop game (but may also have a literal role to play in the game). The free-form provides a setting and a structure for improvisational role-playing. The players take the role of characters,

sometimes created in advance by the game operators, but more often improvised on the spot.

An excellent example is Thorbiörn Fritzon and Tobias Wrigstad's The Upgrade, which has been played at several events in Scandinavia. The conceit of The Upgrade is that each of the players is a contestant in a reality TV show called "The Upgrade," and each player is part of a couple, whether married or not. The couples are split up, and each assigned an alternative partner, with whom he or she spends time over the period of the reality show's filming. At the end of the final episode of the show, each player must decide whether to stick with his or her original partner, or "upgrade" to the person with whom he or she was paired. A typically degrading scenario, for reality TV, yes?

The gamemasters take the role of the producers of the show, and the players do not play out their full experience on the tropical island where The Upgrade is filmed; instead, the GMs sit them down and "introduce the next clip," saying something like, "Well, something very interesting happened when Hannah went for a stroll with Lars. Could you tell us about that, Hannah?"

At which point Hannah is expected to say a few words to the studio audience and we "cut to the clip," meaning that Hannah and Lars now roleplay a scene. The situation is further complicated because any other player can stop the action to say, "Hannah at age twelve" or "Lars, three months after the show" - at which point that player (and any others she chooses) play out a mini-scene, not using Hannah's and Lars's players but taking the relevant roles themselves, either establishing something about the character (in the past scene) or imagining a "possible future." Thus, a player does not have complete control over the nature of his character; past scenes may establish things about the character that its player then must accept and role-play. Similarly, the "hosts" can stop the action to role-play a little scene of their own (e.g., the two of them in the production trailer that evening, drunk and laughing about how they couldn't believe Lars had gotten tangled up in the fishing net), which event Lars then must role-play when we "cut back" to the "clip."

In other words, there is a structure here, and even what you might term "rules." But the main thrust is frenetic, on the edge improvisational role-play - and the rules exist to shape that role-play into a coherent narrative arc rather than deal with the specifics of task resolution. Salen and Zimmerman would doubtlessly not consider this a "game" (no "quantifiable resolution," under their definition, Salen and Zimmerman 2003), but I surely do.

Transferring to Digital Media?

It's hard to see how the lessons learned from narrativist RPGs and free-forms can be brought to digital media since they depend so heavily on a gamemaster and player creativity - and "player creativity" doesn't generally work well in tandem with "limited, pregenerated digital assets." But perhaps a more generalized lesson can be learned: it's possible to constrain the narrative of a game if you free up constraints on player action in other regards, thus giving players the feeling that they still have a degree of freedom of action in the gamespace.

Breaking the String

While there is no dishonor in implementing an existing game style well, it seems to me that we've rung the basic changes on what's possible with the "beads-on-a-string" approach to combining games and narrative. If we want to get closer to games that also produce compelling stories, we're going to have to experiment with different approaches.

Some approaches to consider, as I've suggested, are embedded narratives and imposing a defined narrative arc on the game, but allowing a high degree of player freedom between those fixed points.

In general, it's important to think of story and game as discrete, if intertwined, entities, and look for novel ways of integrating them. And to find different ways to grant players "freedom of action" while working

within a constrained narrative - or ways of constraining player freedom in one area while freeing it in another to produce an emergent narrative.

Precisely because there is a tension between the demands of game and the demands of story, the attempt to resolve that tension has spawned a number of interesting game styles. If, however, we are to get closer to something that deserves to be called "interactive fiction," we need to break the string of beads and find other approaches to pursue.

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Links

Colossal Cave

Tags: narrativist vs. ludologist debate, tabletop role-playing