Game Analysis – *Stacking*

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Video game is a unique medium that combines culture and interactivity. For example, the video game that I am going to discuss today, *Stacking*, is a perfect illustration. This game not only uses humor in storytelling but it also implements unique interaction in the entire gameplay. It reflected the "Narrative and Ludology Theory" we learned in class. *Stacking* has established a unique game world and a system based on the concept of Matryoshka doll. In the game system, the developer delivers a story by utilizing the player's curiousness and exploration.

Play and game have a long history in human culture. People engage in play or game as means of competition, gambling, simulation and so on. The most traditional games are board game, card game and board war game. For example, Go, Poker, Chess. The development of video game cannot be separated from the advancement in computer technology. The earliest video games were developed in the computer labs of tech institutes, like *Spacewar!* at MIT. These games set rules and environment for people to interact with either the computer or other players rather than narrate a story.

Before 1970, it was nearly impossible to connect a video game with storytelling. But in 1975 the release of *Colossal Cave* changed the entire world of video game with interactive text and started a new genre – Adventure. People called this game Interactive Fiction (IF). *Colossal Cave* filled the gap between video game and storytelling. With the use of interactive graphics, storytelling no longer just lies in the text, but it became a narrative with vivid graphics in a virtual world. Players were more easily attracted to the gaming world and storytelling became more real and interactive. In recent years, Virtual Reality (VR) has started a new era for video games and it pushed story narrative to a higher level with immersing experiences. From my years of video gaming experience, I believe that most of contemporary video games have implemented their story narrative to support some given theme and they provided specific directions for the player to explore. Interactivity makes the storytelling more attractive and gives the player more freedom to explore within the virtual world and "create their own storyline". For example, a number of current video games on the market have non-linear plots in storytelling and the ending of the story is based on player's choices and decisions. Video games are similar to TV shows, broadcasts, magazines and newspapers. They are mediums for storytelling. However, video game is not as same as traditional mediums that tend to tell a linear story, video games immerse the player with interactivity and a non-linear story.

Stacking is a puzzle adventure game. The game uses Matryoshka dolls as characters and narrates stories with puzzle solving, NPCs' conversations, open world exploring and silent film style scene cuts. The storyline of the game is centered around the main character, Charlie Blackmore, the youngest boy in the family, who is on a mission to rescue his siblings from the antagonist, Baron. In the game, the player acts as Charlie who is the smallest doll. Charlie has the ability to jump in and out of a bigger doll (Charlie can only jump into a doll that is "one size" bigger than the size of his current doll) to acquire that doll's abilities. And Charlie then uses the acquired abilities for

puzzle solving or interacting with other dolls. The game is full of puzzles and challenges. One puzzle may has more than one solution or embedded with other related puzzles. The player can choose either to follow the main storyline or the player also has the freedom to explore around the entire game world, take on challenges, collect objects and acquire new abilities.

The timeline of the story is set in the industrial age. "Baron" is an evil industrialist who forces children to work for him (child labor). With Mr. Blackmore's mysterious disappearance and the amount of heavy debt, the Blackmore family faces significant difficulties. The entire family has to go to work with exception of Charlie who is the youngest child of the Blackmore. Charlie finally realized that his siblings lost their freedom and have become slaves. Charlie decided to rescue his siblings so they can have family reunion. Charlie started his journey and thus began his adventure. The player acts as Charlie Blackmore who is the smallest doll. Charlie has the ability to stack into a one size bigger doll if that doll is not staring at him, and he can then control this new doll and uses its abilities and features for puzzle solving or to follow the game story. Each doll in the game has unique abilities such as unlocking a gate, singing, vomiting, playing a violin, crying out or expelling the crowd and so on. A stacking doll in the game can stack into another doll that is one size bigger than itself and acquire new abilities from the "absorbed doll". In the game, stack of dolls can stack or unstack at any time for different puzzle solving or to follow the main storyline.

Stacking can be played in multiple ways. One may follow the main storyline to rescue all the Blackmore, or try to figure out all the solutions to puzzles and accomplish all the challenges or submissions. For example, a puzzle needs Charlie to drive out all the people in a restaurant. He can stack into a chef and use that chef's ability to walk into the kitchen and destroy all the food. Another solution is Charlie stacks into a cleaner and clogs the vent with dust. Accomplishment of challenges and submissions can achieve more unique dolls and rewards.

A video game can attract people's attention and time even if it's not about following a set storyline. Video games motivate players to positively engage, immerse and explore the game story through positively exploiting interactivity. *Interactivity is almost the opposite of narrative; narrative flows under the direction of the author, while interactivity depends on the player for motive power. (Adams 1999).* Adams' theory demonstrates the relationship between narrative and interactivity. In *Stacking*, the player can deviate from the main story for activities he is interested to engage in any time he wants during the game. The player acts as Charlie to explore the place or environment where he is, complete a challenge for new objects or just enjoy immersion in the game world. The exploration mechanics provides freedom to the player under constrain of the game system. *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.（Greg Costikyan，2007，Games, Storytelling, and Breaking the String）* Greg's theory illustrates the importance of freedom to the player in a game. Adams has mentioned "Motive Power". This power should be stimulated and accumulated in the game. Enjoyable interactivity and free-exploration mechanics are the most effective ways to stimulate and accumulate motive power to the player in a video game. The player transfers from passively following the designer's idea to positively exploring the game. This not only gives the player freedom in the game, but also helps the player accept the game story and designer's ideas.

From the perspective of the psychological instinct of human, no one likes doing something in a passive situation. Video games can utilize curiosities of human to stimulate the player to positively explore and discover in the game world. Since we know the player likes to explore the unknown that we can work on keeping the player full of curiosity, which would be the most effective method to best communicate the story and the designer's ideas through the game. The game story and designer's ideology are preset, which are no different from traditional media like TVs or daily paper. But the unique part of a video game is based on technology and interaction. Combining with aesthetic, the player receives real-time reaction while he or she is playing a video game. Like *Stacking* and other adventure games, the game narrative works as the skeleton to the overall game. The story supports the whole framework of the game. Puzzle solving, achievement, collection, characters' abilities are merged into this framework to establish a complete game system. Under this system, the game has specific rules and constrains. The player has freedom in the game system and this freedom is important in stimulating that player to keep playing the game. And this way the player is no longer passively accepting the preset story but is instead positively seeking to reach the next checkpoint. The features of interactivity is what makes video games different than all other mediums of storytelling.

A video game is a play. No matter how dramatic the story is and how dynamic the virtual world seems like. It still has rules and constrains. These rules and constrains define possibilities in the video game and keeps it working normally. Rules of a video game help establish the game system, the interactivity, the storytelling and in explaining the designer's ideas. Huizinga's definition[1] to play is also valuable to video game genre. Playing a video game is a voluntary and non-serious activity. It does not significantly affect ordinary life and is distinct from ordinary life. The virtual world and gameplay make video games relatively independent both in location and duration to the daily life.

However, we cannot say that games with no story are not convincing any designer ideas. A significant number of games are still very attractive even without a story narrative. For example, *Bejeweled 2 Deluxe*, *Tetris* and *Temple Run*. These games emphasize gamer experiences and interactivities rather than telling a story. The relationship between Interactivity and story narrative is more apparent to Adventure Games rather than other genre.

In summary, based on the above examples I believe that story narratives in video games are no longer presented simply in linear structures. The combination of interactivities and non-linear story narrative helps make video games more attractive and dynamic for the player. This improvement also helps communicate the designer's ideas more effectively. I think that video games are not distinct from the definition of "play" by Huizinga, except that video games have evolved into a more advanced level of "play". *Stacking* appropriately exploits the feature of interactivity in video games, and gives players the freedom to explore in the virtual world. Through utilizing the concepts of aestheticism and visual design, *Stacking* created a unique virtual environment for the player. By having multiple solutions to puzzles and achievement in challenges and submissions, the game simulates the player's curiosity and encourages the player to keep exploring. This exploration journey by the player allows the game designer's storyline to emerge in front of the player in a

more fun and compelling way.

References

Henry Jenkins, *Game Design as Narrative Architecture*, 2004.

Greg Costikyan, *Games, Storytelling, and Breaking the String*, 2007.

1. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmeran, *The Game Design Reader – A Rules of Play Anthology.*