**Game Analysis – *Stacking***

Video game is an important medium and a combination of culture and interactivity in the contemporary world. The video game that I am going to talking about is *Stacking*. This game not only has humor story but also implements unique interaction in the entire gameplay. It reflected “Narrative and Ludology Theory” in the class. *Stacking* has established a particular game world and system with the concept of Matryoshka doll. In the game system, the developer delivers a story by utilizing player’s curiousness and exploration.

Play and game has long history in human culture. People use play or game to competition, gambling, simulation and so on. Most of traditional game are board game, card game and board wargame. For example, Go, Poker, Chess. The development of video game cannot separated from the advances of computer technology. The earliest video games were developed in the computer lab of tech institute, like *Spacewar!* in MIT. These games set rules and environment for people to interact with computer or other player rather than narrate a story. Before 1970s, people had no consciousness for the connection between a video game and a story. But until 1975, the release of *Colossal Cave* changed the entire world of video game with interactive text and stared a new genre – Adventure People called this game Interactive Fiction (IF). Colossal Cave broken through the gap between video game and storytelling. By the graphic advancement to computer, storytelling not only belong to text, but narrative with vivid graphics and virtual world. Player would easily attract by the game world and the story comes with more dramatic. Virtual Reality (VR) has started a new era for video games and pushed story narrative to a higher level with immersing experience. Based on my experience for video game, most of contemporary video games has implemented story narrative to support their theme and pointed the direction for player to explore. Interactivity makes the game story attractive and brought free-explore to the player in the game system. Some of current video games have non-linear plots in storytelling. The end or result of the story is based on player’s choice and decision. Video game is similar to TV, broadcasts, and paper. They are mediums for storytelling. But video game is not as same as traditional mediums conduct linear story, it immerses player with interactivity and non-linear story.

*Stacking* is a puzzle adventure game. The game uses Matryoshka doll as characters and narrates stories with puzzle solving, NPCs’ conversations, open world exploring and silent film style scene cuts. The game story is talking about Charlie Blackmore who rescues his siblings from the antagonist, Baron. In the game, player acts as Charlie that is the smallest doll. Charlie has abilities to jump in and out a bigger doll to acquire its abilities for puzzle solving or interacting with other dolls. The game is full of puzzles and challenges. One puzzle may has more than one solutions or embedded with other relative puzzles. Player can choose either following the main story or having freedom to explore the entire game world, engage challenges, collect objects and evolve abilities.

The game story is set in industrial age. Baron is an evil industrialist who forces children to work. Mr. Blackmore mysterious disappearance and the heavy debt brought significant influence to the Blackmore family. The entire family has to work with exception of Charlie who is the youngest child of the Blackmore. Charlie finally realizes that his siblings lost their freedom and have become to slaves. Charlie decides to rescue his siblings and reunion his family, so that his steps onto his journey and begins his adventure. Player acts as Charlie Blackmore who is the smallest doll. Charlie has ability to stack into a one size bigger doll if it is not staring at him, and controls this new doll and uses its abilities and features for puzzle solving or the game story. Each doll has its own ability or feature like unlocking a gate, singing, vomiting, playing a violin, crying out or expelling crowd and so on. The stack of dolls can stack into another one size bigger doll to acquire new abilities as well. In the game, stack of dolls can stack or unstack at any time for different puzzles solving or demand of the main story.

Player has multiple ways to play *Stacking*. Following the main story to rescue all the Blackmore, figuring out all the solutions to puzzles and accomplishing 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 control the chef to the kitchen, then 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.

The motivation in a video game attracts people’s attention and time, but not passively following the game story. Video game motivates player to positively engage, immerse and explore the game story by reasonable 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*, Player can leave the main story for his own activities at any time he wants. 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 help the play 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 so that stimulate the player positively explore and discover in the game world. The player’s motivation on exploring unknown and keep the player full of curiosity is one of the most effective methods on conducting the game story and designer’s idea. The game story and designer’s ideology are preset, which have no difference between traditional media like TVs or daily paper. But the unique part of a video game is based on computer technology and implement of interaction. Combining with aesthetic, the player would receive 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 entire game. The story support 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. Player has freedom in the game system and this kind of freedom is significant to stimulate player’s motive power to keep the game going forwards. So the player in a video game is no longer passively accepting the story but positively seeking to reach the next checkpoint. Video game has features in interactivity is the most difference to other mediums.

Video game is play. No matter how dramatic the story is and how big the opening world is. It still follows rules and has constrains. The rules and constrains defined possibilities to the video game and keep it working normally. Rules of a video game established the game system, interactivity, storytelling and explained designer’s ideas. Huizinga’s definition1 to play is also valuable to video game genre. Playing video game is a voluntary and non-serious activity. It will not affective and distinct from ordinary life. The virtual world and gameplay make video games relatively independent both in location and duration to the daily life.

We cannot say games, which have no story, are not convincing designer’s ideas. A significant amount of games are still very attractive even though lack of story narrative. For example, Bejeweled 2 Deluxe, Tetris, temple run and so on. These game emphasizes game experiences and interactivities rather than telling a story. Relationship between Interactivity and story narrative is more appropriate to Adventure Game rather than other genre.

In summary based on the above examples I believe that story narrative in the video games is no longer in linear structure. The combination of interactivities and non-linear story narrative makes the video games more attractive and dramatic to the player, and effetely convinces designer’s ideas. Video game does not distinct from play that defined by Huizinga, but pushes play to a higher level. *Stacking* appropriately exploits video game’s feature in interactivity to bring player freedom to explore. And based on aesthetic and visual design, the game established a unique virtual environment. Multiple solution to puzzles and achievement in challenge or submissions motivate the player keeps playing the game. And the story gradually emerges in front of the player by following player’s steps of the exploration.

**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*