Definition and directions of cultural-narrative games

Abstract: *Culture-narration games* are a promising genre for transformative games. This genre can be defined formal and dramatic characteristics, and we identify tabletop games that belong to the genre. Adding technological components to the game affords new interaction modes as well as convenient digital distribution. We describe our team's pilot project at creating a technology-enhanced culture-narration game to improve cultural empathy among players aged 10–14. This pilot project highlights several complications with this genre, including thematic, technical, and production challenges. However, the pilot project justifies continued experimentation, development, and formal assessment within the genre.

Introduction

Tales of the Arabian Nights (Goldberg, 2009) is a tabletop board game based on the eponymous folk tale. It was originally published in 1985 (Goldberg, 1985) but is more commonly known for its 2009 re-release. It is popular within the designer board game hobby with a board game rank of 239 (thematic rank 75) on Board Game Geek as of this writing, and Shut Up & Sit Down rank it as the ninth best game of all time (Shut Up & Sit Down, 2015). In this game, players control a character within a mythical Arabian setting, and players explore the known world to accumulate Story and Destiny points. The winner is the one who is able to meet their Story and Destiny point goal while having a successful encounter in Baghdad—the City of Peace.

An intriguing property of *Tales of the Arabian Nights* (hereafter, *TotAN*) is that it eschews the conventional wisdom for game design, that player immersion is related to agency. When a player has an encounter in *TotAN*, they are told the name of the encounter—such as angry merchant, powerful prince, or elephant's graveyard—and based only on this information, they must choose a reaction from one of the given tables; for example, table A contains options to grovel, aid, rob, avoid, converse, attack, court, abduct, or honor. Another player then reads a corresponding entry from the *Book of Tales*, which is a 300-page tome containing 2600 numbered entries. Most entries provide introductory text followed by paragraphs tagged with skills that the active player may choose to use—without knowing the consequences. The reader then narrates the conclusion of the encounter and informs the player of their rewards, often in terms of Story or Destiny points, gaining new skills, finding treasures, or gaining status cards that modify players' options in future encounters. To summarize, the player chooses a location on the map, but they do not choose what is encountered; they choose a reaction to the encounter name without knowing how it will be interpreted in the story; if they have the corresponding skill, they may choose to use it but without knowing whether it will help or hinder them. *TotAN* is not a game of skill, where the player with the best tactics wins the game: it is somewhat arbitrary and imbalanced, but from its design emerges a fanciful gameplay experience. It is not played to win but rather to enjoy the emerging story with friends.

This property of *TotAN* reflects several characteristics of its source material—a book that "changed the world on a scale unrivalled by any other literary text" (Makdisi and Nussbaum, 2008, p.1). Our team focused on the translation by (Philip, 1994), a youth-friendly version recommended in the *TotAN* rulebook. Like the original stories, *TotAN* is a collection of shorter stories that are sometimes linked together and sometimes not. The characters in the folk tales are often victims of fate with very little agency over their own encounters. The games rules follow cultural norms expressed in the folk tales: you cannot win while sex-changed or on pilgrimage, and both marriage and children are great blessings—unless you have an ugly baby, which is shameful. Baghdad is the most important city in the world, where your adventure starts and ends. Furthermore, many stories in *TotAN* come directly from the tales, such as the Sindbad's escape from the valley of diamonds or Aladdin's being trapped in a magic cave.

Playing *TotAN* inspired members of our team to read translations of the original tales, which made us recognize the cleverness of the design and its elegant dovetailing with the source material. Furthermore,

in reading the texts, we recognized that we had already learned elements of the stories and the culture through playing the game, although not always consciously or explicitly. This inspired the following analysis, in which we tease apart the various elements of *TotAN*, considering them from both game design and learning design points of view, and then share the results of a pilot project to create a technology-enhanced game within the same genre.

The role and meaning of narrative in games is a perennial topic of discussion among game design theorists. We hope to position this work not as one of ludology or narratology, but more pragmatically as part of a systematic investigation of how systems and stories interact to produce learning outcomes.

Defining the genre of culture-narration games

We propose that *TotAN* is one of very few games comprising a genre of *culture-narration games*, and we define this genre as having the following characteristics.

1. *Take place in a believable, consistent setting.* Although the world of *TotAN* may be unfamiliar to the player, everything in it is representative of the world described in the original folk tale—complete with the contradictions that add depth and nuance.
2. *Use narrative as a primary feedback mechanism.* In *TotAN*, the player's reaction and skill choice yields two forms of feedback: the narrative description followed by the changes to the game state. The narrative is primary, both chronologically and aesthetically. Note that we follow Koster (2012) in treating narrative as a feedback mechanism, not a game mechanism.
3. *Have measurable goals.* There is a winning condition as part of the social contract of play, following colloquially-accepted standards for board games. The "game" is not simply constrained cooperative storytelling or a role-playing experience without formal end conditions.
4. *Incorporate endogenously meaningful ambiguous decisions.* Following Burgun (2012), the decisions that one makes in the game are meaningful even though they are made without complete knowledge of the game state. For example, a player makes the choice of reaction in *TotAN* in hopes that it leads toward skills that they have, such as choosing "Fight" while in possession of the "Weapon Use" skill, even though one does not know whether or not this skill will have relevance in the resulting entry from the *Book of Tales*.
5. *Reward players for decision-making that reflects cultural understanding.* The knowledge that a player brings to bear on decisions is not just knowledge of in-game systems. If one chooses to Fight an Angry Ifrit in *TotAN* without the Weapon Use skill, it is probably not going to end well. This prediction is not based on my having memorized the *Book of Tales*, nor knowing how many hit dice an Ifrit has (as in *Dungeons & Dragons* powergaming). Rather, this prediction draws upon a cultural understanding of anger, spirits, violence, and likely much more. However, the game does this without establishing "right" and "wrong" ("moral/immoral", "light side/dark side", "paragon/renegade") choices. There remain unexpected twists: perhaps fighting the Angry Ifrit without combat skills makes him respect you and grant a boon. *TotAN*, after all, is a game that allows the player to choose to "drink" a violent storm or "enter" a mysterious artifact. While the world remains consistent, it also embraces the potential for surprising results.

Two formal elements from *TotAN* are intentionally not included in the genre definition above. Perhaps the most clear omission is players' reading each others' stories. While we agree that this is a critical element of *TotAN*—and that it dovetails performatively and practomimetically (Travis, 2011) with Scheherazade's performances in the source material—it is not clear that this is characteristic to the genre. Anecdotal evidence shows that players with low reading skills can ruin the play experience for other players, while those players could have read their own stories, aloud or not. Similarly, *TotAN* permits a single-player experience which, while having a different aesthetic, still seems to produce the same general outcomes we described above.

The other formal element omitted from the genre definition is the use of an explicit map. The map is an important tangible aspect of *TotAN*, in particular with its representation of Baghdad as the largest, most important city in the world. However, we also note that virtual spaces can be represented without such an explicit map, such as in the MUD family of games or choose-your-own-adventure books, both of which use discrete spaces without giving them visual manifestation.

Analyzing *Agents of SMERSH* (Maxwell, 2012) establishes that these characteristics form a genre and not merely selected elements from one game. *SMERSH* is a cooperative game set in the Cold War, with players as covert agents trying to stop the enigmatic Dr. Lobo. Players move across the world collecting resources and battling henchmen, facing encounters clearly inspired by *TotAN*: flip a card to read an encounter title, choose a reaction from a table, hear an introduction, and then get different results based on skills. Unlike *TotAN*, *SMERSH* uses dice for story resolution, and supporting resource management mechanisms introduce important strategic decisions. Despite the use of dice for story resolution, the feedback is still primarily narrative.

For contrast, consider *Above and Below* (Laukat, 2015), a worker-management game about building a city both above and below the surface. *Above and Below* is primarily about building an economic engine that generates victory points faster than your opponents within a fixed number of rounds. Exploring the underground is one source of points, and this is done by determining a random entry within its encounter book. A player reads this entry aloud, after which the player is presented with a decision of how to react. However, the reaction titles are a thin wrapper around a risk-and-reward balance: each has a number which is the number of successes required on dice rolls, so players choose the highest number they believe they can roll. Higher numbers always equate to better results, and this roll is usually the end of the encounter: a successful player is given an in-game reward with no other story or narrative. Hence, although *Above and Below* includes an encounter book that players read to each other, it does not satisfy the characteristics to be in the culture-narration game genre.

Cultural Empathy

We have discussed how *TotAN* uses cultural understanding, not only on a small scale as a way to reward players, but also as a key takeaway of the game. In order for the game to reward players for their cultural understanding, we have to present cultures in a way that they can, to some extent, be understood. In other words, our game needs to foster a sense of *cultural empathy*, defining "empathy" as the "state of mind in which someone shares the feelings or outlook of another, sometimes prompted by imaginative exercises 'stepping into someone's shoes"' (Honderich, 2005, p.242) Therefore, cultural empathy, loosely formed, is having empathy for others who are from different cultures, which allows for better understanding of that culture.

This goal of cultural empathy differs from a goal of *cultural literacy* which prepares individuals to participate in another culture based on the information of the culture that they have been given (Eric Donald Hirsch, 1983, p.165). Being culturally literate is having the ability to be able to participate in another culture that you are "dropped into," similar to how being literate is having the ability to understand or write a given work of text. *TotAN* focuses on a certain level of literacy of the given culture. Players are rewarded for their cultural understanding and their ability to "perform" in the given culture because of the information they have. This is demonstrated in the example above, understanding the cultural views of marriage and sex-change have an important role in game play. However, cultural empathy makes the main point the understanding, not the performance. *TotAN* relies on an understanding of cultural values as opposed to just focusing on some of their values consequential norms. Therefore, though *TotAN* expects some sense of cultural literacy, it focuses more on cultural empathy. When a player walks away from the game they would not have gained the ability to participate in either a Middle Eastern or South Asian culture; however, they will have gained an understanding of that culture. In the context of the game, cultural empathy is a means to the end of cultural literacy. However, outside of the game, focusing on cultural literacy within a semi-fictional world works as the means for cultivating cultural empathy, particularly world culture empathy.

Context

Investigating the potential for culture-narration games to teach cultural empathy brought our team into a partnership with *a local library branch hidden for blind review*. This branch serves primarily patrons from low socio-economic status, although its special technology education programs also draw homeschoolers from around the region. The youth patrons of the library tend to be 4rd–6th grade "latchkey kids" who see the library as a place to visit with friends, to participate in programs, and to access technology.

Conversations with program coordinators about culture-narration games revealed that despite other differences, the youth patrons shared a fascination with monsters, horror, and the macabre. This is in part because of cultural taboo: the youth will brag about being able to see a PG-13-rated movie or play an M-rated game, for example, and several kids worked together to produce an original short movie based on battles between movie monsters.

The fascination exhibited by the youth patrons reflects various theses of Cohen's monster theory (Cohen, 1996). We see in their behavior that "the same creatures who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies" (p.16). Recognizing the youth patrons' attraction to this theme, Cohen's theory establishing monsters as reflections of culture, and the narrative potential of monsters, our team decided to engage in a design experiment to validate our hypotheses about culture-narration games, in collaboration with *the library branch*.

Design Experiment

Paco will describe the team that undertook the design challenge, including the articulation of our three goals and the design elements being used to realize them

Pilot Study

In which we describe what playtesting has revealed to us

Conclusions and Future Work

Based on our design experiments, pilot study, and understanding of the literature, we believe there is a significant potential for culture-narration games as learning tools, particularly for cultural empathy. However, as with any educational intervention, these games do not come without complications.

Physical games such as *TotAN* and *SMERSH* are expensive to produce and, for many, intimidating to encounter. *TotAN*'s **X**-page instruction booklet may not faze a board game enthusiast, but we have observed that others are intimidated by the large rulebook, heavy box, and many components included in the game. Combined with the duration of play and complexity of rules, such games seem inappropriate for use in almost all formal educational settings such as conventional schools. However, we have found that the combination of technology enhancement, grade-level writing, and shorter duration circumvents these problems. Digital implementations all but eliminate distribution costs, and with clever game design, children can play the game in the relatively chaotic environment of an informal after-school program. With curriculum aides and improved scaffolding, such as post-game debriefing, we are certain the game could be easily integrated into school environments, particularly those with ready access to computers.

The role of text within the game is worthy of particular attention. The textual expression of narrative requires that players already possess literacy skills: players who struggle with vocabulary or decoding words are easily frustrated by such games. There is an opportunity here as well, to differentiate text based on player reading level or provide embedded reading aids; however, this also transforms the outcome of the game from cultural empathy to reading literacy. Player oration—having players read aloud to each other—additionally requires oratory skills. We observed engagement being enhanced when the reader employs theatrical talents as well. The precise role of oratory skill, self-confidence, and the social contract of gameplay (the "magic circle") is an area for future work.

Acknowledgments

The team, organizational, and community partner acknowledgments are hidden for blind review.

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