Responsive Narratives: Analysis of Methods for Interactive Storytelling Design

Summer School Project Presentation
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Project Description

The aim of this project is to contribute to the understanding of how interactive storytelling artefacts are authored in recent productions.

Through a process of reverse engineering, we aimed to address how the interactive elements of the story are assembled into the final narrative structure.

Three different case studies created using film as the primary media will be analysed and each of their story mechanics and interactive affordances will be documented.
Focus

The main focus of the project is on analysing the story authoring process and mapping the narrative design approach by adopting a method of reverse engineering.

Secondary points of interest for the analysis are:

- Attempting to deduce authorial choices from a finished artefact - how much can we tell about what was going on at the story design stage from the finished media experience?
- Examining the rapport between apparently story-influential decisions and actually story-influential decisions
- Analysing the story experience as a whole in relation to the interactive
Main Questions:

- What methods of designing story concepts are being used by contemporary studios?
- How can reverse engineer interactive narrative artefacts?
- What can we deduce about the authoring process from the finished product?
- Can we go beyond the flowchart method for a narrative that does not branch in a traditional way?
- **How much of the narrative is linear?** How many decision points truly affect the story? What is the balance between the illusion of choice and significant decision making?
- How successful are the interactive elements in the story experience?
Case Studies

● Focus on interactive experiences that use film as the primary form of media
● We aimed to take an in-depth look at how studios are designing interactive film works at this current moment in the field’s development
● Recent turn towards an FMV revival - how is film as media being integrated within interactive experience?
Process

At the beginning, the whole interactive piece is gone through once to acquire an overall understanding of the piece’s structure.

Then, I move on to creating the flowchart / diagram for the narrative piece using Lucidchart, an online application which allows me to create diagrams in a user-friendly environment.

Different shapes are used to identify the story events and decision points, while arrows are used to specify the flow of the story. By playing the piece multiple times, I am able to record how the story branches and see how the decisions lead to different endings and outcomes.

Data was collected by several passes through the story experience in order to test and explore the branching capabilities of our case studies. Custom structured visualisations were created for each case study in part, in order to facilitate understanding of the mechanics behind how the interactive elements of the narrative were designed.
Case Study Analysis and Flowcharts
As a point of comparison, this is an example of a basic branching narrative flowchart:

Rhizome-like Branching Narrative form ‘The Complex’ (2020, Wales Interactive)
I SAW BLACK CLOUDS
2021, WALES INTERACTIVE

- This interactive psychological thriller makes use of a basic choice system to allow the players to make decisions; with a timer for every decision point by default, players have to make their choices in real time.
- The interactive film features a meter for the story elements, allowing you to reach different endings; in spite of the fact that it has two different routes, the same ending can still be achieved due to the variables within the meter.
Character trait-based tracking system

One point leading to different endings, based on traits system

Simplified flowchart:
- This mystery-themed interactive film takes the form of a point-and-click adventure; giving you the ability to explore the environment freely and access your inventory.

- It features spatial navigation as a mode of interaction, it also has a higher level of playability by giving players a series of puzzles and an object inventory that is crucial for advancing the narrative.
SPATIAL CLUSTER NARRATIVE

Focuses on series of events (acts as a second layer to spatial map)

Focuses on primary mode of experiencing the story worlds (spatial navigation)

STORY EVENTS MAP:

Focuses on series of events (acts as a second layer to spatial map)
ERICA
2021, Flavourworks

- Erica is a thriller which revolves around Erica, a young woman trying to unravel the truth of her family's occult past
- In addition to traditional decision points, it features haptic interaction with the video sequences (you can interact with video with your hand)
- Endings rely on a handful of heightened dramatic moments, some involve quick-time events
- This interactive film is more similar to the branching structure of the example
Character-dependant embedded narratives:

One story point with heightened dramatic levels affects ending
GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

- Most Interactive narratives which make use of branching structures are not actually branching, branches constantly converge and end up forming a parallel structure.

- Multiple decision points create an illusion of agency and multiple directions, enhancing the replayability for the audience despite the larger narrative structure being closer to linear.

- In some narratives, selecting different branches can still allow you to reach the same ending, creating confusion and a lack of motivation for the audience to explore other options.
OUTCOMES

- By playing through and recording different interactive narratives, I am able to identify how these narratives deliver an immersive experience to the audience and what are the upsides and downsides of their narrative methods.

- Using different diagrams to document the narratives, I learnt about the approaches to create branching storylines and deliver the agency to the audience effectively and efficiently; I could apply this experience to my future projects to create more complicated interactive stories.

- The data and visualisations created in this project will contribute towards a research paper focused on an analysis of contemporary interactive storytelling approaches. The visualisations will also provide a theoretical foothold for interviews with practitioners and may contribute to generalised models for use in future research.
Q&A