

Waking the Ghost

How a Renewed focus on Narrative Design in Games can Help reach Gaming's Potential.

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For 30 years, Game Development has contained a conflict between the emergence of narrative design and the game designers who define much of what a game will be. For years, game design and technology have ruled game development, and justifiably so. But many prominent members of the game development community have begun to wonder aloud if perhaps this status quo should change. That perhaps for gaming to reach its potential, a renewed focus on narrative design should be made. This paper will examine the history of game narrative development, and how a few psychological theories may help to progress narrative design to reach gaming's potential.

Video Games: A Brief Narrative History

Since its inception, games have been defined by the mechanics that they are designed for and the hardware that powers them. As a result, narrative development, especially throughout early game development was often overlooked in the overall game development process (Skolnick, E 2014). This was due in no small part because of the technical limitations of games throughout that era. Overcoming those limitations meant focusing more effort on software development which in turn took resources and energy away from what little narrative development may have occurred, because it was an aspect that was regarded as superfluous by most developers. The result was that early game development fell back on the tried and tested narrative structures that have worked for other mediums such as books, television and film. The three-act structure, first discussed by Aristotle (Aristotle, 1996) and the Heroes Journey (Campbell, T 1949), became the standard for much of the narrative structures used in games. Even today, it is easy to identify these basic narrative structures within many games. The unfortunate result of this history is that narrative design has since taken a reduced priority in game development given the effectiveness of these traditional narrative conventions. Warren Spector, in his 2013 GDC talk (Spector, W 2013), identified some extensions or refinements to the few basic narrative structures outlined above. However, they all bare some resemblance to each other and at best, exist because as games became more technically complex, game narratives were required to grow with them. This meant that as games required stories with multiple points of conflict and resolution, and to enable

an overall narrative that would last the 20-60 hours a game might take to complete, the narrative structures had to adapt to that larger canvas. But adaptation is not innovation, and much of what has been used in modern titles still bears all the hallmarks of those traditional conventions. The result of all this is that game development has never given itself the opportunity to develop its own narrative structures that apply directly to the medium they are being created for (Murray, J 2017). Instead, games have borrowed from other mediums and tried, valiantly, to adapt what works for those mediums to games. The desire to achieve a narrative form that suits games has seemingly waned since those traditional structures and their refinements were first adapted into a video game.

However, in recent years, some significant members of the game development community have argued that it is time for a renewed focus on game narrative (Spector, W 2013; Cage, D 2018; Dawkins, D 2019). That as the influence of technology plateaus on game development, we should instead focus on the narrative forms' games use to tell a story, to invite player agency, and to immerse players in the worlds being created. These prominent members of the game development community are challenging developers to fundamentally change the perception of itself, that the ghosts of game narratology should be woken and given new life in the effort to reach gaming's true potential: to turn the medium from a technological one that contains a story, into a storytelling medium before all other considerations. This doesn't mean mechanics and technology are irrelevant now, but that narrative, being the area that has been ignored for so long, should now be the area of focus for game developers.

The Rising Conflict: Game Design and Narrative Design

This story, like all stories, contains a conflict, in this case that conflict is the one that has existed between game design and narrative design since narrative design emerged in game development. As gaming grew in popularity, it was largely due to the success of games designed in an era where story was not something developers spent much time considering. What story did exist within games like *Super Mario Bros* (Nintendo 1985) or *Zelda* (Nintendo 1986), was linear and relied on the traditional story conventions being adapted from film and television. Shortly after this early era of games came the rise of multiplayer games like *Quake* (ID Software, 1996) that possessed no identifiable story at all. Instead these games were driven entirely by their competitive mechanics and were successful because of it. This success resulted in the belief that story was not important to game development (Bogost, I 2017). Games at this time, like traditional sports, were a

collection of mechanics where the only context for what the player was doing was to either win or lose. First Person Shooters (FPS) especially became popular in this era, and as a result of their success, developers found a way to profit without the need for building a narrative or developing characters at all. A more modern example of this is *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016), a game developed as a multiplayer FPS experience only, where the narrative of each character is explored via other mediums (animated shorts, short stories). In this way, no conflict can exist between game design and narrative design, as the narrative for the game's characters is explored through other methods. This, however, undersells the potential of the medium, and should not be considered as a guide for future game development. Disassociating narrative from game design is not a solution to the conflict.

In modern gaming, the line between genres is more clearly defined. While a game like *Overwatch* could include an inbuilt narrative, the players expectations for *Overwatch*, or games similar to it, don't necessarily include a desire for narrative because they don't expect one in a game whose predecessors never included one. Understanding an audience's expectations of a game is an important method in heading off any potential conflicts between narrative and game design (Apperley, T H 2014). But with the rising popularity of narrative based games, it has become even more crucial to understand how we can improve on the narrative structures used in games, and to create new structures that are designed specifically for games. Perhaps now is the time when gaming can challenge not just the perceptions of its developers, but also the perceptions of its audience. Games such as *Halo* (Bungie, 2001) and *Doom* 2016 (ID Software, 2016) have demonstrated that a narrative can work in genres that are not normally associated with them.

Weapons in the Arsenal: Player Agency and Fail States

At the heart of the narrative designer's mission is finding ways of connecting a player to the story they are designing. In video games, this phenomenon is called Player Agency, and is defined by how well the game allows the player to exert an influence over the story they are interacting with (Skolnick, E 2014). In this way games are unique among other forms of storytelling, as those other forms don't have to contend with both the length a game may be designed for, nor do they have to handle how a player interacts

with the story. No film ever has to deal with a choice their audience might want to make (Cage, D 2018), 20 hours into that story, nor do they have to explore the consequences of those choices. Video games, especially modern ones, have a rising expectation from the audience that they will be able to do this (Liebowitz, J & Klug, C 2015).

All players interact with a game via the mechanics created by game designers. When these mechanics don't allow for the kinds of interactions the player is expecting, especially when the players expectations about the direction they want to take the story in don't align with what the designers of the game are allowing them to do, the game falls into an issue called Ludonarrative Dissonance (Skolnick, E 2014, Hocking, C 2007). It is the roll of the narrative designer to try and avert this dissonance by working with the game designers to predict how a player will try and interact with the story and thus design the mechanics to support that (Skolnick, E 2014; Liebowitz & Klug 2015). Games have dealt with this issue in a number of ways, one of which can be described as offering the player the illusion of choice (Spector, W 2015). Some of the best Role-Playing Games (RPG's) of the modern era include this tactic for giving the player a sense of agency. *Mass Effect* (Bioware, 2007), *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Softworks, 2008), and *Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks 2011) all offer the player simple choices throughout the gameplay that can be answered in a simple, binary way. The game is presenting what appears to be a meaningful decision, but whether that choice has any actual consequence on the games narrative is hidden from view (Alborov, B 2017). As narrative design matures, and a greater focus is placed on understanding how to tell a story in games, the illusion of choice can become an impediment to good game story telling. For a player to feel a real sense of agency over the game they are playing, an exploration of choice and consequence should occur (Legler, C 2015 & Spector, W 2015.1). Another aspect of the illusion of choice is one games have struggled with for years, especially in certain genres where navigating conflict is left up to the players morality, and that is the existence of fail states in games. If a player chooses to navigate a puzzle or level by killing all before them, the game shouldn't then respond to that decision by sending the player back to the beginning of the level to try again. Fail states have become one of a number of aspects of game design that can impede good narrative flow in games. And increasingly among modern titles are being removed from games all together.

Case Study: Dishonored

One game, which embodies this emerging new direction for narrative design in games is Dishonored. Developed by Arkane Studios in 2012 (Arkane Studios, 2012), Dishonored is a First-Person Action Adventure game set in a dystopian world where you play as an

Assassin Soldier named Corvo. The narrative of the story centres on Corvo trying to protect Emily, the Princess, after her Mother the Empress is betrayed and killed by one of her closest advisors. The game places the player in a series of “levels” that the player, as Corvo, must overcome to progress the story and complete the game. However, where Dishonored differs from other games with this genre is that it offers the player a range of mechanics to choose how they wish to overcome each level. These mechanics enable the player to decide if they want to murder everything to progress or save everybody by employing stealth mechanics to advance through each level. The significance of this choice is that the decision has real consequence on the games narrative as it evolves. Not in the binary good/bad way games have demonstrated in the past. But instead, the consequence is an emotional upheaval of the characters based on these decisions. Corvo leaves an impression on his follows, and Princess Emily. If Corvo is a bloodthirsty killer, then Emily, who becomes Empress by the games conclusion, will be a bloodthirsty ruler, all because of your actions. Conversely, if you choose a more pacifist style, Emily will become a kinder, gentler ruler at the games conclusion.

Dishonored found a way to balance a linear story with a more nuanced dynamic narrative that effects the outcome of the game. Although the conclusion of the game remains the same (kill the bad guy, save the princess), the “impressions” you make on the main character of Princess Emily , as well as other characters, as you navigate your way through the game will have a consequence on the final outcome. In this way, every decision you make has a bearing on that final outcome, not merely the ones defined by dialogue boxes, but the phenomenal number of smaller decisions that are made by the player as they play the game will also have a consequence on this outcome. These decisions are ones defined by the mechanics of the game: how you decide to treat enemies, solve puzzles, and speak with other characters all has a consequence that is explored by the dynamic narrative at the end of the game. Dishonored is a pioneer in the quest for a more video game specific narrative form, because it finds a way to balance the story conventions games have relied on, while also recognising that a games story doesn’t have to be in conflict with its mechanics, and that the exploration of consequence can be subtle but still fulfilling to the player. This exploration of consequence is what enables a greater form of player agency in games and with that comes a greater sense of immersion in games (ref). This section will cover some psychological subjects that are crucial to improving a player’s sense of agency and thus immersion in a game and its narrative.

The Psychology of Narrative Design

If we accept as true the idea that player agency is enabled by creating an environment where the player feels connected to the story (Murray, J 2017), that their interactions with the game they are playing have weight and genuine meaning. Then to advance story telling in games we must look at and understand theories that relate to the removal or reduction of game elements that hinder this connection. First among these is the idea of Flow, first observed and explained by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his 1990 book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Relevant to game and narrative design is the lesson that by identifying and removing obstacles to flow, such as overwhelming the player with information (Csikszentmihalyi, M 1990) or reducing the feedback the player experiences while playing, and by finding a balance between anxiety and boredom (see figure 1), we can better immerse the player in the worlds we are trying to build.

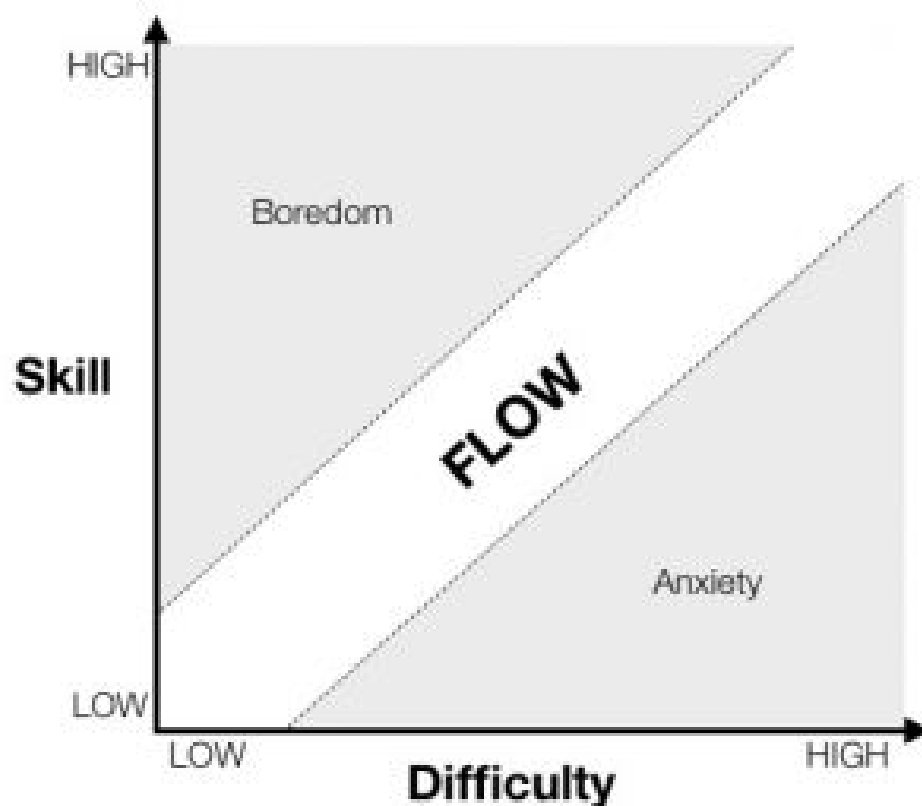


Figure 1 Flow Graph

Jenova Chen, in his thesis *Flow in Games* (Chen, J 2006), discusses his ideas around Dynamic Difficulty Adjustment (DDA) in games. Where the game will adjust based on the experience and input of the player as they are playing the game. This subtle evolution of

a games mechanics mirrors that seen of the way the narrative adjusts in Dishonored, and working together, these techniques can create a more unique narrative and mechanical experience for a player.

An important aspect of any story is the inclusion and role of characters in our games. In modern games, non-playable characters (NPCs) are often used as a vehicle to guide players through the narrative and even to teach the players how to master the mechanics of the game they are playing. The teachings of Attachment theory (Bowlby, J 1958) can be instructive in the way we construct our characters to interact with the player and help to reduce anxiety as they begin to master the game. By doing so, we improve the chances of creating a flow experience and immersing players in the narrative. Attachment theory proposes that as children, we form attachments to our parents as they provide us with food and care and give us confidence to go out and explore the world. As adults, our romantic relationships also exhibit similar patterns of attachment as observed in children (Hazan, C & Shaver, P 1987). By being close to a partner, sharing experiences and giving support to one another, people can feel more confident in themselves and their interactions with other people and the world around them. Characteristic of both adult and child attachment relationships is the responsiveness of the partner or caregiver (Fraley C R & Shaver, P 2000), with the feedback received from that person helping to reduce anxiety and enable a more confident exploration of the world (Fraley, C R 2018). Feedback is a vital component to enabling player agency and by extension immersion in games. If we can create characters that possess more meaningful relationships with the playable character, or hero, then we can enable a much deeper emotional connection between the player and the narrative. And with that comes opportunities within the narrative to exploit these emotional connections, at the right time, for narrative effect. As Jason VandenBerghe puts it in his 2016 GDC video, he is as likely to play a game again to be tormented by the “bad guy” as he is to play a game for any other reason (VandenBerghe 2016).

One final aspect of play psychology to discuss in this paper is that of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Specifically, three aspects of SDT that if satisfied, it is believed can provide a person with optimal experience and growth. Those three aspects are Competence, Relatedness, and Autonomy (Ryan, R M & Rigby C S 2006). Competence is defined as the desire to experience mastery over something, Relatedness is the desire to interact with and care for others, and Autonomy is the desire to feel a sense of control over one’s own life and it’s direction (Ryan, R M & Deci, E L 2000). In video games, the story of a game will often involve an extrinsic reward: a better weapon, a more powerful spell, or more

money. But what SDT argues is that, when it comes to cognitive pursuits, the intrinsic motivation of a player is far more important than the superficial rewards being placed on that task by the game designer, and those rewards could actually hinder or limit the motivation of a player (Pink, D 2009). As a narrative designer, it is vital to try and contextualize characters and worlds in such a way that the player feels a sense of intrinsic motivation to progress through the game. Jason VandenBerghe, in his 2016 GDC talk, argues that SDT is one of a few models that combine to form the “Engines of Play” (VandenBerghe, J 2016). Which when applied to video game production, will enable the designers of games to better design for an optimal play experience that factors in changes to a player’s motivation as they are playing and experiencing the game and its narrative.

In Conclusion

As narrative design emerges in game development, the aspects of player psychology that enable optimal experience becomes more important to understand. For it is the emotional resonance in our stories that provide games with the capacity to differentiate themselves from other mediums. Through an exploration of consequence, Dishonored shows the player what impact those choices may have on the characters around them. And by doing so, creates a more impactful narrative and characters. Working in harmony with the mechanics of the game, Dishonored finds a way to make every choice matter to the player and the outcome of their story. Narrative and game design no longer has to be a zero-sum game, where one cannot exist with the other, instead the two must work together. In this way, video games can further themselves towards their potential. Not just by employing a simple three act structure or a hero’s journey, but by dynamically examining the choices players are being asked to make and exploring the consequences of those choices.

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