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# The Illusion of Choice

Investigating choice systems within games in the context of player response to achieve higher quality narratives

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## 1 ABSTRACT

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This paper investigates the decisions made by Games Designers with the intention of providing and sustaining the illusion of choice, and the methodology behind the systems in use. Included are decision systems, episodic structure and quest-lines, and the paper breaks down the issues involved with each branch of logic, comparing and evaluating them for use in another project.

## 2 INTRODUCTION

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“Choice does not truly exist in video games. Choice is merely an illusion which we as players believe creates a unique gameplay experience for every individual.” (Legler, 2015). No video game, no matter its budget can currently afford to give its players true freedom of choice. This is both through budget, but also through the definition of the game. Sid Meier (cited by Koster, 2004, p. 14), however, disagrees with Legler, stating that games are “a series of meaningful choices.” At first it seems that choice cannot be inherent to the *definition* of the game and at the same time be an illusion within the game but when someone begins to delve deeper into this discrepancy,

some very thought-provoking arguments come to light.

When considering Dungeons and Dragons (Wizards of the Coast, 1974 – present) – a game that prides itself on the freedom it provides its players – it appears that even it cannot escape stipulating what the players cannot do. It must provide a framework; one which allows the game to flow in a way that convinces its players that they have true freedom. Choices aren’t free, and even the Dungeon Master must follow rules, and when they bend them, they cannot break; the game would cease to exist without its rules.

As a Narrative Designer, or even a Games Designer working with narratives, these rules need to be a known and understood, otherwise the illusion is easily broken. Working with Das Gnome on Llama Noire, this was an important value – the branching dialogue of the game needed to establish itself at a high level of quality, driving the player forward with choices that they wanted, but still hitting the story beats that were necessary for the emotional pull of the game. As the branches become more spread, the designer must work hard to maintain focus on the story, but also ensure that the bottlenecks of the player isn’t obvious, to provide a true illusion of choice.

In relation to this, there are two distinct fields in narrative design principles:

strictly leading the player through a game, (showing the beats of the story one at a time, in a pre-determined order, intended to impact the players' emotions the same way, every time) or pushing the boundaries with choice, (allowing the player the highest level of freedom the game can afford, allowing them to build their own story within the world).

Most games being released today exist between these two principles, avoiding the extremes as much as possible: gaming as a medium encourages a degree of non-linearity, and would suffer without it, but true freedom prevents the game from existing, and instead becomes an exercise in imaginary play.

## 3 MAIN BODY

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### 3.1 CHOICES

In games, choice is a peculiar thing. A game may present paths to its player, opening up its world, and according to Ingold (2018, slide 11), there are three ways to show choice, each with increasing amounts of freedom: "What am I *supposed* to do now?" where the player can see the choices of the game, and must follow them, "What *can* I do now?" where the player is able to test the limits of the game they're in, and "Yikes what have I done?" where the player is given the opportunity to

realise what they've done, changing the world around them. If a game encourages one of these questions, and then doesn't deliver the opportunity for the player to explore them, that game will have failed in its narrative design.

Bartle (2004, p.14) agrees, and goes on to say "choice promotes immersion. It's up to individual designers to decide whether to act on the fact, though." The designer must know how free the player can feel in their game, and design the game around that. Freedom isn't inherent to narrative design, only to specific principles within.

When the player is given the opportunity to – and then proceeds to – analyse the choices they've made, the immersion can be broken. This was seen in the Mass Effect series (BioWare, 2007–2012), when the ending of the popular series sparked outrage with this very concept. The ending was just "choose a colour" according to user SmallHatLogan, and another user, Ariseishirou, added that "nothing you do up to that point matters", (Gethsemani, 2015). Although being an online forum, this source shows some of the public's reaction to the ending, rather than the critical reception. They felt that their Commander Shepard wouldn't have acted in the way they did – the way the game forced them to.

The problem was that not everyone's Commander Shepard was the same, and none of their choices *could* matter. This is an extreme reaction, but shows how invested some players are in the games they play. These types of invested players usually possess extreme and diverse motivation, tastes, and needs. (Yee, 2006). The writers and designers of series like this cannot envision how every player will play the game: Bartle (cited by Lindley, 2005, p. 2) stated that there four categories of player - achievers, explorers, socializers, and killers - each after a different play experience, and with many players existing in combinations of the 4 in different quantities. When these designers are crafting these worlds, the main plot is intricate, and winding, but still deceptively shallow and ultimately, linear. This can make it dissatisfying for some of its players, especially when they realise that they weren't truly getting the experience they thought they were.

"The more the player understands about the Mass Effect universe, the worse the ending seems." (Clarkson, 2012). Clarkson claims that the series itself, and the way it inspires the player's immersion, eventually became its undoing. However, without facilitating and encouraging the players to have an emotional connection to the characters and

worlds of the game, the uproar might not have existed, but the initial popularity wouldn't have either.

The outrage of the fans eventually pushed BioWare to add more content to the ending, attempting to make it seem more personal to each player, whilst "maintaining the team's artistic vision." (Muzyka, cited by Stuart, 2012). BioWare had patched up the holes, but the damage was still visible. "Even if these endings are 'better,' they still suffer from the same problem as the old ones. Nearly all are identical in terms of what you're shown." (Tassi, 2012).

The problems with Mass Effect 3 (BioWare, 2012), especially, were all rear-loaded, with decades of story coming to its climax in both a loud and yet unsatisfying manner. It failed to resonate with fans, not just when compared to other games of its genre, but the series itself. When the player is provided with these choices consistently throughout a long-running series, they learn to expect them, and then the lack of choice expressed by the finale is only more noticeable. The games seemed to encourage the "What can I do?" and "Yikes, what have I done?" mindsets, but as it came to its close, only presented its players with "What am I supposed to do?"

### 3.2 EPISODES

When someone raises the concept of narrative-driven games, Telltale Games are often spoken of in the same breath. Their specific brand of episodic delivery was both an incredible tool for storytelling, and a curse on the writer's freedoms. For the episodic system to work, each chapter would always have to bottleneck to ensure that the story could only deviate in minor ways.

Riedl & Boyang (2010) state that "customization of main plotline involves presenting the right story to the right person at the right time," showing how targeted the process has to be: the affordances of episodic delivery making that customization easier, allowing a development team to adapt to how players interact with the product with a much greater agency than iterating on an already released game. "Traditional game development does have a feedback loop, but with years between results." Whereas "with short iteration cycles, gameplay mechanics that an audience responds to can be used to turn a moderate performer into a hit." (Sanchez, 2007). The same can be said about the narrative path of these episodic games.

The pitfall of the medium lies in that each episode must have a defined beginning and end, allowing the transition from the previous episode

and into the next. This also occurs between seasons:

"There are *five distinct choices* faced by Clementine at the end of season two — one with Kenny, one with Jane, or three variations of setting out alone with the baby — that must be homogenized for the sake of continuity at the start of the third season. The net result is that Clementine and the baby must start season three alone." (Baines, 2018).

To allow the player enough agency to shift the narrative to match the variety of choices they truly want, would result in a constant supply of insurmountable tasks for the development team, and a break of the episodic nature of the game. According to Pascal Luban (2016), a games industry veteran, "an episodic game is not cheap to produce." Adding to this might break the already fragile development cycle of these episodic games.

Because of the lack of agency that the game could afford to give the player-base, they began to feel disconnected from the game, and started noticing the lack of impact the supposed game-defining moments they participated in had on the game. Summed up for Telltale's *The Walking Dead* series (Telltale Games, 2012–2018): "For all of the switches and levers we pull to

change route, the tracks have all led to the same destination.” (Baines, 2018).

But one decision, according to Baines, does matter, the one that has no impact on the other episodes, no true bearing on the story, but instead has its weight and emotions rest squarely on the player’s conscience. Lee’s death is a constant, but his fate is truly each player’s individual choice.

This – somewhat final – decision wouldn’t have had the weight that it did without the choices preceding it. If the player hadn’t started to look past the curtain, hadn’t began to think that their choices didn’t matter, then the impact might have been softened.

Comparing this to the Mass Effect ending, despite being presented with fewer choices, this example being a binary choice, players were able to resonate with it on a higher level for a few reasons: the lack of choice worked to make the decision harder, and neither decision is the ‘wrong one’. The player immediately receives payback for their choice rather than letting the consequences play out over a cutscene that they must sit and watch, removing them from the experience, as was the case with Mass Effect.

### 3.3 QUESTS

“The meaning of quests emerges from strategic actions, but these actions

have thematic, narrative and personal implications.” (Howard, cited by Szczepanski, 2017). Each quest, no matter how detailed, has, at most, minor impact on the game’s world. As a designer, the difficulty lies in the balance of the freedom that the player gets. The ability to choose between paths within a quest is where the illusion of choice comes in.

Shown in Figure 1 are a collection of games plotted on a linear path between relaxed quest systems (those that allow the player to approach from any angle), and strict quest systems (those that tend to push the player down a certain path).

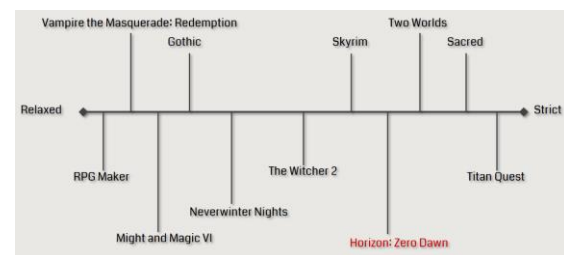


Figure 1. Slide sorting and visualising linear and non-linear games. (Szczepański, 2017)

Much like the episodic structure, a quest must have “an obvious start, middle and end,” with each step existing as “a piece of narrative.” (Szczepański, 2017). The benefit of quest systems over the episodic structure is that the quests can overlay, with many occurring at once, with each climax happening in thunderous crescendo, often weaving through the final act like an emotional rollercoaster, the player increasingly invested, as

they approach the end. With the player invested this way, the cracks in the narrative design can be overlooked.

The player is invested, despite already knowing that the characters fates “like those of all fictional characters – was, is, and will always be utterly determined.” (Self, 2015). When a choice is presented, the most the player can ever change is the path they are on, and the final fate of that path is often already determined.

Without procedural generation of the quests and intensive work behind the systems at work, each play-through of the game can be perfectly replicated, serving to highlight its pre-determined nature. (Riedl & Boyang, 2010). The player may be able to explore an environment differently, but the narrative isn't changed by this: the world doesn't truly respond to player input, and instead responds to set game-state altering systems that the player turns on and off unintentionally. A quest will often lead to the same conclusionary end-point, often without any choice beyond the player's participation.

In a game like *Divinity: Original Sin II* (Larian Studios, 2017), much like *Dungeons and Dragons* in the freedom it affords, the player will encounter quests that drive them forward, and interacting with a wide plethora of characters. These interactions bring with them choice and decision making.

These choices, however, are often only evident when replaying the game. The dialogue doesn't change major outcomes beside some heavily scripted persuasion events, and it is instead the actions which change the world in more significant ways. How a player approached a problem has more impact the state of the world, with failure almost always just resulting in combat, and success sometimes still ending in the same way. However, this impact is often limited to small changes, side-character death, gaining a personal title, and similar changes, with the only changes on the grand-scale – in a game that revolves around the player character being ‘Godwoken’ – occurring too late in the story for their effects to be truly felt by the player.

Truthfully, this problem affects a large proportion of the games market. The game is over when the player finally feels that their actions have made an impact. This is due to a poor plot graph, one that isn't “comprehensive and flexible”. (Trenton, et al., 2010). The narrative design should allow for failure to flow into more gameplay the same way success does. The best plot graphs will be invisible to most players, where the game can react and respond to nearly every action the player takes, without telling its players that it has done so, in the opposite of how *The Walking Dead* approaches this issue.



An example of this ‘player action’ and ‘game reaction’ system is seen in *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008), with the Megaton quest-line. Megaton is the second largest settlement in the game, and the player can decide the fate of the town, activating a nuclear blast at the centre, killing almost all the inhabitants, and affecting other character’s interactions with the player. This shows how it is possible to have quests that impact the world occur before the end of the game, and give the player at least a small sense of consequence.

## 4 CONCLUSION

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The approaches explored here each allow for a different impact on the player, relying on hard-hitting emotional beats, in how the player can impact the storyline with their decisions, and how the player can approach each problem in their own way; however, each must exist and within the framework the game provides. To truly capitalise on the power of games technologies and the writing skill of those involved, the narrative of the game must be as integral as the code.

What the game itself encourages cannot be denied to its players: when it encourages the player to approach a dialogue in the way that they see that

character, as seen in *Llama Noire*, the designers must accommodate that style of play. There must be no ‘right way’ to play, with a large variety of approaches instead rewarding and punishing the player in an appropriate manner.

Each game must also attempt to allow for an impact to be felt throughout gameplay, not just a singular, final payoff. Actions have consequences, sometimes instant, and other times when least expected, but very rarely all at once in life. The quest system does allow for the most similar approach to this, but often rewards or punishes the player instantly at the conclusion of each quest.

Looking forward, more research into the details of branching narrative needs to be done, looking more at the games researched here, as well as *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream, 2018), *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos Montréal, 2011) and its sequel *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* (Eidos Montréal, 2016) alongside texts written about the specifics of branching narratives such as *Narrative, Games, and Theory* (Simons, 2007), Jon Ingold’s talk on writing good games dialogue (Ingold, 2018) as well as the work and analytical texts of Chris Bateman. Analysing these alongside counterpoints will help provide a large base of knowledge, improving the narrative of *Llama Noire* even more.

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