CMSC 498M: Chapter 12a
Storytelling in Games

Source:
- Andrew Glassner’s “Interactive Storytelling”.
- Lecture notes by Michael J. Katchabaw of U. of Western Ontario.

Overview:
- Stories in Games
- The Three-Act Structure
- The Monomyth
- Storytelling Techniques

Stories

Stories are more than just a reporting of events:
- "Life is one damn thing after another" (Mark Twain)
- "Life isn’t just one damn thing after another...it’s the same damn thing over and over and over again." (Edna St. Vincent Millay)

Stories are about people and their activities:
- People could look like bugs (Antz), animals (The Lion King), cartoons (Who Framed Roger Rabbit).

For years people have analyzed what makes a good story:
- Aristotle’s six elements of a Tragedy:
  1. Plot
  2. Character
  3. Thought
  4. Spectacle
  5. Diction
  6. Music
Games and Stories

Common through the ages and yet ...
- Games are player-driven.
- Stories are creator-designed.

Games are all about control:
- Move that white square!
- Shoot that alien!

Stories are about conflict:
- Fine tapestry of numerous carefully woven plots and sub-plots.

Games do not have to be stories:
- Scrabble
- Tetris

Storytelling in Games:
- In the early days, storytelling was usually only done in the context of adventure games.
- Modern video games of all genres can have some story elements.
- It might be a key part, or just for setting and motivation.

Conflict and Drama:
- The power of the story comes from conflict and tension.

Essence of drama:
- Escalating and yet finely controlled conflict.
- \textbf{Not}: Teletubbies and purple dinos.
- \textbf{Not}: Harry Potter declines to go to Hogwarts. The End.

Goal:
- Combine the best elements of games and stories.
- No clear answers yet, but some glimpses ...
Game Story Types to Date

Ride the Rail: (Single track)
- Alternate between game and story. Game is a series of missions.
- Movie-like story connects the plot between missions.
- Player has no control of story.

Ride the Current: (Single track with variations)
- Characters are computer-controlled. Player determines what character gets which powers.
- Fate of your team is determined by you, but the storyline is fixed.
- More flexibility, but the course is still predetermined.
- Example: Final Fantasy X.

Stage Sets:
- Game provides the stage, player(s) provide the story.
- Some computer-controlled characters. Plenty of monsters to kill.
- No authoritative narrative.
- Example: Everquest.

Why Put Stories in Games?

Stories can add to the entertainment:
- Without a context, a game reduces to a contest—exciting, but contrived and artificial.
- A story can provide more satisfaction.

Stories can attract a wider audience:
- Many players benefit from a story to help motivate them to play.

Stories help keep players interested longer:
- A compelling story provides variety and can give players a reason to keep going in a game that lasts for many hours or even days.

Stories help to sell the game:
- It is difficult to show gameplay in static promotional materials.
- Story-rich games can be promoted through characters from the game or events that unfold in the story.
Why Put Stories in Games?

**Theater release, DVD release, Game Release, Product tie-ins:**
- Tomb Raider (Game to Movie)
- Lord of the Rings (Movie to Game)

**Reasons:**
- **Risk management:**
  - Concept testing, community building, ...
- **Cost amortization:**
  - Storyline, character development, content creation, ...

**Screen shot of Soul Reaver 2.** The compelling story in the Legacy of Kain series can really motivate the player to play ... just to see what happens next!

Source: M. J. Katchabaw
Why Put Stories in Games?

Screen shot of Tetris Worlds. Many people think that the story added to this game was tacked on and unnecessary.

Source: M. J. Katchabaw

Why Put Stories in Games?

Screen shot from Okami. The story in Okami can really keep people involved for a long time.

Source: M. J. Katchabaw
Box art from God of War. The story elements from the game are heavily featured here, and help draw potential players to the game.

Source: M. J. Katchabaw

Elements of a Story

Elements of a Story:
- **Plot**: How the story unfolds (rather than what the story is about).
- **Setting**: The world being explored in the story, including history, geography, mood, and atmosphere.
- **Characters**: Entities experiencing and taking part in the story.

Traditional Story Structures:
- There are many traditional structures or formulas to telling stories.
- Common structures in Games:
  - The Three-Act Structure.
  - The Monomyth (aka Hero’s Journey).
Three-Act Structure

Three-Act Structure:
- Commonly touted by Hollywood screenwriters.
- Basic structure of a story is really quite simple:
  - A story must have a beginning, a middle, and an end.
  - Each must be done properly for the story to be effective.

Three-Act Story Structure

Beginning
Act I
- Capture Attention
- Introduce Problem
Middle
Act II
- Provide Tension
- Present Obstacles
End
Act III
- Provide Closure
- Resolve Problem

Three-Act Structure: The Beginning

The Beginning:
- Capture player’s attention and involve them in the story quickly.
- Most begin by placing the player into story’s action/drama.
- Back-story and background events are introduced later as needed.
- Introduce the player’s challenge as quickly as possible.

Timing:

Philosophy 1: Action first
  - Game starts with the problem introduced immediately at its beginning.
  - Back-story and/or background information filled in later as needed.

Philosophy 2: Background first
  - Present the back-story before the problem is introduced.
  - Player can become acquainted with and bond with their character.
Three-Act Structure: The Beginning

Legend of Zelda: The Ocarina of Time. It has a classic introduction that involves the player right from the start.

Source: M. J. Katchabaw

Three-Act Structure: The Middle

The Middle:
- Presents a series of obstacles that stand in the way of the player’s character to overcome the problem introduced in the first act.
- Player must overcome each obstacle to bring game to a successful conclusion.
- Provide back-story and background information as needed.

Obstacles:
- Provide new obstacles throughout the middle of the story.
- Each time one is overcome, a new and harder one arises.
- Good obstacles require the hero to deal with inner conflicts and challenges. Overcoming these involves growth.
- While gameplay challenges a player mentally and physically...
- story-driven conflict challenges the player on emotional levels.
Three-Act Structure: The Middle

Screen shot from Shadow of the Colossus. This game provides perhaps the best inner conflict ever faced in a video game. Incredibly well done.

Source: M. J. Katchabaw

Three-Act Structure: The Middle

Traditional Storytelling:
- Obstacles are laid out in a linear fashion.

In a game, this need not be the case:
- There is time for unrelated storylines, side adventures, twists and turns.
- There tends to also exist multiple paths through the game to reach the end.
- These elements can provide a measure of non-linearity, giving the player freedom and control over their experience.
Three-Act Structure: The End

The End:
- The story ends when the player's character overcomes the problems introduced in the first act.
- In doing so, the player achieves the long-term objective of the game.
- The last part of a game should tie together the themes and issues introduced throughout the game.

Multiple Endings:
- Just as non-linearity in a game can provide multiple paths through the middle act, it can also provide multiple endings to a game.
- Each ending should make sense to the player in light of their actions throughout the game.
- These endings can embody varying degrees of success and failure, depending on what the player did in playing the game.

Screen shot from Mario 64. This is one of the final scenes with a showdown against the main villain.

Source: M. J. Katchabaw
Three-Act Structure: Summary

Summary:
- The three act structure provides a fairly simple and easy to follow template for the story of a game.

Old Writer's Maxim:
- In the first act, you get your hero up a tree.
- In the second act, you throw rocks at your hero.
- In the third act, you get the hero back down.

Traditional Structures: The Monomyth

Monomyth:
- Also called "The Hero's Journey".
- Myths/legends from around the world share a common structure.
- Introduced by Joseph Campbell.

Can be seen in many films:
- Star Wars
- The Matrix
- The Lion King
- The Lord of the Rings

...as well as games:
- Legend of Zelda
- Prince of Persia
- ...and games based on the above movies
**Monomyth (Hero’s Journey) Basic Elements**

The Hero’s Journey

- **Exposition**: Introduces the main character in his or her ordinary surroundings and provides background.
- **Call**: The main character gets a call to adventure and must leave their ordinary world (family and comforts) to go on a quest or journey.
- **Call**: This leads them to another world that intersects with their own, but is somewhat foreign and unknown.

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**The Monomyth: Exposition and Call**

**Exposition**:
- This section introduces the main character in his or her ordinary surroundings and provides background.

**Call**:
- The main character gets a call to adventure and must leave their ordinary world (family and comforts) to go on a quest or journey.
- This leads them to another world that intersects with their own, but is somewhat foreign and unknown.
The Monomyth: Exposition and Call

Screen shot from Oni. Game starts with the heroine on a fairly routine call, which quickly turns sinister with a group known as the Syndicate. She learns there might be more to her past than she realizes ...

Source: M. J. Katchabaw

The Monomyth: Refusal and Information

Refusal:
- The hero initially rejects the call, not wanting to leave the comfort and safety of their ordinary world.
- Typically, this comes with hesitation and doubt, leaving the potential for future conflict.

Information:
- While the hero has outwardly rejected the call, this decision is still questioned.
- A mentor figure provides the hero with advice and information relevant to the refused call.
Konoko rejects consequences of her developing powers and tries to continue with her normal life. After a meeting with her friend and mentor, Kerr, does she fully accept her mission.

Source: M. J. Katchabaw

The Monomyth: Departure

Departure:
- From the knowledge gained in the information stage, the hero makes a final decision.
- Usually this is a change of mind and a decision to embark on the journey and leave the ordinary world behind.
Konoko is now a full on renegade on the run from her former friends as she tries to piece together her past, dole out some justice, and take down the Syndicate.

Source: M. J. Katchabaw

The Monomyth: Testing and Reward

Testing:
- During the journey, the hero faces a series of challenges, making up the main action of the story.
- The hero must solve problems, face fears, rescue others, defeat foes, and so on.
- Typically, this involves growth of some kind.

Reward:
- After completing the challenges, the hero is rewarded.
- This could mark the end of the story, but not always.
Konoko fights her way through her own forces, and eventually to the Syndicate's main headquarters, where she must fight numerous battles and overcome adversaries to reach their doomsday weapon.

Source: M. J. Katchabaw

The Monomyth: Ordeal

Ordeal:
- Just when the hero appears to be in safety with the journey nearly over, the hero must face one final ordeal.
- This is the big conflict, and a difficult one. Unlike the other conflicts, it is not clear whether the hero will ultimately succeed or fail.
- The hero may even die. (But read on...)
Konoko faces a final ordeal to overcome, a final battle with Muro, her equally powerful brother, who is the head of the Syndicate.

Source: M. J. Katchabaw

The Monomyth: Resurrection and Return

**Resurrection:**
- The hero can be **reborn** symbolically, actually, or by metamorphosis; or he can achieve resurrection from the dead—even from a state of dismemberment.

**Variation:** Hero’s **trusted friend** is killed (apparently) and is brought back to life by the Hero’s sacrifice.

**Variation:** Villain returns to life.

**Return:**
- The hero **returns to the ordinary world** that was left behind at the beginning of the journey.
- The hero returns to the human world as **new person** with the **knowledge/experience** gained on the quest.
- The structure is **circular**, with the hero returning back to the beginning, likely a changed person. (And ready for the sequel!)
Despite defeating Muro and putting an end to the Syndicate, their weapon still goes off. Humanity is not destroyed but changed forever … but Konoko is still alive to deal with that in future adventures.

Source: M. J. Katchabaw

The Monomyth: Variations

Phil Cousineau, "The Hero’s Journey":
1. Call to Adventure
2. Road of Trials
3. Vision Quest
4. Meeting with the Goddess
5. Boon (the magic elixir)
6. Magic Flight
7. Return Threshold
8. Master of Two Worlds

Kurt Vonnegut’s Satirical Version:
1. The hero gets into trouble.
2. The hero gets out of trouble.

David Adams Leeming, "Mythology: The Voyage of the Hero":
1. Miraculous conception and birth
2. Initiation of the hero-child
3. Withdrawal from family or community for meditation and preparation
4. Trial and Quest
5. Death
6. Descent into the underworld
7. Resurrection and rebirth
8. Ascension, apotheosis, and atonement
Traditional Structures: Summary

Summary:
- It is possible to vary the monomyth structure to provide interesting story possibilities.
- Some games focus on some elements more than others.
- In some cases, certain elements are omitted or down-played, like the refusal.

Caveats:
- Rigidly following these structures could result in a tired, overused story. Some variations and twists are important.
- These structures might not lend themselves to multiplayer stories in which there are several main characters, not just one.

Storytelling Techniques

How Story is Conveyed in Games:
1. Through the actions of the characters.
2. Through verbal/textual commentary.

Techniques:
- If something is to be part of the story, it must show up in one of those two forms.
- Let us explore some of the variations on how this is done...
**Storytelling Techniques: Cut Scenes**

**Cut Scenes:**
- **Miniature out-of-game movies:**
  - Need professional-quality work, or the game-look will suffer.
- Each cut scene should have **specific goals:**
  - Develop characters.
  - Introduce a new environment.
  - Advance the plot.
  - Establish mission goals.

**“Playable” Cut Scenes:**
- Sometimes assets can be used for both **cut scenes** and the **game play** itself.
- This allows for a higher level of **immersion**, but creates complications of who **controls** - player or author.

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**Storytelling Techniques: Cut Scenes**

*Cut scenes from the original Wing Commander (left) and Wing Commander IV (right). The original game used cut scenes between game sequences, while the fourth entry in the series used them as a main storytelling element.*

*Source: M. J. Katchabaw*
Storytelling Techniques: Scripted Events

**Scripted Events:**
- Brief action sequences within levels that are usually triggered by some player activity.
  - Can be pieces of dialogue or small bits of action.
  - Can provide back-story, build character, or direct the player towards new goals.
- Be careful, however, that your scripted events do not break the player's immersion.

Screen shot from Oni. This is a scripted event where the heroine triggers a guard to come through a previously locked door in another part of the level. Removing the guard, passage would then be free.

Source: M. J. Katchabaw
Storytelling Techniques: Verbal Commentary

Verbal commentary: Purposes:
- Revealing character
- Revealing emotion
- Conveying back-story
- Advancing the plot
- Revealing conflict
- Establishing relationships
- Commenting on action

Forms:
Narration: Can provide an third-person (omniscient) point of view
(“Little did he know, but…”)

Monologue: Given by one of the characters to present the character’s
mental, emotional, or psychological state, or to reveal their inner
thoughts.

Dialogue: Verbal interaction between two or more characters in the
game. Can serve many purposes.

A few tips:
- The characters are part of the story and should not talk about the
  story itself. (Otherwise they break the “fourth wall”, the screen
  separating actors and audience.)
- Never have a character say something that the player already
  knows.
- Keep dialogue realistic, and consistent with the mood, setting, and
  characters in the dialogue.
- There should be a purpose behind the commentary; without a point,
  it can be annoying and frustrating.
- Keep it short. Let the player get back into the game quickly!
Storytelling Techniques: Verbal Commentary

Screen shot of the Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time. Dialogue is a critical point in advancing the story, even if it is done in text form.

Source: M. J. Katchabaw

Storytelling Techniques: Gameplay Itself

Storytelling in Game Play:
- Each challenge faced by the player should serve a purpose—advance the story, develop a skill, understand a character better.
- This includes puzzles, obstacles, enemies, and essentially every other game-play element.
- It should be consistent with the story and the player’s role.

The Best Place:
- Put as much storytelling into game moments as possible.
- Not as easy as it sounds, as this is breaking new ground in storytelling.
- A worthy goal for game developers to strive for.
Storytelling Techniques: Gameplay Itself

Screen shot from Zork I. By finding a way into the house, we advance the story and the player is allowed to proceed further.

Summary

Summary:
- Stories in Games
- The Three-Act Structure
- The Monomyth
- Storytelling techniques