

by Richard Rouse III

Tell Me a Story

games such as
in computer
in space
Centipede. No one
traditional narrative
of story (it's
game is
reception and near
altogether. (Strangely,
appear to be a direct
accompany a game
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stated on
"Computer games
quoting Kirkpatrick

These days, it seems as if every game publisher and developer is determined to make computer games that tell stories, one way or another. In the early years of computer gaming, when nearly all computer games were found in arcades and Asteroids and Centipede reigned supreme - the "stories" found in computer games existed only as general settings for games; flying around shooting rocks in Asteroids or killing bugs in a garden in Centipede seemed to complain overly that there wasn't more of a story to these games. These days anyone who fails to put some sort of actual quality (being seemingly irrelevant) into their computer game promptly lambasted by the press - witness Quake's chilly universal chastisement for doing away with the story line in its sales seem to have been unaffected.) Quake II would be a result of such chastisement, featuring a shell of a story to which is, for all intents and purposes, the same. Closer to the Macintosh front, Double Aught's Greg Kirkpatrick - one of the designers and story architects for all three Marathon games - stated on Usenet some time ago his opinion on gaming storylines: "Computer games tell stories. That's what they're there for." Granted I'm

reflection.

Poker,
story to them.
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Chess's
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wildly out of context, but his statement makes for interesting
Is storytelling really what games are for?

Many traditional, non-computer games feature no story at all.
Checkers, Pictionary, Solitaire, or Chess have nothing like a
Chess does seem to have a medieval warfare theme to it, but
something one thinks about while playing the game. In fact
extremely limited use of storyline as setting is very similar to a
computer game's use of the same. For example, compare it
Chess has a medieval theme while Centipede has an
Chess takes real-life characters - kings, bishops, knights - and
movements in the game-world in a way which bears little to no
to the real-world. Centipede does the exact same thing with
scorpions and centipedes, making them behave in the game
one might expect. The setting in each provides some color to
giving each a bit more life than if the games were played with
and adversaries, but it's not something which keeps one
itself. That is provided solely by the razor-sharp gameplay
game.

Another branch of non-computer games that do tell stories are
games (RPGs). In these games, instead of pitting equal
each other, one of the people involved with the game isn't
all, but is rather regulating and guiding the game. This person
Game-Master (GM) or - in the popularized, trademarked T.S.R.
job - Dungeon-Master (DM). While all the other people playing
have characters whom they control in the game-world, the GM
as a regulator for the game, explaining the situations that the
characters are facing, and regulating - hopefully in a fair way -
happens to them. Though combat between characters and

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characters (NPCs) is handled through a predetermined and complex rule set, all other interactions between the players and world are handled relatively on-the-fly by the GM. Though the always works from a pre-written story-outline, a good GM will alter the story to complement a player's actions; instead of computer games so often do - that "you can't do that," a good to quickly reconfigure his story to react appropriately to players want to do in the game-world.

Playing Roles, Creating Stories

Of course in a computer RPG (CRPG), the GM is replaced by the computer. Though the computer is more than skilled enough to regulate like - number crunching is basically all that computers can do - less able to dynamically react to the actions of the player. In computer is stuck with whatever storyline the game's designer many designers will have supplied only one narrow storyline, anticipating very well (if at all) the different actions the player perform. Over the years many CRPG designers have limitation and as a solution - instead of working on complex, storylines - have made their CRPGs combat-intensive and

But why is it that we as designers want our computer games to I have a couple of theories about this. One is that most of the mediums popular in the U.S. - movies, TV shows, books, pop stories, and we want our games to be as popular as possible. gaming industry's desire to tell stories in its games may well be another facet of our nasty case of "Hollywood envy," a concept by Chris Crawford and which I explored in a pervious column

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Games, Not Computer Movies; Inside Mac Games 5.8). We like movies - or at least more popular like movies - and as such linear storytelling methods into our non-linear medium.

[No, No, What I Really Want To Do...](#)

Even worse, it often seems that many of the designers working games secretly wish they were making movies or writing books. Witness the recent shift to movie production of such industry as Chris Roberts (designer of the Wing Commander series, now first movie based on that property) or Robyn Miller (co-creator and Riven) who left Cyan to pursue film-making. It's a simple of pride in the work we do and the games we create that leads when given half a chance, to jump ship and go work in other instead. After all, what sort of respect do computer games get society? I think this frustration can manifest itself as designers tell linear stories in their games, as if practicing for the day get to pursue their novel-writing careers.

I think another explanation for the obsession with storytelling is marketing people love it. As I've mentioned in previous as the dickens to communicate excellent gameplay to a the back of your box. In video arcades a player only had to to see if the gameplay of the game was any good; if it was, she dropping quarters, playing the game again and again. Hence the need to foist a story onto any of its classic games from To this today, the games you find in arcades really don't have attached to them, and no one seems to be complaining. But market, where there's not only the all-important back of the box to be filled up, but also oodles of puffy preview articles to be

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upcoming games, having a storyline to write about is all but storylines do convert awfully well to the written word, unlike, gameplay). A sure sign that storylines are nothing more than tools when marketing hacks work them out for game designers gameplay is even designed, and said designers are told to use regardless of whether they can feasibly be integrated into the match in any way with the game being created.

Let Me Tell You About My Dream

But there's still another reason why everyone's interested in storylines; simply put, putting the gamer in the middle of a letting him make the decisions is a damn compelling idea, and enraptured me for the last decade. I've been interested in general for the same amount of time if not longer. I always stories as a way of showing people interesting situations and consequences of decisions made in those situations. To me, extension of this to a more interactive media is: "Wouldn't it interesting to allow the reader/viewer/player to make the themselves and see the ramifications of any given decision?" dream, anyway. Getting it to actually work is another matter it's such a compelling notion, who wouldn't want it to work? want stories in computer games?

The problem is that how stories have been used in computer has not been working toward the end of allowing the player see ramifications of her actions. Most of the stories we've been have been largely linear affairs, where at any juncture there are possible things the player can do: the Right Thing and the Often there are multiple Wrong Things, but this still pigeonholes

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Roberta Williams,
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into doing the only Right Thing or losing the game. Some
have multiple Right Things, with varying results. I'm quite
probably the most famous designer of adventure games,
seems entirely uninterested in allowing the player multiple
still lead to satisfying resolutions, as I discussed in a previous
Dreams Are Non-Linear, Inside Mac Games 5.6)

The notion that the player needs to see everything the designer
game is a misconception that leads to a disinterest in non-linear
storytelling. For if the player's not going to see it, why put it
are multiple paths that all lead to a positive resolution for the
player only plays the game through once - which in all
he'll be missing a whole section of levels, art, music, and the
those things cost money, don't you know, and if the player's not
them, isn't it just a waste?

Of course, it's not a waste to a game designer interested in
storytelling, but a business-centered thinker will realize that
paying for the art and whatnot in multiple game-paths, the
spend double the money on one part of the game, force the
see only that section, leading to all-the-spiffier screenshots for
the box. Of course, the back of the box has little to no value to
player once he's removed its contents, but by then the
his money.

Multiple Mixed-Up Media

Stories have often been melded onto action games in the worst
ways, through the dreaded disjointed cut-scenes. The action
stays relatively unchanged, but between missions or levels, the
presented with an entirely non-interactive affair which
the player the story. The cut-scene is often of the full-motion

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(either using real actors or pre-rendered 3D animation), the appearance of said cut-scenes usually barely matching with the the actual gameplay. The player then returns to the game, playing on as if nothing has changed. Some games effort to work some of the storytelling into the gameplay itself, have the game-worlds reflect the storyline which unfolds in the interactive cut-scenes. But this entire way of telling a story is flawed and frustrating to the player. Suppose that you went to at one point, the projector stops, the lights come on, and you're the next scene from a book. This would serve only to frustrate you're at the movies, you want to be watching a film, you don't reading a book. Similarly, then, if you're playing a computer really want to be watching a movie? Though expository player isn't directly interacting with his game-world may be they should at the very least be smoothly linked into the and their time should be kept to a minimum. Perhaps, instead vast sums of money in pre-rendered or filmed cut-scenes - expensive as the entire rest of the game - we should developing new storytelling skills which allow us to from within the actual gameplay.

My action game, Damage Incorporated, had it's own faults in department, probably relying more than necessary on overly-briefings between the actual gameplay sections. At least the page through the briefings and fast forward or rewind through accompanying audio at will, giving these non-game elements interactivity. Efforts were made on my part to bring the into the game by having the player's team-mates continually

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sometimes sharing their thoughts on the current mission and player's team of Marines were being asked to do. Though the speak back to her team-mates, their lines did occur during the gameplay, and I think it helped to communicate a story while actually progressed. Efforts were made to have the levels the moving through and the tasks the player was asked to perform somewhat with the storyline, though whether this was more in other games is debatable.

Puzzling Stories

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Adventure games have been somewhat more successful in working the storyline into the actual gameplay. Unfortunately, adventure games have placed logic puzzles into storylines in contrived and unbelievable ways. Often when playing player will instantly say "Aha, I'm making a jig-saw puzzle!" to assemble the parts to some complex apparatus or "Oho, I'm Towers of Hanoi!" when attempting to shift some boxes from room to another without toppling the stack. These are the which the designers came up with interesting puzzles first, and a story around them. Players may indeed be entertained by these logic games, though the usefulness of a storyline in such debatable, as it ends up being little more than window-dressing actual game. Sometimes these bells and whistles are what is otherwise a mediocre game, but in the case of a truly game, they're nothing but an annoying distraction.

Funny, no one ever complained that Alexey Pajitnov's Tetris story. Interestingly enough, when Tetris first came out it was pushed (from a marketing standpoint) as a "Russian Computer

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reason to buy it was to be in the spirit of detente with our new friends, not because it was a fabulous game. Indeed, how market such amazingly innovative and unique gameplay on the The game's subsequent financial success was based almost of mouth. Surely, without the whole Russian angle, how would marketers and publishers have initially sold the game to (perhaps more importantly) retailers? Perhaps they would storyline of some sort onto it? Or perhaps it wouldn't have at all, a much more likely scenario, as it featured none of the violence, cutting edge technology, or full-motion video that continually seem to think game-players want.

The storyline for my computer game Odyssey - The Legend of which I consider a hybrid adventure/RPG, came before any of I tried never to think "This would be a cool puzzle, what conjure up to justify it?" Certainly I understood what was the technology or "engine" I was working with, but with that limitation in mind, I worked out what story I wanted to tell and situations I wanted to place the player in. I presented the various moral and human interaction problems, and tried to the different solutions to a given problem could be, and which would result from these different solutions. To nearly every game there are multiple, positive actions the player can take, there are not as many different options as I would have liked. these different situations and solutions don't always make for interesting puzzles, they function properly and, I think, the story. Almost by force of habit - perhaps from having computer role playing games - I threw some abstract puzzle the game, almost divorced entirely from the plot. In the end

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probably what frustrated and confused players the most (aside
downer-ending, my defense of which is worthy of a column all
I think a similar story-first approach was taken on Jordan
masterful *The Last Express*, wherein the player is confronted
which almost always work seamlessly into the story; the
player is "how do I dispose of this body so I don't get caught"
do I solve this abstract puzzle so I can get through some story
the next abstract puzzle?"

I originally started working on this column because I thought it
easy subject for me to write about, since storytelling has always
forefront of my reflections on game design. But as I worked on
myself wondering just why I was trying to put storylines into
games, and, if I could figure that out, just what new and useful
the subject. Here I've presented a lot of what's wrong with
being told in computer games now, and offered little in the way
That's because I don't really have any. I'm so bereft of
current project (which must be completed in far too little time)
focusing all my efforts in making the gameplay as smooth and
possible, pushing the storyline to the side. For, as I firmly
computer games really don't need to tell stories to be brilliant
right. Nonetheless, I still can't help but wonder how we can
games function so that the computer can act more like a real-
Master, creating a story on the fly to suit the player's needs as
their own, unique choices in the game-world. Storytelling is
computer games have only barely begun to explore in any
and as of this writing, I don't have any easy insights into how
ahead toward the dream of truly interactive stories. But I'll

about it.

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Nemesis
recently been
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