Playable Stories

Writing and Design Methods that Negotiate Narrative and Player Agency

Volume 1 of 2

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Creative Project Abstract

The creative project of this thesis is a script prototype for *Underland*, a crime drama video game and digital playable story that demonstrates writing and design methods for negotiating narrative and player agency. The story is set in October 2006 and players are investigative psychologists given access to a secure police server and tasked with analysing evidence related to two linked murders that have resulted in the arrest of journalist Silvi Moore. The aim is to uncover what happened and why by analysing Silvi's flat, calendar of events, emails, texts, photos, voicemail, call log, 999 call, a map of the city of Plymouth and a crime scene. It is a combination of story exploration game and digital epistolary fiction that is structured via an *authored fabula* and *dynamic syuzhet* and uses the *Internal-Exploratory* and *Internal-Ontological* interactive modes to negotiate narrative and player agency. Its use of this structure and these modes shows how playable stories are uniquely positioned to deliver *self-directed* and *empathetic emotional immersion* simultaneously. The story is told in a mixture of *enacted*, *embedded*, *evoked*, *environmental* and *epistolary narrative*, the combination of which contributes new knowledge on how writers can use mystery, suspense and dramatic irony in playable stories. The interactive script prototype is accessible at underlandgame.com and is a means to represent how the final game is intended to be experienced by players.

Thesis Abstract

This thesis considers writing and design methods for playable stories that negotiate narrative and player agency. By approaching the topic through the lens of creative writing practice, it seeks to fill a gap in the literature related to the execution of interactive and narrative devices as a practitioner. Chapter 1 defines the key terms for understanding the field and surveys the academic and theoretical debate to identify the challenges and opportunities for writers and creators. In this it departs from the dominant vision of the future of digital playable stories as the 'holodeck,' a simulated reality players can enter and manipulate and that shapes around them as story protagonists. Building on narratological theory it contributes a new term—the *dynamic syuzhet*—to express an alternate negotiation of narrative and player agency within current technological realities. Three further terms—the *authored fabula*, *fixed syuzhet* and *improvised fabula*—are also contributed as means to compare and contrast the narrative structures and affordances available to writers of live, digital and live-digital hybrid work. Chapter 2 conducts a qualitative analysis of digital, live and live-digital playable stories, released 2010–2016, and combines this with insights gained from primary interviews with their writers and creators to identify the techniques at work and their implications for narrative and player agency. This analysis contributes new knowledge to writing and design approaches in four interactive modes—*Internal-Ontological*, *Internal-Exploratory*, *External-Ontological* and *External-Exploratory*—that impact on where players are positioned in the work and how the *experiential narrative* unfolds. Chapter 3 shows how the knowledge developed through academic research informed the creation of a new playable story, *Underland*; as well as how the creative practice informed the academic research. *Underland* provides a means to demonstrate how making players protagonists of the experience, rather than of the story, enables the coupling of *self-directed* and *empathetic emotional immersion* in a way uniquely available to digital playable stories. It further shows how this negotiation of narrative and player agency can use a combination of *enacted*, *embedded*, *evoked*, *environmental* and *epistolary narrative* to employ dramatic irony in a new way. These findings demonstrate ways playable stories can be written and designed to deliver the 'traditional' pleasure of narrative and the 'newer' pleasure of player agency without sacrificing either.

Acknowledgements

List of Contents

Volume 1

Volume 2

List of Figures

Volume 1

Volume 2

Epigraph

"So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." – F. Scott Fitzgerald