

[SLIDE ONE]

10:00-11:15

[SLIDE TWO]

Beyond Story

Making Games That Mean Something

[SLIDE THREE]

Welcome to Rick's Café Americain. The date is December 4th, 1941. The place is Casablanca in the French Protectorate of Morocco. We will be spending the day here. The bar is well stocked, Sam will entertain on the piano, and there is gaming going on in the back room. I hope you enjoy your stay.

Five years have past since I first began, formally at least, to talk about storytelling in games. From San Jose to Beijing I've gone into great depth on the building blocks of drama simply because I saw that few people were even considering them when they tried to create stories for games. (That blind spot continues to exist today, I'm afraid.)

Last year for the first time the talk began to veer from *how* to tell stories in games, to what we could say with those stories. I won't claim to have solved all of the issues associated with telling stories in games, particularly massively multiplayer worlds, but I have now established enough of a tool set that I'm more and more focussed on the *kinds* of stories I want to tell.

For the past couple of years attendees at my tutorials have mentioned a book to me called *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* By Janet H. Murray. How many have read it? I finally read it yesterday on the plane coming here. Since it's fresh in my mind, I'll be referring to it occasionally today, even though it isn't on the reading/viewing list included in your packets.

I found much of interest in the first half of the book, particularly Chapter Five, called Agency. We share an interest in Victorian fiction, and I need to make a disclaimer here: we're going to play a story today, and the longest example of interactive story-telling in her book chooses exactly the same setting! But I swear I read her book, AFTER I chose!

We also share a lot of the same beliefs and needs about interactive storytelling, and the promise it holds. But Ms. Murray and I quickly part company in the second half of the book, when she starts describing her imagined tool set for storytellers in cyberspace. It is far more complex. It is computer-centric, relying on advances in AI. And you can't really use it yet. Mine is ready today. And while it may seem complicated, it's far simpler. I'll be revisiting Ms. Murray a bit later, extolling her virtues when she agrees with me, and lambasting her when she doesn't. I do not believe computer AI is going to do my storytelling or character-generating anytime soon. I'm not criticizing the attempt. I simply question its validity to us as storytellers with a story to tell NOW.

I take profound issue however with the emerging school of thought that players will generate all the stories. That the players are the future. You'll hear this again and again at GDC. I see where that deeply rooted conviction grows from, and I sympathize. But that is a dead-end street. If I had to bet on where mass market interactive storytelling was going to really blossom from, I'd rather put my money those 99 chimpanzees tapping away in Microsoft Word than the general public. More on this later.

My tool set borrows freely from storytelling and dramatic techniques that have been with us for decades, some for centuries. The techniques are repurposed for interactivity, multiplayer, and so forth. They will not only be *recognizable* to you, they are *useable* by you.

Games are a very different animal from stories. We all know that. This is often the first observation out of the mouth of somebody who tells me we shouldn't attempt to tell more than cursory stories in games, or that we need to throw out all the old rules, and find some completely new paradigm like AI or letting the players do the work..

The problem is that people approach the wedding of story and gameplay from two distinct camps. Writers, few of them gamers, demand a measure of control, and give it up very unwillingly. Screenwriters, who seem most attracted to games, in particular. This is why so few have made a successful transition from one industry to another.

Programmers, most of them gamers, lean toward an open-ended world that allows for total player control. That is why game companies made up of gamers don't really see the need for anything else.

The first truth is, and always has been: Entertainment. Entertainment is meant to be... FUN... Interactive Entertainment should be no different. And more: we should do everything we can to *guarantee* fun. This issue comes up particularly in online these days.

We have the "sandbox" theory of game design. Build it, they will come and play. But playing with other human beings doesn't guarantee fun anymore than it did when we were kids on the playground.

Beyond fun, we cannot let ourselves be distracted by the myth that by simply creating an environment for players to play in that *meaningful* human drama will somehow *emerge* on its own. We have become so *media-conscious* of our own lives, is it any wonder we think we are capable of creating drama by simply *being*? I exist therefore I am dramatic!

It appears that it *can* happen. The social Petri dish of *Survivor* demonstrates that. We as a species revel in the failures of our peers, as much as we celebrate their triumphs. Yet *Survivor* is meticulously edited and paced to tell a story. Without the story-telling techniques *applied* to its presentation, it would be as dull as that slowly meandering line on the chart of our own lives between the spikes of pain and joy.

There is more to drama than real life. Drama only exists in real life when real life events mirror dramatic structure, and *remind us* of created drama we have witnessed. From *Webster's Dictionary*:

[SLIDE FOUR]

Oops, sorry, Sacha the Bartender here at Rick's must have added that last one. It's the definition of a dram, not drama, as in "I'll be having a wee dram or two at the conclusion of this tutorial."

That fourth dictionary definition is colloquial. It has become common usage. "Wasn't that a dramatic basketball game?" really means "Wasn't that basketball game as exciting as the Disney movie about a basketball game we saw?" Even in real life drama only occurs when compared to created drama.

[SLIDE FIVE]

According to definition then we must start with drama, a structure in which to wrap real life. Drama begets Real Life Drama.

Drama → Real Life Drama

But wait! Which really came first? Wasn't it life? Shouldn't the cause and effect look like the second one there?

Real Life → Drama

No, because even in the very beginning of story-telling and drama, back around the campfire after the woolly mammoth fell, there was an added step in the equation:

Real Life + Interpreter = Drama

Drama is built on the reflection human beings bring to the incidents and conflict of real life that is then communicated to other human beings. And drama is built from the human context that we wrap the realities of life within.

Witness NBC's relentless attempt last summer to turn the true-life stories of Olympic athletes into Gap commercials to see the wheel spin once more in the wrong direction:

**Life→Interpreter (Shakespeare)→ Drama→
Life→Interpreter (MTV Video Director)→ Trivialization**

It didn't have to be that way of course. Every time *anything* is recycled, part of its original impact is lost, but some true drama can remain. But when you add imagery without meaning to life the life is not dramatized, it is cheapened.

It is time to move beyond these questions:

[SLIDE SIX]

***Should* games try to tell stories?**

Not all of them. But they can, if we want. If we want to involve emotions higher than an adrenaline rush, we need to reach the human spirit, not just endocrine glands.

Can it be done?

The answer is obvious: yes. Believe it or not, we have examples before us. Give a game designer some techniques for doing it, and her games will have stories. We will provide some blueprints here today.

Can it be done well?

Of course. Given some imagination, talent and craft. Imagination and talent cannot be taught, but they can be encouraged. Give a craftsman the tools he needs to create, and both imagination and talent can blossom.

There are always enough lectures and roundtables here at GDC eager to *debate* all of these topics. In this tutorial we will go beyond the debate, and just do it.

We will examine techniques for the creation of emotionally involving *gamestories*. We will explore the story *keys* that can unlock the elusive mysteries of the true mass market, and gain us the critical respect for our products enjoyed by other media. And we will tackle the issue of censorship, and discuss ways of confronting it.

Throughout we will explore the new frontier of online multiplayer worlds, attacking the myth that an open environment is enough, that "entertainment" will "just happen." We will examine theoretical and practical methods of creating stories for a non-linear, wholly opened-ended world full of real people, as well as single-player games.

I am at heart a storyteller. There will be a lot of stories today. You have been warned.

And we will *play* a story.

I have no intention of droning on for eight hours. I will expect audience participation. If you like to watch, Eve, feel free. If you want to get involved, I hope you wore comfortable shoes.

We will be interspersing five rounds of game play with lecture segments. This game is designed to be an example of modular storytelling, a term we'll home in on as the lectures progress. For now think of it as story that can be experienced, *played* in any order. Participants can even skip or repeat parts. It makes no difference to the impact of the story.

A disclaimer: I'm going to be talking a lot about emotion today. I'm honestly not sure if the game we will play throughout the session will generate the emotions I have in mind. The structure of the day, dividing the game into rounds, may work against emotion. We may get too bogged down in the interface elements I've designed to simulate a multiplayer experience on a computer. But certain characters you'll meet are humans pretending to be computer-generated NPCs, volunteers who have not seen their roles until a few minutes ago. Try to remember that fact, if there are stumbles along the way.

Hopefully, as in a Live Action Role-Playing game, some emotion will come through. My hope is that, if emotion is generated or not, you still take away from the experience some knowledge of the inner workings of interactive storytelling. If we do that much, we will have succeeded.

Our day in Casablanca will be broken down as follows:

[SLIDE SEVEN]

1. **Welcome.** This is the welcoming speech. A brief history, explanation and overview.
2. **Round One.** We'll begin to play *Casablanca*.
3. **Dramatic Writing.** Elements of story, character, emotion, conflict and pace are common to drama and screenwriting. We'll explore ways to utilize them in an interactive story through action, conversation with other characters, and obstacles the player-character must overcome. We'll also take a look at stereotypes: women, racial and cultural groups, and how falling back on them may be easier, but it diminishes the overall gaming experience.
4. **Round Two** of *Casablanca*.
5. **Film language.** Dialogue, cutting and POV will be explored as tools with which to tell a story in interactive entertainment without sacrificing interactivity and gameplay. We'll conclude this segment with a discussion of the importance of a consistent style, and the inclusion of universal themes.
6. **Round Three** of *Casablanca*.
7. **Game language.** Elements of game language: interface, game mechanics, interactivity, non-linearity and gameplay are primary factors in the satisfaction a player has while experiencing a game. We'll also explore the current genres of games (RPG, strategy, action, adventure and sims) and

how any of these can feature storyplaying.

8. **Round Four** of *Casablanca*.

9. **Online Multiplayer**. We'll kick sand at the Sandbox Theory, track the evolution of interactive story structure, compare drama and game parallels, confront the human factor, and probably run screaming from the realization of how much story-telling might seem to be required, and finally we'll find triumphs and climaxes in a world that never ends.

We will not cover the mechanics of managing the game: "It's a service, not a game", nurturing newbies, policing the masses, etc. That will undoubtedly be discussed in depth in other sessions on online worlds. Here it is pretty much irrelevant. We want to get stories into our online games the equal to any other entertainment medium. And that will be our focus in this section.

10. **Round Five** of *Casablanca*.

Followed by a **Discussion** and some closing remarks.

[SLIDE EIGHT]

“Here’s Looking at YOU, kid.”

I'm going to ask for a show of hands. Look around you, see who is sitting nearby who isn't raising their hand when you do.

Question: How many are Writers? Producers? Designers? Developers? Programmers? Artists? Publishers? Gamers?

Okay, check it out. You now have somebody close by you can learn from, or that you might be working with in the future. Interactive entertainment requires a collaborative effort.

Now, what are some of the games represented here today? If I dis anybody’s product here today, I want to give them a chance to PK me, if they can.

Why make games?

Is it a need to create? A need to express ourselves? A need to entertain? A need to illuminate the human condition? A need to make great wads of cash? Keep this question in mind. It connects to the theme, too! Let’s begin where many people want to get: the mass market.

Interactive entertainment will never replace passive entertainment any more than movies replaced the theatre, or TV replaced movies. It will however grow to be an equal source of pleasure and satisfaction for millions of people throughout the world. Opportunities are boundless for those who have the time and the patience to learn the skills necessary to take advantage of them.

Yet the game industry's misunderstanding of the true nature of entertainment has prevented us from realizing our rightful place at the bountiful table that is *mass market* entertainment.

You can begin to *suspect* how a watch works by watching the hands move, or hearing the ticking sound it makes. But you learn how it works by taking it apart, and putting it back together. That's what we'll be doing here today.

My mentor at California Institute of the arts was a screenwriter and director named Sandy McKendrick. In one course he taught we watched a handful of films over and over again: *North by Northwest*, *On the Waterfront*, Sandy's own *The Ladykillers*... The purpose was to see beyond the entertainment value each film possessed, to see the seams, to see how all the elements came together to create a unified entertainment experience. If you can get to the point where your favorite game no longer entertains you, you will have taken a crucial step toward understanding how it worked its magic. It can be a sad moment and an exhilarating one all at the same time.

AT the end of playing our *Casablanca* game today, we will be able to dissect it, to get beyond any entertainment value it might have, and see how it was created.

“I came to Casablanca for the waters.”

Playing games

I started with *Microsoft Adventure, Ulysses and the Golden Fleece, Asylum, Wizardry, Zork*. In the past I have listed all of the games I played during the previous year. Since my talk last year however I admit I've played only a handful. Far more sit on my shelf untouched. In the past year I've played *Everquest, Asheron's Call, Age of Empires II: The Conquerors, The Sims and Baldur's Gate*.

The fact is that the bulk of the time I had for game-playing was overwhelmingly consumed with the two MMORPGs *Everquest* and *Asheron's Call*. I quit playing *Everquest* last October. My two major characters were a level 52 ranger and a level 51 druid. I still have my *Asheron's Call* account, but I haven't played since December.

Creating games

I started my professional career as a writer in Hollywood. Over two hundred produced scripts as writer, several hundred more as rewriter/producer/story editor etc.

I began searching for that elusive middle ground between Hollywood and Silicon Valley in 1982: *Otherworld* (Procter & Gamble/Tomorrow Entertainment/Atari).

In 1984 I tried again with the daytime soap, *Edge of Night* (crossover) using the then new service the 900 number. This was my first experience with rudimentary branching of storylines, an approach that seems to me these days as limiting to the designer as it is restrictive to gamers.

I flirted with interactivity over the years, usually when there was writer's strike, then in 1994 I made the leap. Actually I kept one foot in Hollywood that year just in case, and didn't devote my full time to games until '95 with the release of *The Riddle of Master Lu*. But now, for me, the new challenges

and the new opportunities are in this industry. I have eight published solo games and one story-telling website under my belt

The last solo game I worked on was the action/adventure hybrid *Wild, Wild West: The Steel Assassin*.

Since then I've worked on three massively multiplayer online projects: *The Gryphon Tapestry* made it as far as Beta before the company ran out of money; an untitled project from Entertainment Science that's an outer space adventure/RPG set in the present day, and funded by the US government. Now I'm lead writer, co-designer for Cyan, makers of *Myst* and *Riven*, on their new project. I can't say much about it, although it was the only interactive entertainment product to be demoed at the TALK Conference in Santa Barbara a couple of weeks ago.

Should games have meaning?

Not all of them. But some should. We need balance, not saturation. We need responsibility, not censorship. Interesting, if far more difficult questions are "Is the product fun?" "Does it move me?" "Does it make the world a better place for its having existed?" "Would we like a game we create to endure? To touch the hearts and minds of generations unborn?"

Not all of us would. But some of us must. Imagery without meaning is empty and artless. We owe it to ourselves, and the future, to strive for more.

But for the moment let's begin with this: Involving story and rich gameplay can coexist in a single entertainment product. We'll examine the core ingredients of each, and find a comfortable home for it in the final product.

You won't learn everything there is to learn about each topic. I've been selective. If I skip one of your favorite elements of film language, feel free to ask about it.

I'll say up front that I may have bitten off more than you can chew in a single day. As we progress, if I start to shorthand *anything*, if I'm unclear, please feel free to slow me down, or ask me at one of the breaks, or ask somebody else at one of the breaks: "Do you have a clue what he was talking about just then?" If what I'm covering is too elementary, let me know. I really don't have a feeling yet for what the shared knowledge in this room might be. As I figure it out, I will try to adjust. This is all still so new, nothing is cast in concrete, including concepts, mechanisms, or terminology.

We'll be here together from 10 to 6. I have been known to lose track of time. Please let me know, if we're in danger of missing a break!

It is very important we get started again promptly after each break. We'll start with an overview, lay some groundwork for the material I want to cover, and get specific with the tools and techniques necessary to create interactive entertainment.

Anyone looking at computer games will see an industry struggling, consolidating, entrenching. Developers going under, larger companies gobbling up smaller ones, survivors relying on sequels, licenses, and sometimes fading reputations.

Soon the hardware wow factor will be practically meaningless. All computer products will have reached a level platform that film reached decades ago. VCR quality, 30 frame per second images backed by digital sound will be the norm. What's left? What will make each successive generation of products stand out from the crowd?

Since tales of great hunts and hunters were told to awestruck listeners huddled around the protecting fire, consumers from cavefolk to moviegoers have been drawn to the power of storytelling. The story is the single thread that is woven through the entire fabric of what entertains us. The appreciation of a good story is not a gift granted to another species on this planet. It is reserved for Homo Sapiens alone. It's not the fire of technology that drives our culture's entertainment, it's the stories we tell with it.

What most concerns those of us who work at popular dramatic storytelling these days is the drama of western civilization as defined by the Greeks, polished and honed by Moliere and Shakespeare... The leap from live performances on the spot to live TV, celluloid, kinescope, and videotape... And drama's first furtive thrusts into computer games... multimedia... interactivity...

People say our technology is changing so fast these days it's impossible to keep up with it. Janet Murray suggests we are in our industry still at the incunabula stage, using a technology still in its infancy. She points out it took 150 years from Gutenberg's printing press to Don Quixote, a book we both find significant, but for different reasons. Be that as it may, it is regarded as the first true novel in western culture. Maybe it's no coincidence that this novel gives us hints of how to handle interactive storytelling today in the infancy of OUR technology.

But I would argue that things move much faster these days. Information, ideas, spread like wildfire, or email viruses, threatening to overwhelm us. Innovation runs at a much faster pace.

Twelve years separated the very first one-reel narrative film, THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY, and D.W. Griffith's epic BIRTH OF A NATION.

It's been almost thirty years since Colossal Cave, the first adventure game, showed up on mainframe computers.

In twelve years nearly a century ago the narrative film went from gurgling infancy to mass entertainment produced by a host of competitors. As we charge into the new century, almost thirty years after the birth of computer gaming, games are little changed in content despite the addition of the latest audio/video trimmings, and for the most part the core audience for them remains a small portion of the entertainment market. Why?

[SLIDE NINE]

If technology were the answer to mass market entertainment, I'd be worried about Brutus.1. Everybody know Brutus? Created by the Minds and Machines Lab at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. He writes stories. 500 words or so, only about betrayal, and only in academic settings. Where did Brutus.1 get such ideas I wonder? The minds behind the machine aren't saying. Scary news? During an online fiction contest, only 25% who responded, guessed which of five contestant's was digital. Not quite the Turing Test, but not too shabby a showing for 0's and 1's. Good news? It was the least liked story of all. I'm not running out to buy the collected works just yet.

Those who blame rapidly changing technology for the primitive state of story-telling in games are missing the point. Storytelling has NEVER been dependent on technology.

A better answer is that the people creating the first games were not primarily storytellers. They didn't have to be. They had to be programmers. Or people who enjoyed, and understood interacting with computers. And that was also

their audience. The market supported itself. We didn't need anybody else. We, the core gaming audience (comprised in the main of people drawn to *computers*, as opposed to *entertainment per se*) snapped up everything the industry produced.

These days, a far more sophisticated market is sitting there untapped. Yet we ignore it. Today there are very few non-programmers programming games. Yet there are an incredible number of non-writers writing.

Yet to justify the escalating expense, to increase revenue pools, the industry must now draw these people new to gaming for whom computer games might not be the first entertainment choice. And as more and more consumers are looking for entertainment, no matter what the delivery medium, they expect a far more sophisticated experience.

A legitimate question: can games be true mass-market entertainment for millions -- not just hundreds of thousands, or even a couple of million -- but tens of millions of consumers? A lot of people who make games these days don't think so. The return on these larger investments has been less than earth-shaking. But I'll make a self-serving suggestion: if as much money was spent on the content providers as is spent on everything from technology to graphics to marketing, the investments might pay off a little better.

A major complaint we've heard from opinion-making critics is that game stories are simply not interesting enough. The mass market is not ignoring computer games because it isn't interested in computer games. It's ignoring them because in critical areas where it expects a certain level of competence, it has been disappointed time and time again. Even worse we're getting dismissed and sent home by the true critics, not the writers of game magazines.

For now, consider:

[SLIDE TEN]

Hula hoops and Stephen Hawking

If a ring composed of hollow plastic, and the work of a theoretical physicist can attract a mass market *anything* can. If the experience is compelling enough.

After almost three decades the computer software industry is finally beginning realize that maybe *content*, not hardware, is what will attract a larger audience that wouldn't know a hardware innovation if it fell on them from a scaffolding. They want it to be "like a movie only better." Where they do *not* forgive the hardware is if it falls too far short of what they can see on their TV screen, and also fails to provide some other compensatory entertainment value. They are looking past the graphics and sound for something *more*.

Where they do *not* forgive the product is when it fails to deliver on the experience it promises: story + gameplay. Story + Interactivity.

"Interactive movies" have given story-games a bad name by pretty much ignoring these essentials. They will *never* work on computers alone. They'll need to be a success in theatres and/or on TV before they have a chance on computers. We have buried video because we didn't understand it. And we have buried human beings in our games as a result, at least for the time being.

But that's no reason to ignore *story*. The simple fact is the experience on the computer must be as technically and artistically sophisticated and compelling as it is on other screens. Period. No excuses. "It's just a computer game." "We didn't have the budget to..." The market doesn't care.

The time has come – hell it's PAST time – when we should be spending as much time and energy on the things the market has PROVEN it cares about as we do on number of polygons, bezier curves, or the number of cool weapons you can find..

It is our job as creators of interactive entertainment to recognize, and take responsibility for what we're doing. Our job is to capture the imagination, and speak to the sense of wonder in all of us.

[SLIDE ELEVEN]

- **Take me to a place I have never gone.**
- **Make me into someone I could never be.**
- **Let me do things I could never do.**

The mass market shouts this mantra on a daily basis. We can provide a ticket.

It's time to play a game...

Round One

[SLIDE TWELVE]

EXPLAIN RULES

Read Instructions to Players.

[SLIDE THIRTEEN]

[SLIDE FOURTEEN]

[SLIDE FIFTEEN]

PLAY ROUND ONE

Break

11:30-1:00

[SLIDE SIXTEEN]

Elements of Dramatic Writing

These are by no means all the elements of dramatic writing! We don't have time for them all, but I've chosen some major ones, and will indicate how they are adaptable to game design.

Books to Read on your list: *The Poetics* by Aristotle, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell and *Play-Making* by William Archer. **[Go over entire list.]**

Universal Themes

What is the story about? Good vs. Evil? Is that enough? You want an audience to willingly suspend their disbelief? Give them a theme they understand, and are interested in. Whether it's the universal heroic quest tracked from culture to culture by Joseph Campbell, or the Greek-tragedy of families torn apart. Give the story for your game, as any story, a reason for being told beyond the fact it would be fun. Don't give in to the mechanical repetition of cliché. Find new stories, or at least new meaning in old stories. Do RPG's really need another "There was a great conflict in the past between good and evil, now evil is coming back!" story that offers nothing more than a change of scenery, and different names for weapons and spells?

Drama

Life is not drama. A senseless death in real life is not drama until we human beings react to it, place it in a context that touches us and others. What then is drama? William Archer says "the essence of drama" is crisis. He quotes another writer, "No obstacle, no drama." Obstacles exist to be overcome by strength, intelligence, force of will. How do we apply this to the creation of games? We create a game structure that is built on conflict, that provides

obstacles (including traditional puzzles, but not limited to them), to the player.

Obstacles can arise during action, conversation with other characters, and are present everywhere in gameplay. Traps, bosses, locked doors, all are obstacles. But think of them as obstacles, not just puzzles or targets. These obstacles can be the natural next step beyond those that have dominated games up until now, replacing them with dramatic confrontations and suspense-filled predicaments that are the meat and potatoes of drama.

Conflict

Drama is not simply about conflict, but conflict certainly drives it. Conflict gives the player a need to continue. The village is being ravaged by marauding monsters! Someone must stop them! A child has been stolen to be used for a sinister purpose by a being from another dimension. The conflict must be ongoing, not simply in the past. Too often games fall into the trap of emulating Golden Age mysteries. They do when they confine all the action to the unraveling of the crime instead of a mystery that unfolds and deepens as we read. In games, an impending doom is much more interesting than the slow unveiling of an obscure struggle between mechanically-adept brothers at some point in the past.

The conflict of course doesn't have to include danger except in the broadest sense: the danger of the breakup of a relationship can be just as compelling as the breakup of an alliance between two planets.

Story

Story is the structure: it's almost like the clothesline upon which we hang out to dry the individual scenes and incidents. But that analogy fails to add a crucial element: forward momentum. The story is not the creator of forward momentum. It is the chart. The creator is...

Character

Story structure can spring from many sources: a situation, a relationship, an ideal, a need to educate, whatever. But it is borne on the backs of the characters that inhabit it. We can be touched by the death of an "old yaller dog" but we are most often and easily touched by the plight of our fellow human beings. Our stories must be populated by characters that compel us to watch them, or interact with them. Characters that we want to spend time with, maybe because we like them (Floyd, the Robot from *Planetfall*), maybe because we are mesmerized by their evil as we are mesmerized by the swaying cobra (*Hannibal*).

Stereotypes. Square-jawed heroes and hook-nosed villains. Gravity-defying big-breasted woman, wily thieves, scheming clerics.

Falling back on stereotypes is certainly easier than finding new characters either in life or in our imaginations. Certainly some of the appeal in RPGs is allowing the players to assume roles more glamorous and enviable than we might play in life. But stereotypes diminish the overall gaming experience. They limit the sophistication of our stories. And as a result, limit our audience. Try to catch yourself doing it. Take the extra time and struggle to avoid stereotypes.

POV. Most books are written in third person. It provides the most flexibility in narrative structure. You can write scenes the main character may not be a witness to. You can get inside the heads of more characters. First Person is used quite effectively to draw the reader into the life and experiences of a single character, to really see what makes them tick. It provides an immediacy and reality to the action. Books are rarely written in Second Person. It is pretty much reserved in life for parents... or bosses... "You do this!" "You did what?!"

Second Person was used extensively in early text adventures, and died on the day graphics showed up in games. With a few exceptions graphics limitations (all those pixels needed to move things around the screen) kept most games Third Person. There were a few bare-bones 1st Person Shooters and sims even early on, but Third Person was standard for story-based

games. Now that we can shove all those pixels around with far more ease, 1st Person, and the immediacy it provides... immersion is a nice word that Marketeers seem to favor... is very popular. I'll talk about 1st Person more in a little while.

Emotion

Emotion lies at the core of all great literature. Drama. Of all classic films. And the best of TV. What touches us... what illuminates a truth about the human condition... is at the heart of what entertains us.

Game designers to date have shied away from emotion, or failed at delivering it when they've tried. It is absolutely essential that we attempt to get beyond what is hip and cool at the moment, and tackle some more lasting human values. Emotion is a good place to start.

Suspense

Tension. Uncertainty. Apprehension. What is going to happen next? In order for suspense to grow, we have to plant the seeds, and water on a regular basis. Suspense in games can be found in 1st Person Shooters: what's around that next comer? Sims: Is the toilet going to clog *again*? RPG's: what's around the next comer? Strategy: what's my opponent up to now? Adventure: what's around the next comer?

Here we have a puzzle that is synonymous with a suspense sequence in a film. (**HANDOUT: The Trunk Puzzle**)

There's also the suspense of knowing there's a bomb in the room disguised as something else. The suspense in a developing relationship. The suspense of realizing you don't truly understand another's motives.

Pace

Rate of movement or progress. Speed. Shortening the length of dramatic scenes. Cutting out travel time you may have invoked earlier.

Adjusting "obstacle" difficulty. Whereas in an RPG the monsters get tougher the closer you come to the end, sometimes even there the ultimate monster is usually not as difficult if you've brought the right weapon, armor, package of spells, etc. Near the end of a game, consider rewards that come faster, puzzles not quite as difficult near the end.

Narrowing the world.

- a) Increasing linearity without appearing to do so, blocking off unused passages with an explosion.
- b) Reducing inventory as part of the third act reversal.
- c) Reducing number of tasks to be performed, number of characters to interact with, etc.
- d) Timers: Real Time (you're at your computer and the clock on the wall is ticking), Game Time (you're within the game world and a real clock there is ticking), Event-Based (you're within the game world and you have the illusion that a real clock is ticking, but it actually only advances as you do).

Consistent Style

This relates back to the idea of a consistent world, but includes here elements like consistent behavior of the characters. If all the NPC's are oppressed, show how each one copes with that oppression. Consistent language. Anachronistic language kills the suspension on disbelief. Consistent levels of difficulty. Difficulty can mount, but don't just toss a difficult puzzle suite into an arbitrary place in the game. Have a reason for where it is placed.

Elements of Film Language

[SLIDE SEVENTEEN]

We can use the following tools to tell an interactive entertainment story *without* sacrificing interactivity and gameplay. We have grown up with a consistent film language. We are bombarded by it in films and television. It is part of our modern collective unconscious. Game writers and designers ignore the rules of this film language at their own peril. Even if the market may not consciously recognize a bad translation of that language, they will subconsciously realize *something* is wrong when the rules are broken.

Dialogue

The trick is to get beyond "how people talk," learn to write in different voices with their own rhythms and reflections. Take colloquial speech and add an edge to it. Twist it. David Mametize it.

Geography

A man walks out the front door of his house. He exits past camera. We cut to a reverse to see him get into his car. Those two shots may actually have been filmed thousands of miles apart. The front door may have been indoors. We create a consistent geography within the camera that works for the story. It doesn't matter how it was really put together. Illusion.

Cutting

In adventure games, RPG's, strategy and sims, film cutting is generally confined to dramatic scenes without interactivity. We call these strangely enough: cut scenes. They can be the introduction, the final action, connective tissue between missions, and so on. Here is a chance for a screenwriter or director or film editor to settle into comfortable shoes for a short while before venturing back barefoot again on to the hot coals of interactivity.

These can be very helpful in moving the plot forward, illuminating character, providing a cool reward. Just remember: To a gamer, time spent with an inactive mouse, is time wasted.

POV

3D rendered worlds allow us to stuff as many camera angles as we want into a game. Sometimes the game cuts on its own, sometimes it allows the player to choose angles. There is a wonderful freedom in this, but if its use is indiscriminate, the effect can be dizzying. Right now I'm of two minds. It makes most sense in action games, but there's always the danger of missing something crucial.

Shifting between POV's (as opposed to simply camera angles) is very tricky. How many third-person games have you seen where NPCs will suddenly speak directly to the camera. It works better when we're in first person, but having both first and third person conversations in the same experience, increases POV disorientation.

In some games the floating camera leaps and swoops and pivots, basically to keep the primary action in view. We've seen this in many games in the past from *Alone in the Dark* on.. There becomes a moment when all that constant camera shifting becomes intrusive. Usually when drama might occur. And shifting between the fluid camera and a static camera can be just as disconcerting.

However, breaking out of the predominant POV for variety, as in inter-cutting, or to create suspense, is perfectly valid. Alfred Hitchcock was a master of POV. Remember the scene in *The Birds* when Tippi Hedron is sitting outside the school...? **[DESCRIBE]**

Sound

While not strictly within our area of concern, sound is too important to forget. We should be aware of how much sound can bring our games to life. I remember an RPG from as early as 1984 (called *Dunzhin* I think) that had sound effects digitized on its single floppy. *Lurking Horror* was an Infocom text-based adventure that effectively used sound to set a mood of impending doom. *Dungeon Master*, first released for the Atari-ST and Amiga systems, was the first game that allowed you to hear unseen creatures approaching. You could identify what was coming by the sound it made.

Beyond the obvious applications that also apply to film, the designer can effectively use sound to provide clues to interactivity (tapping on a wall to locate a secret passage), to bring alive a scene where no natural sound was recorded, to create a sense of being there with the use of ambiance or room tone, or when the graphics simply don't tell the whole story. The sound design of *Riven* and its predecessor *Myst* is brilliant.

[SLIDE EIGHTEEN]

PLAY ROUND TWO

Break for Lunch.

2:00-3:30

[SLIDE NINETEEN]

ROUND THREE

NO BREAK!

Game Language

[SLIDE TWENTY]

Game Mechanics

The entertainment value of an interactive product is directly related to the gameplay, the underlying reason for the player to interact with the world, and the simplicity with which we make it possible to do so. That brings us to...

Interface

Simple, transparent, intuitive.

Strategy games in particular can fall victim to complex interfaces and micromanagement that destroy the pleasure of the experience. In Real Time Strategy games its even more deadly. Check out *Pax Imperium* (if you can still find a copy) where the computer opponent doesn't need to hunt through sub-menus, but can make its choices instantly. If an interface offers too many choices, you'll find yourself playing it instead of the game.

In RPGs that stress action, simplicity is a necessity. *Asheron's Call* and *Everquest* each have simple interfaces as far as combat is concerned for example. In general *Everquest's* interface remains simple throughout, while *Asheron's Call*, a game with admittedly a lot more on its mind story-wise than *Everquest*, is a bit "click-heavy."

Keep the mechanics simple. You'll avoid the need for an elaborate interface, and probably a game manual as well. Intelligent cursors and easily-found objects that can be manipulated do not necessarily lead to a too-easy game. Making the player go on a pixel hunt to discover your interactivity is only a sign of sloppy design, not another level of gameplay. It's frustrating. Not fun.

You have a problem if one of the mysteries of a game is figuring out what you're supposed to do next.

Wandering and dead ends... We'll explore these in just a second.

Design Issues

Anything that helps the player suspend disbelief, and move beyond the fourth wall into the world of the game is a good thing. What tricks can we use to help the player do that?

- Design a coherent world that observes strict laws. If the game pretends to be on earth in the last years of the twentieth-century, don't introduce 3D TV. We don't have it yet. If you want to stick it in a lab, or a visiting flying saucer fine, just not in every home.
- Help the Player learn the rules. Give them a hint system, but disguise it if you can. *Asheron's Call* uses easily identifiable Town Criers, bartenders, etc. to provide hints, and supplements it with scrolls, books and so on, and NPC reactions to specific events. *Everquest's* hints are often so hidden they're as hard to find as the quest requirements they are supposed to explain.

Keep the obstacles organic to the story, and solutions real-world and intuitive. Keep them *in context*. Even the smallest incidental quest can actually tie in to a larger story. I use the *Rumpole of the Bailey* model. As well as treating us to some of the best writing ever in a TV series, John Mortimer gave us an elegant handling of traditional A and B stories. All the B stories supported the A stories, at least thematically. A big case Rumpole was working on would be mirrored in a domestic squabble between him and his wife Hilda, *She Who Must Be Obeyed*.

There has to be a reason why there's suddenly a loaded gun on the desk that wasn't there before, and the reason can't be that you couldn't let the player have it before the confrontation with the robber because she might have shot the robber with it, but now you need her to be able to shoot somebody else.

If you use an inventory *be very careful*: allow for alternative solutions to puzzles, or find another reason why a logical object can't be used. Don't just refuse to let the player use the shoe on the nail simply because you want him to use the hammer you made it so hard for him to get.

b) 1st Person vs. 3rd Person. I discussed this in detail in *Elements of Dramatic Writing* and *Film Language*. But I'll mention one crucial issue here:

[SLIDE TWENTY-ONE]

In a First Person Game: Are you the character? Or is the character you? Big difference.

The answer to those questions also answers: To voice or not to voice the player's choices in a conversation? Voice the inner thoughts? "I probably shouldn't open that door right now..." My vote: allow the Player to play the character. It's extremely difficult the other way around. You can choose to give plentiful detail to the player/character, or keep things sketchy. Plentiful detail will help the story and character arc. Few details allow the player to fill in some of the blanks, to be more comfortable in the character's shoes.

1st Person presents some unique problems for the dramatist, especially working in interactive. In single-player games the central character is the player, or the player portrays the central character. Normal character development isn't really possible. We must work with things like *self-awareness*. What might the player discover himself through the course of his adventures? Another is *training*. Here the player learns skills that will help her move through the game. Another is *detection*. What the player can learn about the world and the story in which he finds himself We can play with *choices* to illuminate character to the point where the player could realize new things about himself. Scary thought!

But by presenting the player/character with moral, ethical, pragmatic, philosophical choices, and altering the dynamic game world to respond to those choices, we begin to reveal not only the character of the character, but the character of the player herself.

c) Real World Illusion. If you have a map in the game, consider making it a map in the game world. Limit the use of text onscreen, or make it organic. This may mean limiting the size of objects. If an object is too small, a text box ala Windows might seem appropriate, but we don't see text boxes floating around this room when our eyes fix on an object. A literal world is a more easily entered world than one that forces the player to accept "game conventions."

Some game conventions may be necessary. The idea of inventory for example. Unless the game is a comedy, avoid placing cement trucks or live fish in your inventory. Start out with the idea of limiting the inventory to what you could comfortably carry either in the traditional backpack, or your hands, or what you could wear. RPGs and action games seem to be much better at matching the real world than adventure games.

d) Avoid dead ends and wandering. I've mentioned this before, but it bears repeating. There's nothing more destructive to pace, suspense, story movement and character than leaving the player to wander aimlessly across the landscape of the game. This means giving the player goals to reach, and missions to accomplish, all structured within the larger story. Find a mechanism to *remind the* player what she should be doing, but again keep it as an organic piece of the game world.

[SLIDE TWENTY-TWO]

Interactivity

We need to provide enough *interesting* and fun things to do.

Simply clicking to move to the next video clip to see whether you die or survive gets old very quickly. We'll get to branching in a second.

Don't commit the cardinal sin of stuffing the game with things to click on simply for the sake of "adding gameplay." All it will do is point out the thinness of the underlying game structure, the precise thing you may be trying to disguise. Gamers and critics alike will be merciless. And they

should be. Interactivity shouldn't be superfluous to the story or characters. It shouldn't tear down the fourth wall, it should help preserve it.

Puzzles

In the past adventure games committed this sin over and over. *Black Dahlia* gives you far too many variations on the "combination lock." In *X-Files* one of the first puzzles you encounter is the "computer password." (**EXPLAIN**). These games featured puzzles that are not integrated into the world of the game. They exist solely to support some meter of gameplay.

The elements of interactivity should relate mechanically and thematically to the story and the universe of the game.

As we've seen, puzzles can become dramatic obstacles.

Skills

Skills need to have some real value in the world. I've read that skills were added late to Everquest. It shows. Throughout the 2 years since it went live, EQ has been upgrading its skill system. Looked at another way, skills can have even more relevance than something productive to do. They can be tied to character, both the player's and NPCs. In *The Gryphon Tapestry*, NPCs taught skills. We created a matrix which tracked the relationships players had with NPCs. It was important that players knew where they stood with NPCs, because NPCs taught most of the skills in the game. Get on the bad side of one you needed to learn a skill from, and you might have to search far afield to find another teacher, or work at getting back in that NPC's good graces. Of course, being friends with one NPC might mean another wouldn't think very highly of you. It was a social tightrope players seemed to like trying to walk. [**HANDOUT: NPC RELATIONSHIP CHART**]

Quests

Quests in RPGs are another under-utilized type of activity. All RPGs have them. Big quests, little quests. But rarely are the quests more than simple

Fed-Ex. Go get me a minotaur horn, bring it back, and I'll reward you. Now, there's nothing intrinsically wrong with Fed-Ex quests. But what a missed opportunity, particularly for storytellers.

I want to create NPCs that are characters with their own needs (Not just personalities!), (Characters are more than accents and attitudes!), and stories that are meaningful. So simultaneous with developing quests I try to determine what players can do to impact the lives of the NPCs.

I'm indebted to Chris Foster, designer at Turbine, for the ongoing discussions that forced me to focus my thoughts on quests.

Quests can come in all sorts of interesting shapes and forms. Some examples from life:

Run with the bulls in Pamplona. Play bingo for cash. Be the first human to climb that mountain over there. Win the hand of a fair maiden. Return home from the Trojan Wars. Help Jews escape Hitler. Prove that chivalry isn't dead (*Don Quixote's* quest). Agree to appear on Jerry Springer's TV show. The Game of *Casablanca* we're playing.

1. Each has a reward for overcoming one or more challenges. None are simply Fed-Ex.
2. Knowledge can be more important than items in a quest. It frees you to explore story, ethics, universal themes, etc. Tracking that knowledge is key, but you've heard that before.
3. Replayability must be addressed, although replayability can be seen in some quests more obviously than in others. Two issues: Allowing one player to do it over and over again; or only playing it once, but not ruining the experience for the thousands (hopefully) who will follow him.

The simplest solution (beyond ignoring the problem) is of course a matrix. Go kill the x (50 possibilities for replay value), and recover my lost y (50 more possibilities for replay value). Come back. You can z (marry one of my 50 daughters, choose my best stallion, pick out a nice diamond, etc., 50

> in all). Now... X isn't home/is already dead/is nicer than the quest giver/has a quest of its own/46 more. Y has been broken/lost again/put to use in a machine even more valuable/47 more. Z loves another/is ugly as sin/has never been ridden successfully (We -may- have switched to the stallion here)/was replaced years ago with paste. On and on and on.

More sophisticated is modularity, or what you might call object-oriented storytelling. More on this soon.

To populate our game or world with quests:

1. First level quests: out-and-out FedEx for everyone. Life is full of them, no problem. But don't forget character and story (or at least consistent context). Infinitely replayable. The matrix I provided a moment ago is geared to this lowest level of quests.
2. Second level quests: quests that are not infinitely replayable, but with enough variability they might as well be. Again for everyone, maybe limited by player-character xp. Much more story/character driven.
3. Third level quests: replayable only by a certain segment of the player base: only archers need apply, baking skill required, etc. In terms of character/story can be a step back to first or second level. Again, in reach of many of us in the real world.
4. Fourth level quests: replayable until some world change (large or small) is achieved.
5. Fifth level quests: quests that alter the world, not just for a single player, or small group, but everyone.
6. Six level quests: quests that never end. The journey is more important. The Holy Grail is never found, but the experience is fulfilling nonetheless.

Puzzles, learning skills, quests... Killing stuff, forming clans or guilds, politics, achieving wealth or fame...

What are some other “activities” in games?

Non-linearity

Non-linearity, or at least the illusion of it, is essential. It gives the player the feeling that she is moving through a dynamic world that reacts and changes as she interacts with it. The player should feel she can go "in any number of logical directions and have an equally fulfilling gaming experience. There is no true Golden Path. Whatever the genre, once you set up the basic premise in the introduction, open the game world wide. If you must have paths at all, what you want is any number of *equal* paths. The challenge is creating what I call modular scenes so that *no matter what the order of their presentation*, tension and suspense will increase. Interesting word: modular. There is a structure suggested in it. And we will explore that structure shortly.

There will always be eddies and backwaters, but these should be readily apparent. If the Player wants to digress, let them. In the bloated middle section of a semi-linear game, this won't matter. I wouldn't allow it later in the structure of any game. It can interfere with pace.

There's another player to keep in mind: the Game Breaker. The person who derives entertainment value from beating the designer, whether this means deliberately doing all the least likely things, or actually hacking the code. How do you deal with the gamer who wants to peek up the magician's sleeve?

The Pact

There must be a pact between game writer/designer and player just as there is in any other medium. The author does everything in his power to ensure a good time for the reader. The reader agrees not to sneak a peek at the last page.

Part of the responsibility of the game designer is to make sure each of the possible paths through the game are equally fulfilling.

Part of the responsibility of the gamer is to go along for the ride. We call this...

... willing suspension of disbelief.. not suspension of disbelief, but *willing* suspension of disbelief..

It is part of the responsibility of the reader not to put the book down right when Sophie is making her choice. The moviegoer should squirm in the seat rather than wandering out of the theatre for a popcorn fix right when Luke is attacking the Death Star.

Our job is to keep the experience fun. The gamer's job is play the game.

Rewards

Rewards are extremely important as well. They add to the "fun" factor of the experience. These rewards can be eye candy, a cool dramatic scene, a plot or character twist that launches us into the next act... Action games are full of such rewards, if again limited to the visceral: cool explosions and deaths.

All of the above are primary factors in the satisfaction a player has while experiencing a game. Here are some other things to think about as well.

Dying

The threat of death is often used to create tension in drama. However in many games the death of the player/character exists mainly as a penalty, or a break in the action.

If a player character unknowingly opens a booby-trapped closet door, and it explodes in his face, killing him, we have substituted shock for suspense: a classic dramatic structure blunder. If we know the door is booby-trapped, but we have to get in there anyway, we now have an added, continuing element to the scene: suspense.

If you're going to kill a player, warn them it could happen. Be wary of cool deaths for their own sake. They can snap the player right out of the drama,

for the sake of a brief moment of "Whoa! " Frag NPC's with impunity, but treat the death of the player/character with some delicacy please.

Both *Asheron's Call* and *Everquest* handle death differently. Each provides penalties for dying, but not game-ending ones. In EQ, if you die, you must reclaim your belongings, and you can lose a significant amount of XP, as much as it may have taken you hours of real time to gain. In AC you take a hit to your stats, and lose 1 or more of your best items. In an ongoing game killing off the player character is very dangerous. You're playing with the investment the player has in your world.

There are no easy answers. If you've followed the saga of Sierra's *Middle Earth* at all, you know that this was a major source of conflict between the original design team and the company over "permadeath."

Another problem with how death is often used in a game, is the "learning by dying" syndrome. You see this in approaches to puzzles. Cut the blue wire or the red wire? Cut the right one, you live. Cut the wrong one, you die. You restore, and now know which one is the correct wire to cut. What has happened to the fourth wall? What has happened to the willing suspension of disbelief? Where is the tension and suspense?

Many action games commit this sin with unrepentent glee, ending all but the Golden Path branch or branches with a death. This can make slogging through the same level over and over again a frustrating chore. Try this. Nope: death. How about this? Nope: death. This? Ah! Here's the next screen! Cool! It's a sewer!

You hope the dramatic sequences will carry you. Because you're going to be seeing them over and over again. Repetition of action leads to Frontal Lobal Syndrome. Brain pain.

I talked about suspense we discussed the elements of drama. Here, consider a way of viewing death that is not simply a penalty or an unpleasant surprise, or a learning experience, that breaks the rhythm and flow of the game. Think of its threat as a way of increasing tension and suspense and pace instead...

Cheats and Easter Eggs

Okay, cheats were originally aids for the designers, and Easter Eggs were there to entertain their friends. But they exist outside of the reality of the game universe, and should be looked upon with suspicion in any story-based game. On the other hand programmers seem to love them, and may refuse to finish the game unless you allow them to stick a few in. (**CTRL-LEE IN "MASTER LU"**)

Branching

... or sawing the limb you're sitting on... Branching has a place in gaming... a small place... it is an efficient method to structure conversations (as we'll discuss later). It can be tolerated in certain cases when dealing with FMV, but it is only one element. It is for the most part misunderstood by both the pro and con sides.

Pro-branchers are usually those who come late to the game of interactivity, and come from the direction of Hollywood; or those who have not done their homework to see how branching has been applied in various media in the past, and think they've discovered the Holy Grail of interactivity that the mass market is seeking.

Con-branchers come from the game industry, and programming in general, who can see far more sophisticated systems of AI, and because of how badly branching has been handled in the past, have dismissed it as a dead end unworthy of consideration.

An entire "game" of it is excruciatingly tedious. It is a valid component of conversations. But it can't be the only one, or tedium is again the end result.

DO WE HAVE TIME FOR THIS?

Conversations

Conversations with NPC's (Non-Player Characters) are typically a useful way to relate the story of the game to the player or players, to illuminate

character, create relationships and so on. We examined these when we discussed dramatic writing and how it relates to interactive writing. A discussion of conversations with other live players is simply a discussion of mechanics. Examples of how to handle conversations with NPCs follow. Note that some games use more than one technique.

No Conversation (*Riven*)

You watch. You don't interact.

Canned Speeches (*Half-Life, Legend of Zelda, Goldeneye, Baldur's Gate*)

Your character doesn't speak. The characters have a pre-determined, repetitive response, or series of repetitive responses. Story is fixed, no mechanism for handling the reality of a repeat visit. Conversations in the console games are both text only.

Canned Conversations (*Everquest and Asheron's Call*)

This form was all but dead until MMORPGs resurrected it. Your character carries on a single pre-ordained conversation.

Natural Language/AI-Based Conversations (*Le Morte D'Arthur*)

The computer chooses responses based on probability and logic. In its current state of development best reserved for: Minor characters. Repeat encounters. Subplots. The "story" is created on the fly from a set premise. Manipulations can occur, but pace and structure of conversations is problematic.

Mood Meter (*Necropolis*)

The player chooses from an array of emotions, graphically represented, and then the character speaks dialogue based on the choice. **(WHITEBOARD)**

Attitude Chart (*Tex Murphy:Overseer*)

Some kinship to the Mood Meter; the player may choose from a series of conversation attitude descriptions: Play It Cool; Get Tough; Pour on the Charm, etc.

Topic Menu (*Sanitarium, Legend of Zelda*)

The player picks from a list of topics: this list can include generic topics as well as specific topics added as the game progresses. *Zelda* has a rare and rudimentary form of this: the fishing shack, race course, etc.

Iconic Choices (*Circle of Blood*)

Graphic version of Topic Menu.

Draining the Reservoir (*Black Dahlia*)

Subset of Topic Menu: a list of dialogue choices must be gone through in its entirety. Clues or puzzle elements may be hidden in the foliage.

Player Character Dialogue (*The Gryphon Tapestry, Grim Fandango, Baldur's Gate*)

Writing specific in-character dialogue. *TGT*: Full Sentences. *Grim Fandango*: Sentence Snippets. *Baldur's Gate*: Full sentences that provoke huge speeches only partially voiced.

Puzzling Conversations (*Titanic*)

Can be combined with several of the above. The Player must discover the correct path through a conversation in order to proceed. Hints are okay, in fact desired, but this type of puzzle feels arbitrary, and is often frustrating to the non hard-core player.

Racing for the Finish (Staple of text adventures. No current examples)

The player selects one of several choices, then the conversation moves forward, the other topics gone for good.

How I Do It

A couple of the above approaches to conversation are elements in how I currently handle conversations. I'm forever looking for more intuitive ways, but here's my thinking...

Part of my approach is the idea that people play games for some of the same reasons they watch passive escapist entertainment: to go places they've never been; do things they wouldn't think of doing in real life; to be people they might only dream of being: heroes, goddesses, villains...

Just as we can put them into an exciting situation beyond their everyday experience, we can put them into a conversation where they can hold their own with Sherlock Holmes, Albert Einstein or Dennis Miller. There is entertainment value in the Player seeing a well-written line of dialogue, and selecting it to see how the character they're speaking to will react.

Therefore I am willing to accept a stretching of the fourth wall that allows actual lines of dialogue to appear onscreen. The Player clicks on them, then hears the player/character say them, and watches the NPC's response.

The case for dialogue is the case for character development. How the player thinks of herself. Who the player wants to be. How the player wants others to see her.

This approach works best in current RPG's, adventures, strategy games and sims where the pace can be adjusted to accommodate these dialogues. And even in an action game like *Wing Commander: Prophecy*, time outs can be given to the player to catch their breath much like the obligatory comic relief in a Shakespearean tragedy.

As I mentioned before, while looking to branching as the sole source of interactivity in a game is not very fruitful, branching can be used for the basic structure of a conversation.

Think of the branching however more like the *cloverleafs* on heavily-traveled highways. Combination of Topic Menu; Draining the Reservoir, and Racing for the Finish. How does conversation flow? Not just in one way. We need to create the illusion of natural conversation.

For example, it might be most convenient to ask a shopkeeper about the wares he has for sale. You can throw in a couple of comments about the weather, but if the scene's primary purpose is the buying and selling of goods, a simple topic menu, whether portrayed onscreen as dialogue, or just a list, could work fine.

If it's a chance encounter with a character who might impart any one of a group of useful items of information, and you know you can cover the others someplace else, you can Race for the Finish: give the gamer a single path through what will probably be a short and sweet conversation.

But the conversations we have in our life are not always the simple question and answer approach to gathering information. There are a lot more subtle paths the conversation can take.

If you're involved in the opening stages of a relationship with another character, and there are a number of conversation choices you might pursue, the structure becomes more weblike.

Other tools are universal variables and conditions.

These also directly flow into the attitude the NPC will have toward the player. An NPC who knows you've lied to them, should be much more difficult to convince the next time around. This will segue us to NPC characters in just a second.

Entrance and Exit Points

In real life conversations don't necessarily begin at the beginning, progress through to the end, then stop. We come in on the middle of them, pick them up later, decide we want to talk about something other than what the person we're talking to does, etc. To replicate these possibilities in game conversation we identify natural entrance and exit points, paying close attention to the passage of time, as the player/character experiences it in the game. Again, compromises must be considered particularly using video when disc space or production time is an issue, but we strive to address at least three variations:

If the Player concludes the conversation, then immediately reopens it without doing anything else.

If the Player remains in the area, but does other things, or briefly leaves the area and returns.

If the Player is gone for some time before returning.

The Player-Character can handle these. Or the NPC. It doesn't matter. The rooted vs. wandering character dilemma. **[Hunter & Londie]** Forcing the Player through too many choices to allow for greater mobility of the NPC.

Additional Conversation Concerns

Playback

What did that guy say to me back at the hamburger stand? Repeat the whole scene verbatim? I'd rather use a "game world" solution like a tape recorder or notebook.. This is much preferable to simple returning and repeating a

conversation, as if it hasn't occurred. It helps maintain the necessary Real World Illusion. In *Once Upon a Forest* important clues are noted in a journal one of the characters keeps. In *DSOM*, this is handled by the V-Clips in the VDA.

Naturalism

This doesn't mean the NPCs take their clothes off, but it certainly exposes the shallowness of the character-interaction model, if designers ignore opportunities to create the illusion that there is some sort of naturalistic exchange going on with NPCs. In *Half-Life* for example, numerous characters not only look exactly like, but also talk alike and mouth identical phrases. I played the game to the end, hoping for some major revelation about cloning. I was disappointed.

Return Visits

Many games succumb to what some designers consider a necessary evil: the repetition of repeat visits. Avoid a single generic line an NPC can say in response to a return visit. In *Everquest* we get simple repetition. In *Asheron's Call* there is some variety built into the hint characters, but only of canned speeches. A few basic variations wouldn't add all that much disc space.

Another trick is to choose a generic series of remarks hopefully related to the character or situation, but that don't require specific game-affecting responses. Then choose a generic series of responses to the *type* of remarks chosen.

You can then mix and match these in any number of ways, creating the illusion of continuing small talk. We successfully applied this through up to 125 different combinations in *The Riddle of Master Lu*. Just be sure to shuffle the stacks of remarks and responses. Don't randomize them. Shuffling guarantees that you'll hear *all* of the possible combinations, but there will be no duplicates.

Then a shuffle will guarantee that while you'll begin to hear repetitions, they won't be in the same order.

Ok, what can NPC characters do to you?

[SLIDE TWENTY-THREE]

They will try to kill you.

They will talk to you.

They will trade and and buy and sell with you.

They will adventure with you, and attack or perform other simple operations.

They will marry you and raise a family with you.

In a MMORPG it's basically the first three. In a solo RPG the fourth attempts to duplicate the multiplayer experience. *Asheron's Call's* designers passionately want the focus to be on PC to PC interaction. That is why, I'm told, their NPCs are such stick figures, personality-wise.

Number 5? Hmm... Let's look at that relationship chart again.

[HANDOUT: NPC RELATIONSHIP CHART]

[SLIDE TWENTY-FOUR]

ROUND FOUR

BREAK!

3:45-5:00

[SLIDE TWENTY-FIVE]

Online Multiplayer

The Sandbox Theory.

If you build it, they will play; just keep them from REALLY killing each other. This may be true for hard-core blast and cast multiplayer gamers. But it simply isn't true for the real mass market. We can look at the numbers for *Ultima Online* and *Everquest*, and rejoice in the number of people out there playing. We can look at the numbers of *Asheron's Call*, and begin to wonder if yet again, appealing only to this market is enough.

I would submit that *Asheron's Call* has gone to great lengths to separate itself from *Everquest*, and lay claim to more of the role-playing market. But the truth is that what you do on a minute-to-minute, day-by-day, basis isn't significantly different between the two products. I rejoice in the fact that there actually ARE role-players in *Asheron's Call*.

How many more such games can a finite market like this support? Look at the numbers, ye mighty, and despair.

The Human Factor

The biggest challenge facing the designers of MMORPGs is that before we only had one human being to worry about. Now we have thousands. A challenge? Yes. But we CAN have it both ways. Tell OUR story. And let them play THEIR game. Before when I talked about what follows (in far less detail), it was theory. Much of it is now being successfully put into practice. Let's begin by examining interactive story structures.

[SLIDE TWENTY-SIX]

Interactive Story Structures

[SLIDE TWENTY-SEVEN]

Traditional (Linear)

The traditional story structure is time-tested. It is successful in a variety of media, familiar, and guarantees the author control over the progress of the story. Traditional stories enjoy the added benefit that lots of people can write them.

[SLIDE TWENTY-EIGHT]

Branching (Linear-Thinking)

Branching story is also time-tested. It has been somewhat successful, but not recently. As interactive movies have deservedly fallen out of favor, branching has fallen with them. It's also familiar. Many people still think it is the only way to tell interactive stories. Author control is again guaranteed. It is after all just a collection of linear stories with different start points, all headed in the same direction from beginning to end.

[SLIDE TWENTY-NINE]

Web (Simple Non-Linear)

The web structure is fairly new to most people. By connecting up scenes in more than one direction, it begins to break the linear pattern. It has been somewhat successful in boxed games. It's familiar, basically because people mistake it for branching. There is less author control, and it is more difficult to write than either of its two predecessors.

[SLIDE THIRTY]

Modular (Non-Linear)

Modular story structure is new. Some people don't even recognize it *as* story structure at all. Like film direction that concentrates on what is in front of the camera, rather than the camera itself, it can go unnoticed when it works, and be a disaster when it doesn't. It is unfamiliar. There are no more little arrows connecting the elements of the story. There is *apparently* no author control, and it can be extremely difficult to write, especially for someone who has already successfully constructed linear stories.

During a discussion in an internet newsgroup last year somebody said that a free-form, modular approach to storytelling *might* generate coherent story, but asked how could it ever approach great art or literature? In answer I presented *Don Quixote de la Mancha*. Written in 1605, it is considered not only the first true novel in western culture, but a work of some literary and artistic achievement. Janet Murray mentions the book in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, but in my opinion misses its structural implications, and concentrates instead on the earlier, less sophisticated, bardic forms, such as those utilized by Homer in *The Odyssey* and *The Illiad*.

What is the best-remembered moment of the novel? Tilting at windmills. The phrase entered our language and has remained for four centuries. *When* does it occur in the novel? And what can that mean? The picaresque novel can be thought of as modular storytelling, with only one route mapped through the modules.

Charles Dickens polishing episodic structure to gleaming art. His long novels, written as serials, have a much more defined linear structure, yet there are modules in any of them that could be experienced in different order. We can argue that the Victorian novel is a far more sophisticated form than the picaresque. But remember that Cervantes was there at the birth of the novel. Is it any wonder that his structure speaks most easily to us here at the birth of interactive storytelling?

The progression of serialized fiction takes something of an artistic step backwards in the movie and radio serials from Pearl White to *The Adventures of Captain Marvel*. And strangely enough the Captain's adventures fit the modular storytelling mold as well as anything else to date. We can thrill to the Captain fighting the infinitely re-spawning forces of evil in institutionalized modular, episodes that except for the first and last, really can play in just about any order. Pass a few variables and Shazam!

Hot on the Captain's heels come soap operas that dare to turn Republic serial climaxes into climaxes of a very different sort. Soap operas mark another stage in my development. I was the head writer of a couple in my former, linear life.

But out of all these techniques, which one works best for games?

[SLIDE THIRTY-ONE]

Which one works best for games, darling?

[THIRTY-TWO]

They all do. And they can often work best in combination, dear.

[THIRTY-THREE]

You can use all of them for story, branching and web for conversation construction, modular for game action and combat, and traditional for cut scenes that advance the plot or provide player rewards.

StoryGame Structure

[SLIDE THIRTY-FOUR]

A comparison of popular Drama and StoryGame Structure would find both using a strong hook to catch the audience or player as soon as possible. We make an effort to keep the drama compelling. In games it is especially important to maintain the fourth wall, the invisible, but incredibly important wall that separates audiences from the action onstage.

Both need engaging characters. In story games these are the NPCs players interact with. We rarely put words into the mouths of other players. Although it does happen. Look at the rich vocabulary of taunts in strategy games like *Age of Empires II* for example.

We need escalating suspense to keep the audience interested, building on their expectations, then topping them to increase tension. I'll single out one little technique for achieving this in a wholly non-linear fashion is just a moment.

Just as strong drama needs surprise twists, storygames must deal with player knowledge. A problem that is compounded when there are many players in a persistent world in various stages of any number of stories. Here is a reason at last for not only multiple endings in a story, but multiple beginnings as well. Also, I tend to embrace the concept of players sharing their experiences in persistent worlds, rather from running from the idea. It may not mirror the real world, but it gives them something to talk about. As one party shares how it progressed through a quest, another can react with the different choices *they* made.

A satisfying conclusion is essential in a good play, movie or book. The most vivid and immediate memory some take from the experience is its concluding moments. In an ongoing world, there can be no ultimate conclusion, but we must provide many satisfying resolutions along the way. And stories are the perfect medium to provide them.

And finally there is the universal theme. Is it a story of ambition, love, betrayal, courage? What is the “story” of the story that touches us as individuals, members of a specific culture, and human beings at large.

[SLIDE THIRTY-FIVE]

Symbiotic Escalation: “A Bad Day at the Office”. Think of this example as only one way of escalating tension or suspense in a modular story structure. It is by no means the *only* one!

Suppose in the course of any work day six bad things can happen. These are not earthshaking, such as getting fired. Nor are they so minor as to pass beneath our emotional radar. All are of a similar intensity somewhere in the middle ground between minor irritation and total calamity. A misunderstanding with a co-worker, a meeting that went nowhere... whatever.

Ok, one of these happens to you. You go home, and your significant other asks how your day was. Balanced against that one bad thing is an entire day of good, or at least neutral incidents. So you reply, “Pretty good!”

Suppose three bad things happen. Depending on your outlook on life, you might reply, “So so.” “Not bad.” “Not so good.” Etc.

Suppose all six happen. You would say you had “A bad day at the office.”

Now, these 6 things could happen in any order. And none is of a higher intensity than any other. Yet, simply by juxtaposing them in a single “world,” then adding them up, something interesting occurs. The resulting emotion is stronger than any one of the individual pieces. Symbiosis. And we can manipulate that symbiosis in a modular story.

[SLIDE THIRTY-SIX]

Game Structure Considerations

These are more tools to help us achieve compelling drama, even in a modular story structure. You can find their roots in the earlier section on drama. All are designed to maintain illusion, to maintain the fourth wall.

Maintaining consistency of style.

I bring this up more than once because it is so important! Avoid anything that is anachronistic to the world you create. By all means create as bizarre a world as you like. It can be as far from the real world as you can imagine. But once you create it, and its laws, stick to them. Live within them. Do not *comment* on them by stepping outside the illusion of reality you've created, and winking at the player.

Providing rewards (without obvious leveling)

We don't have leveling in real life. We don't walk around with a bar code on our foreheads that reads "Level 17 Chaotic Accountant." We do measure success however in a variety of ways: money, esteem, name-recognition even. And many more. We all know the numbers need to be there to *track* the progress of the player, and there needs to be a mechanism to tell the player how she is doing. But if we want to maintain the illusion that the player character inhabits a real world, hide the numbers.

Hiding the numbers (die rolls, etc.)

Not just for leveling, but everything! Any die roll result or check for balance the game makes can be expressed in a standardized way that players will recognize. Even provide a chart in the documentation, if you wish, just don't have those numbers flashing past in the middle of a fight. You don't see them when Jackie Chan goes after twenty bad guys with a ladder. Sure, a martial arts movie isn't interactive, but it would also destroy the fourth wall, and therefore harm your willing suspension of disbelief.

Tracking variables (Order of modules, states set, flags tripped: relationships, status, knowledge)

Another tool to escalate suspense and to track the player character's progress in the world is to attach a database to the character. In this way the game engine can know which modules the PC has visited, and in what order, and can adjust the experiences in the remaining modules before the PC reaches them. Then we don't have to rely solely on symbiosis alone. We can create the illusion of a dynamic world that is altered by the actions of the player within it, a world where events pile on top of one another with purpose. Since the PC may alter the world in any number of non-story ways as well, it provides a consistency of experience. We don't stop world-affecting gameplay for an insular story. The story affects the world, too. Maybe not in the same exact way. But it will *feel* the same, and that is what we are striving for.

[SLIDE THIRTY-SEVEN]

Techniques 1

So, Technique number one: use NPCs, a *standardized* description of action (so the player can quickly spot trends, success or failure), specific dialogue (again *standardized*, but not necessarily entirely repetitive), and anything else you can think of.

[SLIDE THIRTY-EIGHT]

Replace explicit numbers with real world-style accomplishments for players to truly feel as if their characters live in the world of the game.

[SLIDE THIRTY-NINE]

Techniques 2

Technique number two. Most of us already maintain databases to track things in our games: items owned, skills learned, abilities acquired. We can use the same database to track stories completed; scenes of stories

completed; knowledge acquired; general reputation; NPC relationships. And by tracking all these story, or at least character-based, conditions, we as designers can ensure that the experience, even in a dynamic, open-ended world is consistent, believable, and as logical a progression as in any linear story.

[SLIDE FORTY]

Attach that database to every PC in the game. Again we do it already. Just use it to track story and character elements as well as physical objects or numbers.

[SLIDE FORTY-ONE]

Techniques 3

It is our duty as writers and designers of story-based genre games to do everything we can to guarantee the player a rewarding, fun, experience. Therefore we cannot totally abdicate authorship. We only need to hide it when we use it.

We *want* players to be storytellers, but we cannot leave them to flounder. He must help them be *good* storytellers. We cannot create worlds and expect the players themselves to do all the work. The worlds must be focused and covertly manipulated to help non-storytellers feel as if they are truly not only enacting, but creating their stories.

We can create story scenes as independent modules.

We can use web and branching structures to tailor conversations with NPCs based on the PC's experience.

We can use traditional linear scene progression for rewards, and major advancements in the plot.

By knowing what the player has done, we can allow the world to react to the PC's ever-changing knowledge of the world.

[SLIDE FORTY-TWO]

Where Janet Murray and I parted company in our approaches, was not just waiting for AI, the Godot of computer gaming, but also in how we think the players will have the most fun experiencing stories.

GIVE EXAMPLES FROM HER BOOK

I don't think players want to mess with the mechanics of storytelling. In my opinion, if you want your players to immerse themselves in your game world, and the stories and characters you populate it with, use every trick you can think of that you've seen in the best movies, TV, drama and literature as story-related substitutes for the usual simplistic tracking of statistics. Use any techniques you have to *hide* the mechanics of the storytelling, and the gameplay. You want as little as possible to get it the way of entertainment. And meaning.

[SLIDE FORTY-THREE]

ROUND FIVE

NO BREAK!

[SLIDE FORTY-FOUR]

[SLIDE FORTY-FIVE]

DISCUSSION

1. Explain how the game was constructed.
2. Ask for reactions.

Exit Visa

[SLIDE FORTY-SIX]

Should games have meaning?

I think we have a responsibility to recognize what it is we do, and how it affects other human beings. And all the technology in the world cannot take that responsibility away from us.

Should meaningful stories remain the province of other media? Other entertainment? Should we let the fact that games and stories are *different* stand in our way?

Oil and Vinegar

Salad dressing: the mix of interactive entertainment. It can be quite tasty. Entertaining. Fun.

Should games have meaning?

Not all of them. But some should. We need balance, not saturation. We need responsibility, not censorship. Remember the questions I asked... a long time ago now... this morning... "Is the product fun?" "Does it move me?" "Does it make the world a better place for its having existed?" "Would we like a game we create to endure? To touch the hearts and minds of generations unborn?"

Not all of us would. But some of us must. Imagery without meaning is empty and artless. We owe it to ourselves, and the future to strive for more. A failure to address these issues is a failure to communicate with the player/audience. It is a failure to communicate with ourselves.

Before any last questions, I'd like to say: Thanks, folks. I hope you had fun.

[SLIDE FORTY-SEVEN]

Music Swells. Fade Out.

The End