

- > Could you elaborate more on modular storytelling? I have been reading the
- > other thread, and your talk, and to be honest I still have a hard time
- > coming up with real-world (err, real game?) examples. How exactly would you
- > have a narrative if you do not know the order on which the player
- > experiences the modules? What happens to foreshadowing and other
- > film/narrative techniques? I understand how you could increase tension and
- > increase the players sensitivity to different situations (a la your Bad Day
- > at Work example), but it doesn't seem like a very, errrm, epic (?) technique
- > (seems to work best for things like "A Bad Day At Work"). Sorry, I'm having
- > difficult describing my lack of understanding :) I guess I am getting
- > confused when I try and figure out how the modules would be related to each
- > other (argh, no little arrows!) and in what sequence they could be
- > experienced (or worse, how to craft flowing, meaningful narrative not
- > knowing what sequence they might be experienced in).

I'll start with an example of a modular "return-visit conversation system" we used in THE RIDDLE OF MASTER LU back in 1994. One thing that destroys the illusion for me in a game is to have NPCs repeat the same old stock phrases over and over when you return to them. When Ripley (the player-driven character) returns talks to the guard at the temple in Sikkim after having exhausted all of the guard's pertinent information, he can still talk to the temple guard. The player clicked on the guard, the engine shuffled the following possibilities, and pulled one from the deck:

Can you tell me more about the temple?

I'd like to hear what those of the temple believe.

If an outsider were interested in the sect, what would you tell him?

Can you tell me some of the key doctrines of the Temple of the Hidden Way?

Numerous westerners are fascinated by Eastern religion. What would you tell them about your beliefs?

We applied the modular technique we called CHAOS to the guard's replies. The following lines were NOT simply shuffled. They could be given as single lines, 2 could be given together, or three, or four, all the way up to all eight, which could be said by the guard IN ANY ORDER. These lines were voiced by an actor, and I directed the actor in how to deliver them, so they could be combined in any of these ways. The actor ONLY recorded each single line once. The combinations were then built by the engine on the fly. Here we go:

We believe in the testing of the faithful.

We believe only through questioning can we find answers to that which puzzles us.

We believe that to learn one must study.

We believe one may not reach true enlightenment until one has found the Hidden Way.

We do not believe in trial and error.

We believe in method and reason.

We believe anyone who proves himself worthy, by throwing off the trappings of the outer world, may join us.

We welcome questors from all lands.

It's not a game. It's not even a full conversation, but it makes reasonable sense no matter how it's constructed by the engine. It's not much harder to write than "I have nothing further to say to you." repeated over and over. And it IS modular. Modules can be NESTED within modules as this conversation was nested within the larger module of Sikkim.

Let's take a story next, one from literature. To make things simple for me, and you, we'll use a picaresque novel "Don Quixote de la Mancha" published at the beginning of the 17th Century. Picaresque novels fit modular storytelling perfectly because their very nature (like movie serials) is a series of events "fairly" equal in emotional intensity. In the book Don Quixote, imagining himself a heroic knight, experiences a number of adventures. After a solo adventure Quixote meets Sancho and he sets off:

Don Quixote meets Dulcinea. Now they are three. And the modules begin.

Don Quixote tilts at windmills, mistaking them for giants. (Yes, this, the most famous scene in the book actually occurs early on... hmmm...)

Don Quixote rescues a "princess" from her two captors (actually friars).

Don Quixote becomes involved with a tryst between a servant girl and her lover.

Don Quixote breaks up a flock of sheep, thinking they are two opposing armies.

Don Quixote breaks up a funeral procession, thinking it a parade of

monsters.

Don Quixote is saved from fighting a monster he hears in the night by Sancho (it's only the roaring of a mill).

Don Quixote seizes a barber's bowl, thinking it to be a famous golden helmet.

Don Quixote encounters a chain gang on their way to the galleys.

Don Quixote fights for Dulcinea's honor.

Now from here on there are several scenes again in fairly linear order, leading to yet ANOTHER series of modules. (The book was written in two parts with ten years separating them). After them, in true epic style a character from an earlier module returns. On his deathbed Don Quixote bemoans his foolishness, and renounces chivalry. The moral of the story is of course that his noble-hearted nature WAS the true essence of a chivalric knight. There, now you don't have to read the book (although it IS wonderful!).

And if Don Quixote were a game, those modules could be played in ANY order with the tracking of variables to make sure that the dynamic world would always make sense to the player. The sequence is un-important. The meaningful narrative, complete with climax and moral, is there before us.

<snip>

Anyway, now you know that Modular Story-Telling was actually used (not invented!) by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra 400 years ago. :)

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