Game Design as Narrative Architecture

Butch Nasser

Essential Background

Ludologists — Value Mechanics — Think Tetris

Narratologists — Value Storytelling

FIGHT

Agreement points

Many games DO have narrative aspirations (tap into emotional residue)

Experience of games can never JUST be story - mechanics always remembered

Games tell stories DIFFERENTLY from other media — Games are a unique medium

There is not "one future" of games, nor narration within — Not prescriptive

Introduce spatiality; designers are less storytellers and more narrative architects

learn from comparisons w/ other media

Spatial Stories/ Environmental Storytelling

Design Space is typically more memorable than narratives for games w/ low narrative focus (Maps, not stories, put in magazines)

Games fit older tradition of spatial stories — odysseys, epics, travel narratives

Games allow for more immersion in storytelling

Environmental storytelling — Infuse story in physical space

Spatial stories evoke pre-existing associations

Immersion can be shattered by a single contradictory element.

Spatial stories often rely on player reaching a final destination

★ Player experience & story is not pre-structured or pre-programmed ★

Ex: Animal Crossing, Minecraft, Sandboxes

Evocative

Ex: Hades – Eudoxes mythology

★ Pre-existing narrative assumptions ★

4 E's

Draw upon other stories more so than tell self-contained story

evoked material need not be fully explained (target audience, Star Wars Game)

Exist in dialogue, w/ not isolation from source material.

Source — Game

re-write stories by redefining spaces (McGee's Alice)

Enacting

Ex: Zelda: BOTW, most RPGs

★ Player acts through story events ★

enter a game in 2 ways — broadly defined goals — micro-narratives

Loose sequencing privileges spatial exploration over plot development

"Impact Moments"

4 E's

Accordion

Story enactment can often follow an accordion structure

Embedded

Plot = events, Story = viewer mental chronological construction of events

Story is body of info, not temporal structure (open-ended exploratory narratives must give hints in multiple locations, assume one can't explore them all.)

Players use stage details, and their changes, to make guesses about narrative. (Life Is Strange, Until Dawn, Butterfly Effect Games)

Information spread across numerous channels (AR Games do this)

Emergent

4 E's

Self-design lets players build to own significance (create own story)

freedom of story, limitation on this freedom to narrative story functions — sims items

★ Mystery, story via context clues ★

Ex: A Short Hike, Stray, Inscryption, walking sims