Creating Serious Games with Emotional Characters and Rich Storylines

Anna Flynn
COMP 585
Integrating rich characters and storylines into educational games

• “Gamification” concept: make a game out of learning
• Focusing first on building a game that teaches the player something
• Can assure accuracy of concepts and puts importance on reaching teaching goals
• Can lead to stiffer games with suffering storylines

• Examples:
  – Armadillo Run: gets the concepts across, leaves you wondering why?
  – Many simulation games: learn from the simulation, but may not feel connected *emotionally* without clear finish/resolution or characters to connect with
Integrating learning into games with rich storylines and characters

• Focusing first on having a strong storyline and characters that the player can connect with

• Add in elements of learning: primarily as problem solving or thinking that leads characters to their goals

• Examples:
  – AgentSurefire: Play as a character investigating a security breach. Good story, but learning aspect feels thrown in
Aspects of a Good Storyline

- Fleshed out and full dynamic world for gameplay
- Relationships between characters
- Voice acting, good graphics influence
- Connected elements
- Nonlinear (usually)
- Immersive

**Examples:**
- Journey: Very explorable world, open storyline, secrets to uncover, feel very connected to singular character.
Aspects of a Good Character

• Dynamic
• Appeals to player
• Fine balance in video games of spending too much time on character development
• Not limited to the player’s character! The best stories have players connect with many characters

• Examples:
  – Shadow of the Colossus: Care about the creatures in the game
Other Ways to Make Players Care

• Challenge the player
• Allow the player to set their own goals
• Points, leaderboards, high scores to reach for

• Examples:
  – Portal
  – Minecraft
RETAIN Model

• RELEVANCE
• EMBEDDING
• TRANSFER
• ADAPTION
• IMMERSION
• NATURALISATION

• A method for developing games with academic content well integrated into fantasy storylines
Who Gets it Wrong?

• Losing the learning aspect:
  – I.M. Meen: game meant to teach grammar, instead focuses on story and grammar challenges don’t teach – they quiz

• Boring games

• Having the learning aspect feel very forced

• Not enough focus on graphics (difficult to create immersive world):
  – Number Cop: play as cop, track down speeders to learn about numbers.
Why is this Difficult?

- Some concepts are easier to make story based games about
- Others will feel forced unless done very well
- How to show concepts that don’t necessarily come up in every day life
Who Gets it Right?

• Ludwig: 5th+ grade game for learning physics concepts. Cute character, very well developed world, good graphics
• Numbershire: k-2nd grade game for learning about numbers. Fantasy based, lots of reinforcement
• Oregon Trail: History, built in story, able to name and personalize characters, connect with “family”, learning is integrated through storytelling
• Dynasty Warriors 7: Chinese history is taught through fighting game, learn officers names, dates
• NBA 2k15 MyCareer mode: play as an owner of NBA team, learn about roster, stats, how to manage a team. Sports are good content for story based learning
So What is the Best Way?

• Games that incorporate learning as a necessity in the game
• Create a character the player cares about
• Problem solving, critical thinking used to solve this character’s problems
• Learning advances you through the story