Strategic Dialogue within Narrative Games as a Mechanic – Moving from Branching Narratives to Branching Perspectives

Oneeb Bin Nauman
RMIT University
oneeb.nauman@monash.edu

Keywords

Strategic, Dialogue, Mechanic, Branching Narrative, Perspective

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, storytelling has been an extremely powerful means of sharing experiences. However, most stories did not have an interactive element to them. That changed with the introduction of interactive narratives, which initially took the form of choose your own adventure books and tabletop role playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons* (Wizards of the Coast 1997). Video Games have allowed this type of storytelling to flourish, through the use of Branching Narratives. Defined as "a storyline structure in which plot interactions and events are non linear and allow players the freedom to choose how the story progresses" (Hambly 2021), branching narratives offer a breadth of choices to players. Often, these choices lead to distinct paths. *Detroit:Become Human* (Quantic Dream 2018), demonstrates the appeal and depth of such a branching narrative. Choices are often presented to the players within dialogue, as shown by *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM 2019). Usually, no more than four choices are presented to players at a time, limited to that specific point in the narrative. This inspired the development of *LINK* (Nauman 2023 - Ongoing), an interactive fiction, visual novel that encourages 'strategic' decision making by the players, in an attempt to facilitate differing interpretations of the game's narrative events.

In a paper on strategic studies, Hedley Bull states; "Strategy in its most general sense is the art or science of shaping means so as to promote ends in any field of conflict." (Bull 1968). Within games, it entails players using their mental skills to develop and execute a plan to achieve a particular outcome within an interaction. In most narrative games, players are unaware of what dialogue choices will be available to them over the course of the game. Therefore, it is difficult to incorporate elements of strategy to these games based on Hedley's definition, as players cannot manipulate the order of the dialogue choices made available to them.

For strategic decisions to facilitate differing narrative interpretations by the players, it is important to understand how these may arise. *The Rashomon Effect* (Heider 1988), originating from Akira Kurosawa's film "Rashomon" refers to a narrative phenomenon in filmmaking where the same event is

recounted by different characters in differing, and often contradictory ways. This effect highlights the subjectivity of perception and memory, demonstrating how individual biases and motivations shape various interpretations of a 'shared' reality. As a narrative technique, it challenges traditional perceptions of the objective 'truth' and engages audiences in an exploration of divergent perspectives of the same narrative events. This leads to the question: *How can the timing and order of dialogue choices within narrative driven games facilitate strategic gameplay that allows for alternate interpretations of the same narrative events?*

Through a practice-led investigation in designing dialogue, dialogue choices and choice mechanics within *LINK* (Nauman 2023 - Ongoing); exploring approaches to strategy within narrative driven games becomes quite possible. LINK is a science fiction detective story, set in a future where Artificial Intelligence is deeply integrated into society. To address the investigation's questions, it was necessary for LINK to encourage strategic thinking and facilitate different interpretations of narrative events. Ideally, differing interpretations would arise naturally, based on how players navigated through the game's narrative. Therefore, the game is centered around a series of interrogations, with players assuming the role of Jace, a detective in an ongoing murder investigation.

Narrative games lack strategic elements, as defined by Hedley. Dialogue choices are available to players only at fixed points; they do not carry over to subsequent decision points. In real-life conversations, both content and timing are crucial, but the element of 'timing' is absent in interactive fiction games. Therefore, interrogation mechanics within LINK were designed to provide players with a 'case file' of 'NODES'. NODES encompass the available dialogue choices within the interrogation, and are categorized into Evidence, Questions, and Deflections. Evidence NODES pertain to crucial pieces of evidence, Question NODES drive the interrogation's progression, and Deflection NODES steer the conversation back on track. Interrogation progresses in 'rounds', and players select three NODES from their case file to be used at decision points in the interrogation. The Case File can be accessed at any decision point to choose new NODES, discarding any unused NODES. Used or discarded NODES cannot be reused, which encourages prudent usage of NODES, adding a strategic element to the gameplay, as defined by Hedley. The content, order, and combination of NODES, alongside the mental state of the interrogatee, determine the validity and context of the information obtained. This information may change, challenge or reinforce the player's perception of the game's narrative events. This discrepancy in contextual information adheres to the underlying principles of The Rashomon Effect.

Ultimately, these interrogation mechanics within LINK allow for a method of storytelling which encourages the exploration of multiple perceptions of the same series of narrative events.

BIO

Oneeb Bin Nauman is a Pakistani Narrative Designer, Pixel Artist and Game Developer, with a passion for storytelling. Oneeb is fascinated by the potential video games hold as a storytelling medium, and that is the focus of his work as a developer. His current project, LINK, aims to tell a story where the players' experience depends on their own interpretation of the game's narrative events. Currently, Oneeb is a Teaching Associate at Monash University, where he teaches the Undergraduate Game Design course. He also serves as a Cohort Coordinator for the IGDA-Foundation's Scholars Cohort.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Special thanks to Dr Chris Barker, Dr Matthew Riley, and Chase Profaca.

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