

Wrapped in Plastic: An exploration of Input and Narrative working in Harmony

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Keywords

Video Game, Input, Inconsequential Decisions, Narrative

Format of work

A game prototype with an alternative controller.

DESCRIPTION OF WORK

Wrapped in Plastic is a 3D narrative prototype created using the unity engine involving a conversation between the player character referenced as ‘Him’ and a girl that the player is told will be murdered later that night referenced as ‘Her’. The game is traditionally controlled using the mouse scroll wheel with the player being able to scroll backwards and forwards through the dialogue. However for the exhibition of the game the controller takes the form of a record player that the player is able to spin to progress or backtrack through the dialogue. While going through the dialogue at certain points in the dialogue the player is able to backtrack through it and progress again in order to change what was said in the conversation. The game is an exploration of inconsequential decisions, input and narrative working together in harmony, memories of those who are lost and the process of grief.

RESEARCH STATEMENT

Background: Narrative has a way of connecting with audiences, within the medium of video games one advantage is that of input[1]. Input takes audiences from passive observers into active participants within the narrative. What this work explores is how input can be used to create deep and impactful narratives that engage audiences further than what audiences generally experience when engaging with a narrative. When looking at the landscape of narrative within the video game medium there is a lack of utilisation of input when tackling narrative, oftentimes relying heavily on simple dialogue options and narrative trees[2]. Practitioners rather than exploring what kind of mechanics might suit their narratives often rely on mechanics borrowed from popular genres (Dubbelman 2019). This can be effective in conveying narrative to an audience however there is a possibility for deeper and stronger narratives to be told in the medium by utilising input further. One way to achieve this is through inconsequential decisions. Inconsequential decisions (Nay & Zagal 2017), where consequential decisions impact the sequence or existence of events taking place within the narrative, and inconsequential decisions reflect choices that help the player better understand the narrative and the characters within them. Engagement and identification with a protagonist are necessary for an audience to experience catharsis within a narrative (Mateas & Stern 2006). Consequential decisions are commonplace in narrative focused games, the player is made to make a choice, those choices have consequences and the narrative continues, changes and evolves. Consequential

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decisions should not be undermined as effective storytelling tools, though the method of execution of these decisions can be evolved into more engaging and effective story beats through the use of input. Thus with the involvement of inconsequential decisions and evolving how the audience makes consequential decisions practitioners can craft a more compelling and engaging narrative within their game.

Contribution to field/industry: *Wrapped in Plastic* was created to expand our knowledge in the fields of input driving player engagement with the narrative, as well as the use of inconsequential decisions impacting how an audience engages with the narrative. By allowing the player to control the flow of dialogue, as well as the player having to scrub back and find the different dialogue options themselves, gives more agency over this dialogue scene to the player than in traditional dialogue scenes. Although featuring branching narratives they do not change the overall narrative structure other than additional dialogue content and a deeper understanding of the character the player is talking to. This was important when designing this feature as it ties into the themes of the game's narrative. *Wrapped in Plastic* uses an unconventional input system for controlling the game, in which the player uses the mouse scroll wheel to scrub back and forth through the dialogue. For exhibition using a record player as the controller furthers this connection between player input and the themes of the game. By changing the way the player interacts with the dialogue system from the conventional system they embody the action the input is trying to simulate more. The player is no longer doing an arbitrary input like clicking or pushing a button to progress through the narrative, they are now making a dedicated and unique action to control the scene, which can be used as a guide for future works that seek to create a deep connection between the players actions and the games narrative.

Significance: Video games are able to make a deeper connection with audiences, most of the time this is by borrowing elements from other mediums. However when practitioners let the design of input be informed narrative and the design of narrative be informed by input, a holistic, deep and driven work can be created. This work drags audiences from being passive observers into the role of active participants. The use of the idea of inconsequential decisions is a non intrusive way to inject narrative with interactivity, by not changing the structure or sequence of a narrative, practitioners can take passive narratives and make deep connections between the audience and the themes and ideas that are explored within the narrative with simple inputs. *Wrapped in Plastic* is a key exploration in these ideas. By utilising inconsequential decisions and unique input crafted specifically for the game, *Wrapped in Plastic* creates a connection between the player and the narrative of the game truly unique to the medium of video games. This work ultimately contributes to the Australian industry as it is an industry focused on smaller more boutique projects. By using these ideas within the landscape of the Australian industry it can continue to foster unique, deep and moving works that the Australian games are known for.

EXHIBITION

For the exhibition the game will be played using a PC and Monitor, with the record player controller set up on the table in front of the monitor with a painted record on it. There is also a small easel with a painted record cover for the game displayed.

BIO

Murphy Doyle is a Melbourne based game developer, he has spent his career making short game experiences experimenting with narrative and recently alternative controllers. Murphy believes that video games have the capacity to deliver truly unique narrative experiences using the medium of games attempting to create compelling stories and designing input and mechanics around delivering that story to the player. By allowing the design of the narrative to inform the design of the mechanics and vice versa, Murphy's games hope the audience feel like an active participant within the narrative rather than a passive observer.

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ENDNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

Endnotes

1. Input within media is defined by researchers as a phenomena that is purely mechanical, where researchers and scholars commonly agree upon it being an action physically carried out by the player, which is then computed by a system and results as an action within the game (Djaouti 2008) (Cowley 2008) (Stach 2009).
2. Narrative Trees are a mechanic used within video games that has the player making choices throughout the game. These choices take the player down different routes within the narrative. This gives the power of what happens within the narrative to the player within predetermined options.

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