Exploring The Story: Using Video Game Spaces to Construct Non-Linear Narratives

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INTRODUCTION

Video games are a relatively new storytelling medium, especially when contrasted with more traditional mediums such as film, novels, and theatre (Lebowitz and Klug, 2011). Compared to these older mediums, video games have a unique ability to immerse the players in 'a world of art, sound and story' (Goins, 2018), while telling interactive stories that give the players a level of agency over how a story unfolds (Lebowitz and Klug, 2011). These interactive stories often take the form of non-linear narratives, where player choices in the game may lead to vastly different outcomes The dominant type of non-linear narrative found in video games is a branching narrative[1]. This structure can be traced back to Choose Your Own Adventure gamebooks, and can be seen in a variety of game genres, from hypertext games and interactive fiction, to visual novels, to AAA role-playing and action-adventure games (Costikyan, 2000). While this structure is versatile, its focus on player choices made in dialogue interfaces or quick-time events means it doesn't utilise the more spatial aspects of video game design. These include design elements such as the level design, environment design, and player navigation mechanics.

When examining existing non-linear games with an emphasis on engagement with the game-world, and exploration as a core mechanic, such as *Mutazione* (Die Gute Fabrik, 2019) and *Wayward Strand* (Ghost Pattern, 2022), a trend emerges. These games encourage this engagement by explicitly de-emphasising the amount of agency the player has to affect the outcome of the narrative (Nicklin, 2020; Symons & Bakker, 2023). Players have agency over where they go, and what parts of the narrative that they encounter, rather than having an influence over the final outcome.

Through a practice-based methodology, an experimental video game *You're At A Party* (Harte, 2024) was developed, with a goal of combining the level of engagement with the game world found in these 'simultaneous' style narratives, with the level of agency to affect the outcome of the narrative found in more traditional non-linear games. This was done through the design of the game's environments, its navigation mechanics, and through its formal narrative elements.

The game has a realistic setting, a suburban share-house[2], and the world is divided into a series of discrete rooms. The environment is built up through visual elements; stylised background images, audio elements; diegetic music and sound effects, and textual elements; descriptions in the narration that change as the player moves through the world. These all work to create a strong sense of place, grounding the player into the game world.

Players navigate the game by moving between adjacent rooms, as outlined by the text narration. Time is static as the player explores, until the player experiences a key

narrative moment; an interaction with one of the Non-Player Characters (NPCs), which will progress time by one in-game hour. Each time period has multiple available interactions, and any moments not encountered by the player become inaccessible once time has progressed. This results in only a portion of the narrative being accessible in a single play-through, which instils a level of narrative weight to the act of navigation.

The game's overall narrative structure was heavily informed by the simultaneous story style narrative found in *Wayward Strand* and *Mutazione*. The primary NPCs move about the game world on their own schedules, regardless of the player's movements or actions. This contributes to the developing sense of place. The scene-level narrative elements, the dialogue and narration, are informed by the concept of storylets[3]. The game utilises state tracking, using location, in-game time, character relationship metres, and other variables to determine what the player sees next, ranging from incidental narration, to the key narrative moments. As storylets, these all have a resulting impact on the world state, changing how the NPCs view the player, and other details that are fed back to the player through the narration, and future scenes. There are no interactions that don't have any narrative weight.

You're At A Party presents a novel approach to non-linear narrative design. By developing a strong sense of place through every element of the game's design, the game constructs a realistic world that players can intuitively understand how to navigate. By giving narrative weight to all player choices, including acts of navigation, and feeding this back to the player through dialogue and narration, the game creates a possibility space where players can have a strong impact on the overall narrative. Combined, these aspects create an expansive game world that exists around the player, but is responsive to their actions and decisions, creating a unique narrative experience.

BIO
Eamonn Harte is a writer and game developer from Melbourne Australia. They have a keen interest in storytelling and narrative in interactive forms, as well as experimenting playfully with a variety of digital tools. They are currently completing their Masters of Animation, Games and Interactivity at RMIT University, and have exhibited games and interactive work at ACMI, Sabby Gallery, and the Melbourne Queer Games Festival.

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ENDNOTES
[1]A branching narrative is a narrative structure where player decisions at key moments splits the story into separate narrative paths (Lebowitz and Klug, 2011). These narrative can continue to grow exponentially, terminate early, or re-merge, to create a versatile range of narrative patterns (Kabo-Ashwell, 2015)

[2]A share-house is a living arrangement where multiple people reside in a single property, typically with each person having their own bedroom, and then sharing communal areas like kitchens, bathrooms and living rooms.

[3]Storylets can be defined as 'pieces of narrative content, that have prerequisites that determine when they can play, and have an effect on the world state that results after they have been viewed' (Short, 2019)

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