Courtroom Investigations: Engineering a playful 'show and tell' conversation

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Keywords

Show and tell culture, interactive narrative, reflective rereading, investigation games, detective games, courtroom games, choices matter, playing cards

Format of work

A detective card game that is paired with a deck of playing cards and some A4 sheet handouts.

DESCRIPTION OF WORK

Courtroom investigations is a narrative/detective card game that is played alongside a standard deck of playing cards. Player's 'draft' clues using a hand of playing cards, before debating the outcome of the case in a courtroom setting. Players are given a set of A4 sheet handouts that act as a 'case introduction'. Each 'case' has its own pre-made deck of standard size cards.

Cards are drawn from the top of the 'case' deck three at a time and placed face-down. The back of each card has a playing card suit and a description of what investigative action it represents (eg, examine bloody knife). The front of each card describes the clue, sometimes with an image. To draft a clue, each player puts a playing card face down, then reveals simultaneously. The highest suit gets the corresponding clue, with leftover clues going to the losing player(s).

After the investigation, players claim the 'prosecutor', 'attorney' or 'judge' role. They then debate the outcome of their case, presenting their evidence. The judge wins if they correctly choose the correct suspect. The prosecutor wins if their chosen defendant is declared guilty. The attorney wins if the judge picks a suspect other than the defendant.

RESEARCH STATEMENT

This board game emerged out of my PhD research into interactive narrative. Part of this research involved an examination of the early 2010s 'choices matter' controversies surrounding games such as *Mass Effect 3* (Bioware, 2012), *Life is Strange* (Dontnod, 2012) and Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead* (2015).

My conclusion was that part of the 'pleasure' of interactive narrative emerges from the satisfaction that emerges when one player gets an ending, or experiences content, that is radically different from the content and ending that other players received. The 'which ending did you get?' conversations that follow are a core part of the pleasure and satisfaction of interactive narrative. By fustrating this desire, many games came to be percieved has having choices that did 'not matter'.

This insight synergieses with Eli Cook's connection between *Choose Your Own Adventure* novels and their underlying neolibral ideology of individual outcomes determined by presonal choices (Cook, 2021). It also emerges out of Alex Mitchell's observation that 'reflective rereading' of interactive texts is often done in an effort to understand the branches not explored (Mitchell, 2015).

Quantified self researchers have observed that the individual outcomes users receive are often not enough for users to understand what their data says about themselves personally (Lupton, 2016; Neff and Nafus, 2016). This leads them to engage in what Lupton describes as a 'show and tell' culture (Lupton, 2016, 13-15). The personalised alignments, outcomes and endings of many games operate as a form of 'quantified self'. In a similar fashion, comparing different outcomes in an interactive narrative serves as a playful form of 'show and tell' culture.

Much of academic discourse around both alignment systems, the 'choices matter' controversies, and of the quantified self itself – is largely critical and negative. Bosman describes a 'consensus' (2019, 574) of different academics who are critical of alignment systems. Similarly both Han (2017) and Zuboff (2018) have been criticial of both the quantified self, aspects of its culture, and of the broader surveillance culture it is situated within.

Neither my research nor this board game is intended as a complete counter-argument to this criticism. Instead it functions as an example of how the individualising nature of interactive narrative can be leveraged to positive effect, creating a moment in which otherwise disparate individuals come together to create a gestalt and collective sense of understanding.

The first half of this game seperates players, creating what are effectively information 'echo chambers' that polarise players. The players arrive at radically different conclusions regarding the mystery they are trying to solve. Yet in the second half, during the player's debate, they arrive at a broader and more holistic understanding that can only be produced cooperatively. By emphasising the 'show and tell' element of interactive narrative, this game highlights the potential benefits of this form of media.

EXHIBITION
The work should be located on its own table with chairs. It is interacted with through play.

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BIO
Antranig Sarian is a PhD Candidate at Swinburne University of Technology. His research examines the intersection between interactive narrative and the quantified self. He has previously worked as a narrative designer for the mobile game *LoveVerse.* His research has been published in *Games and Culture*, *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* and *The Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*. He is currently developing a board game called *Courtroom Investigations* that is informed by his PhD research