Intro GD Unit 4 - Narrative in Play

This unit concludes the second lens of the course, about the experience of game as they are played – this time focusing on narrative (embedded through authorship as well emerging through play) rather than social dynamics. As it emerges from rules and is experienced by players. Students do a second group project that's more open-ended and could go many different directions, and have to continue doing research, iterating and playtesting as they try to evoke a social “mood” and use multiplayer game structures.

Major Assignment V: Narrative Game (usually assigned second session of week 5 due second session of week 7)

Educational Goals for Unit 4

- understand embedded vs emergent narrative
- become familiar with some forms of procedural storytelling, various mixtures of embedded and emergent narrative, how non-digital games approach narrative
- use of narrative as theme, metaphor, explanatory conceit, etc.
- take a non-traditional narrative and use it as the inspiration for a game

Class-by-Class Lesson Plan

Sample lesson plans by Eric with times for each activity in each class. The exact week and class numbers will probably not line up with your own syllabus due to variations in schedule for different days of the week, holidays and other disruptions, etc.

Week 8, Class 1: Narrative and Procedural Representation

Pre-Class Prep

- Borrow one copy of Life in the Garden from Eric's office to demo in class.
- For the Life in the Garden exercise you'll need a large quantity of index cards, the larger the better. Each group of two students will need one "cover" (which is just one index card) and 10-16 "pages" (which are index cards cut in half). For a class of 16 students, that's around 100 index cards total, 80-85 of them cut in half. Probably want to have extras for do-overs.
- Print materials for Up the River or grab copies from the library and/or Eric's office. In a pinch, you only need one copy for a demo game that everyone else watches.
- Print materials for Ten Zombies: one board per group of two students (three-person group is OK for an odd number of students), and two rules sheets per group (because the rules sheet has a character sheet on it, and each group will make two characters.)
- Make sure you have the other required materials for Ten Zombies: one die per group, 10-20 "zombie figures" per group (can be any generic figure, toy soldier, etc), 2 "special figures" per group (a different looking figure, or just a marker, pawn, block, etc)
- Have the texts (prose poems, stories, fairytales etc) that you plan to use for the Narrative Game assignment, printed out and folded up or put in envelopes, so they can be randomly assigned to groups of 3-5. Have enough that each group can take a second pick if they don't like what they got.

Why do games so often have stories in them? How do stories and gameplay benefit from each other, or create interesting counterpoint? (15-30 minutes)
- The distinction between embedded (or authored) narrative and emergent (or played) narrative.
- Conflicts between embedded and emergent narrative, and the idea of "ludonarrative dissonance" – when gameplay suggests one set of values, meanings, or stories, and is quite different than the embedded narrative
- Examples of embedded narrative: linear (cutscenes or "string of pearls" story vs branching or "choice" narrative
  - Choose Your Own Adventure as classic pre-digital branching, embedded narrative (to make sure students understand what a CYOA is, could get an paper copy from the library, or download one of Naomi’s growing collection of CYOA PDFs)
  - Steve Jackson's Sorcery: adding game elements to the Choose Your Own Adventure (Eric has some copies of these; there are many other "gamebooks" that are similar)
  - Are these on a continuum between "book" and "game," or how should we think of them?
- As an example of procedural narrative, show Life in the Garden

Exercise: Life in the Garden (45 minutes)
- Discuss Rules of Play Chapter 27 – Games as the Play of Simulation (15 mins)
- Procedural representation as another way of telling stories through games – between totally non-interactive forms of authored story and totally emergent player experience; a "shaped" narrative that's not pre-authored
- What are the "big ideas" of the chapter?
- Defining simulation - a representation of "reality" that utilizes a dynamic PROCESS
  - How does form relate to content?
  - We can separate the music in an opera from the libretto
  - Traditionally, there is harmony between form and content, ie, the imposing King sings imposing deep melodies
  - From the reading: Zelda witch character / Deus Ex Character

  - Fighting game examples: Zangief from Street Fighter looks large, sounds large, moves slowly, has wrestling
moves

- Unless we want to play with expectation and upend aesthetic assumptions of the audience (which is fine too) – the idea of "ludonarrative dissonance" again, is it overrated?
- What does a simulation leave out? And what does this omission say? (One example of this: the developers of Prison Architect avoided gameplay that involved violence, even though this is a hugely important dynamic in actual prisons)
  - Simulations are always partial; deciding what to shine a spotlight on, and what remains in the shadows, can be an extremely significant design choice that often speaks volumes about a designer's values
- PROCEDURAL representation – complexifies form and content relation
  - The nip vs. the bite (from Gregory Bateson: the nip represents a bite, but also the opposite of a bite – the dog is NOT fighting but playing) – this is the complexity of procedural representation – even in animal play!
  - Procedurality in play: strategies for creating story/content/narrative/character, etc
- Let's play some more example games and exercises to flex these techniques!

Exercise: Ninja (10 minutes)
Exercise: Up the River (15 minutes)
Some instructors have shown Naomi's Lacerunner project at this point as an example of "the power of names" to shape narrative experience: http://deadpixel.co/lacerunner/LaceRunner-cardpreview.2June2014.png
Discuss LeBlanc's "Dramatic Game Dynamics" reading (15 minutes)
  - Go over MDA framework if not already assigned earlier this semester.
  - What is drama? In other narratives? In games?
  - The specifics of how a system builds drama – uncertainty and inevitability.
  - What were the classes' favorite tools that LeBlanc lists?
Exercise: 10 Zombies (45-65 minutes)
Major Assignment: Narrative Game (5-30 minutes depending on examples)
- After groups get their assignments, give examples of useful approaches to narrative design in non-digital games. If you run out of time, do this in lab.
  - To help groups get started, discuss examples of other non-digital narrative games and the strategies they take. Here are some ideas for games to show; there may be others, or entire genres that could be added to this list (LARP? Mystery box games? Escape the Room? These might be a little more ambitious than groups have time for, but you never know.)
    - Once Upon a Time: an example of a game with a "creative user problem" that lives or dies based on how likely players are to jump in and start telling their own stories. If nobody's in the mood to be creative and make things up, the game can fall flat. You may want to forbid this approach completely if you're concerned!
    - Sherlock Holmes, Consulting Detective: an avalanche of embedded content; players poring over authored material as gameplay process; they actually are detectives
    - Arabian Nights: another game with a lot of embedded content, and a choose-your-own-adventure feel (with additional mechanics, and competition)
    - The Resistance or Shadows Over Camelot: narrative that emerges out of players being assigned to roles (traitor, etc)
    - Pandemic: design that focuses primarily on simulating a complex system (the spread of disease) and then gives players roles (specialists on a CDC-style team) to thrust them into that world
    - Lord of the Rings (Knizia): relying on an existing well-known story world allows a nuanced simulation of that fantasy world's rules (the mechanics of the "Ring") that players will "get" very quickly if they know the story
    - Cash n Guns: emergent drama created through very simple player roles, and a lot of social dynamics similar to what was discussed in the last unit

Week 8, Class 2: Narrative Game Lab (early lab)

Week 9, Class 1: Surrealist Story Games

Week 9, Class 2: Narrative Game Lab (final lab)

Week 10, Class 1: Narrative Game Due: Play and Critique

In-Class Exercises

Exercise: Life in the Garden

There are several copies of Life in the Garden in Eric's office. If you want to run this exercise, you can borrow them if Eric is around, or check with...
Naomi. These are much, much harder to replace than the other exercise materials, so please don’t lose them, and bring them back to Eric’s office, or somewhere safe in the faculty area, after you’re done using them. (Please don’t keep these somewhere else before or after your class!)

- play through *Life in the Garden* twice, showing that different stories result – if there aren’t enough copies to do this in small groups, just demonstrate once at a central table
  - to play you just shuffle the deck of “pages” and deal out five, place them between the covers, and read the resulting story
  - may be a good opportunity to discuss what is game-like about this experience; the creators describe it as an interactive paper book or an experiment in interactive storytelling. Why might they frame it this way, as opposed to calling it a game? Is it very different than longer digital versions of interactive story that are widely referred to as games?
  - discuss what makes *Life in the Garden* work as an emergent story
    - uses ambiguity to help readers “fill in the blanks” and create causality– can use examples from Scott McCloud’s works on comics, or the Kuleshov experiment in film editing, to discuss this
    - repeated themes help create connections between pages
    - no backstory needed (many people are familiar with these characters & setting from the Book of Genesis in the Bible)
    - small cast of characters (no minor characters who only show up once like a loose thread)
    - each page focuses on a “moment in time” that doesn’t involve permanent changes to the world
    - each page is like a generic, modular “lego block” of story that can connect to any other
  - brainstorm other settings or premises that might be interesting for an emergent storybook like *Life in the Garden*
  - these might be myths and fairytales, pop culture settings, or genre situations like “a barroom brawl in the Old West” – but they need to have similar properties as the list of “what makes *Life in the Garden* work?”

- in pairs, students create a new emergent storybook
  - these should have a book cover with an opening and an ending (one whole notecard can work for this)
  - and 10-12 pages (half notecards work well)
  - like any game, this needs playtesting; use the same rules – note that the original has 3/5/7 page versions for length, so they can vary length as well
  - share with the class by doing a sample story from each book
    - which worked best, and why?
    - what was not working, or difficult to contend with?

**Exercise: Ninja**

- May want to describe the game first in case anyone feels like they may be unable to physically participate, or don’t want to be touched.
- Need a large space to play, like the elevator lobby or area outside the library.
- **Ninja Rules**
  - Ninja is played by standing in a large circle with each player more than an arm's width from the next player (everyone spreads their arms all the way, and moves apart until nobody can touch anyone else). If your class is large, might have to take turns playing.
  - At the beginning of the game, someone (or everyone) yells “Ninja!” At this moment, everyone adopts the pose of a Ninja – whatever that means to you.
  - On your turn, make a single motion and then freeze in a pose. The motion may involve up to one step, hop, jump etc. with your feet, but no further movement (no multiple steps, etc.) Similarly, you may do one “attack” motion with your arms. When you finish your pose, freeze again. You may want to outlaw “cheesy” attacks that end in a much less vulnerable position (swiping all the way out to the extent of reach with a hand, then returning it to be tight against the torso – this ought to be two motions).
  - Your goal is to touch someone else’s hand or arm with your hand. (No touching torsos, heads, legs – too dangerous!)
  - If you are touched on someone else's turn, you're out. The whole circle then moves a little closer together.
  - Next player's turn, counterclockwise, starts instantly after the last player finishes their motion and freezes in a pose. So you can be attacked as soon as your motion finishes!
  - As players move around, they may get “out of order” – but the actual order is whoever's counterclockwise from each other, even if the order has changed.

- Why does this game work as a procedural representation?
  - Freezing in a pose, touching hands only – the feeling of being “super-fast” even though you’re not
  - Arc of dramatic conflict as the circle closes
  - What if we didn’t know the name of the game – would it still have this feeling? The word “Ninja” carries certain connotations and permissions, roleplaying.

**Exercise: Up The River**

- The library has only one copy, but you can print and use this version (the order of tiles at the end of the rules are also useful for setup – so print those pages twice, once on cardstock to cut out): *Up The River* - printable.pdf
- Explain the rules, play and discuss. To save time, could just play one demo game with everyone else watching. (It’s kind of fun, but not an incredible game.)
- **Discussion:**
  - embedded elements that contribute to the narrative experience of the game (consistent every time): tiles, illustrations, box cover, names of elements, story in the rules
  - emergent elements that contribute to the narrative experience of the game (change every time): die rolls, sandbar, moving river that eliminates boats
- For a longer exercise, have students add one more rule that represents something not in the original game and try out their mod.
Exercise: 10 Zombies

- **Rules and Board: TEN ZOMBIES.pdf**
- You'll also need one six-sided die per group of 2-3 people, and a whole bunch of little figures to represent the zombies, with one special figure per group to represent the protagonist/avatar. In a pinch, these can be colored blocks, but we should have enough toy soldiers and similar figures in the prototype cart.
- First, as a whole class discuss a small, generic town in middle-america where a zombie story could take place.
- Then have the class brainstorm a cast of characters. Record on a whiteboard. Each character should have a couple of characteristics or personality traits. There should be at least a few more characters than there will be groups. It's OK for these characters to be "stock characters" but it may be necessary to discuss gender & race stereotypes if those come up!
  - Some obvious ideas if they have hard time getting started: no-nonsense football coach, grizzled local sheriff, rowdy diner cook, eager cub reporter, town drunk, harried doctor
  - Then brainstorm relationships among the characters. Each character should be connected to at least one or two others. Draw these relationships on the white board.
- Break into groups of 2 or 3. Each group picks a character.
  - The group has to come up with a list of 3 actions that “feel right” for the character to do. Start by thinking about the character; what do they do that’s specific to them? The 3 actions should include at least one movement and one attack action.
  - The goal is not game balance (although the game will be more interesting if the character has a chance at survival!) but instead to make the player FEEL like the character in the situation.
  - Play through a game with these characters. If playing 24 zombies, one player can control the zombies. Tweak it and play again, switching off who’s controlling the zombies or the human.
- Next, have 2 groups team up. Think of narrative relationships between the characters. And translate them into new “combo” actions – add one action to each character that creates the relationship. Play the 2-human version. (For 24 zombies, have two zombie masters too?)
- If there is time, go to 4 characters with 4 groups together. Each character should have at least 2 combos with different other characters in the game.
  - Students tend to ask if the merged boards should have two columns of zombies in the middle, or one, or zero. Two is recommended; the humans must fight to reach each other, and start in the middle of their respective boards.
- Discuss what worked and didn't work. Any suggestions for the overall rules of the game?

Major Assignments

**Major Assignment: Narrative Game**

- It's best to start this assignment in a class where there's some time to discuss narrative strategies and what kinds of forms narrative takes in games. If there's no time at the end of the previous unit (when the major assignment for that unit is due/critiqued) it may be better to wait until the narrative unit can begin.
- There are two versions of this assignment: using a source text as an inspiration for a game, and drafting a "beautiful mechanic" then selecting a popular intellectual-property / fictional franchise to pair with it.
- **Version 1: Source text**
  - Form groups of 3-5 students and give them each a random text. We're currently using proses poems from My Vibe by Jeremy Sigler for this assignment, but in the past we've used obscure Grimm's fairytales or Italo Calvino stories.
  - Print out a copy of each poem or story and conceal it in an envelope to hand out randomly. Alternately, you can have groups pick based ONLY on the title of the poem or short story.
  - If groups don't like their stories, they can redraw once, but must keep the second one they draw.
  - The assignment is to represent some aspect of the poem or story; games do not need to recount the whole plot, show every scene, or include every character. (Indeed, this is why poems work better – it's more about capturing the themes, moods, imagery and impressions of the text rather than trying to simulate a plot.
  - Think about the dynamics and aesthetics of the text as well as the particular elements: what's the feeling, mood, or tone? Is there a dramatic arc or central conflict, or something else that inspires your group?
  - This inspiration is a starting point; games can evolve beyond it.
- To help groups get started, discuss examples of other non-digital narrative games and the strategies they take. Here are some idea for games to show; there may be others, or entire genres that could be added to this list (LARP? Mystery box games? Escape the Room?)
  - These might be a little more ambitious than groups have time for, but you never know.
    - **Once Upon a Time**: an example of a game with a "creative user problem" that lives or dies based on how likely players are to jump in and start telling their own stories. If nobody's in the mood to be creative and make things up, the game can fall flat.
    - **Sherlock Holmes, Consulting Detective**: an avalanche of embedded content; players poring over authored material as gameplay process; they actually are detectives
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    - **Cash n Guns**: emergent drama created through very simple player roles, and a lot of social dynamics similar to what was discussed in the last unit
Readings for Unit 4 - Narrative in Play

Assigned Week 7 (end of previous unit) to be discussed in Week 8, Class 1 (Narrative and Procedural Representation)

Standard Readings (These readings are referenced in the lesson plan, tend to relate to unit educational goals, and are often from Rules of Play, but can be supplemented / replaced!)

- Rules of Play, Chapter 27: Games and the Play of Simulation (procedural representation, simulations, immersive fallacy, game consciousness)
- Dramatic Game Dynamics by Marc LeBlanc, from the Game Design Reader

Alternate Readings (Someone's assigned one or more of these in the past! Feel free to sample.)

- Game Design Vocabulary, Chapter 7: Storytelling by Naomi Clark (Kuleshov and narrative, various forms of embedded and emergent narrative; story as exploration, exertion, system)
- Characteristics of Games, Chapter 7.2 by Richard Garfield, Skaff Elias, and Robert Gutschera (conceit and motif, ways of looking at theme for non-digital games)
- Postcolonial Catan by Bruno Faidutti (English version on second half of page)
- "Gossip" Chapter 19 of On Game Design by Chris Crawford (procedural narrative of social systems)
- Rules of Play, Chapter 26: Games as Narrative Play (embedded and emergent narrative, looking at narratives as systems with properties like conflict and uncertainty and goals, etc)

Assigned Week 8 (end of previous unit) to be discussed in Week 9, Class 1 (Surrealist Story Games)

Standard Readings (These readings are referenced in the lesson plan, tend to relate to unit educational goals, and are often from Rules of Play, but can be supplemented / replaced!)

- The aforementioned Surrealist Games

Alternate Readings (Someone's assigned one or more of these in the past! Feel free to sample.)

- Any alternate readings from previous week.

4. LeBlanc Reading (15 mins)

Go over MDA framework.

What is drama? In other narratives? In games?

The specifics of how a system builds drama – uncertainty and inevitability.

What were the classes' favorite tools that LeBlanc lists?