Making Stories Playable

Aaron A. Reed
Narratively-charged gameplay
Interludes of Story
Story as optional, parallel content

Click to pick it up and you may play the narration of the lore book while you continue adventuring.
Story choices
Quiz
(attendance only--no right answer)
Have you played the original “Myst” (1993)?

A) No
B) Yes, but I didn’t finish
C) Yes, and I reached at least one ending
D) Yes, and I replayed to get all the endings
Problems with story choices

• #1: Combinatorial explosion
How to solve combinatorial explosion problem?

- kill the player off after most choices
How to solve combinatorial explosion problem?

- have a story that ends very quickly
How to solve combinatorial explosion problem?

- fold choices back into the “right” plot thread, making them irrelevant.
- beads on a string
- dialogue trees
How to solve combinatorial explosion problem?

- only offer choices very late in the story.
Problems with story choices

• #2: There’s often one “right” ending and a bunch of “wrong” or less good endings.
• Is that really an interactive story, or a story with alternate endings?
“It's possible to combine storytelling with interactivity if you take the story apart and make sure that each thread or each branch that allows a choice is a story in itself. If you have three branches that all lead to the same ending, each one has to be an equally valid story. And that is the challenge.”

Amanda Goodenough, “Hyperland,” 1984
So how can we do this?
Some say we can’t.

“That a game can aspire to artistic importance as a visual experience, I accept. But for most gamers, video games represent a loss of those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized, and empathetic.”

Roger Ebert, 2005
• “[among] the most creative and compelling experience of its generation” 360 Gamer

• “one of the most playable, thought-provoking, and just downright impressive games... ever” GamePro

• “among the best games ever made.” The New York Times
Game of the Year – IGN
Game of the Year – Spike TV
Game of the Year – X-Play
Game of the Year – Game Informer
Best Game – BAFTA
Best Story – GameSpot
Best Story – GameSpy
Best Story – GamePro
Best Writing – Game Developer’s Choice Awards
A+ – 1Up.com
10/10 – EGM
10/10 – Eurogamer
10/10 – Official Xbox Magazine
“No one in or out of the field has ever been able to cite a game worthy of comparison with the great poets, filmmakers, novelists and poets.”

Roger Ebert, 2010
Three Tries

- Blue Lacuna (2009)
- Prom Week (2012)
- Almost Goodbye (2012)
Interactive Fiction

West of House
Score: 0
Moves: 3

boarded front door. You could circle the house to the north or south.
There is a small mailbox here.

> open mailbox
Opening the small mailbox reveals a leaflet.

> read leaflet
[Taken]
"WELCOME TO ZORK, a game of adventure, danger, and low cunning. No computer should be without one!"

Note: this “mini-zork" contains only a sub-set of the locations, puzzles, and descriptions found in the larger, disk-based version of Zork II.

>
How To Play Interactive Fiction
(An entire strategy guide on a single postcard)
Written by Andrew Plotkin — design by Lea Albaugh

You just started up a game and now you're staring at a text and a blank cursor and you don't know what to do.

Don't panic kids — Crazy-Uncle Zarf is here to help you get started."

You are standing in an open field west of a white house, with a boarded front door. There is a small mailbox here.

You can try all sorts of commands on the things you see.

Try the commands that make sense! Doors are for opening, buttons are for pushing, pixies for eating. (Gnomes.)

If you must examine, these should work:

- TALK TO name
- ASK name ABOUT something
- TELL name ABOUT something
- GIVE name TO name
- SHOW name TO name

Each game has slightly different commands, but they all look pretty much like these.

This is a handy IF-for-beginners card that we came up with for the People's Republic of Interactive Fiction Hospitality Suite at PAX-East 2010. If somebody is sitting down in front of an IF game for the very first time, this card should give him or her an idea of what commands will work — and what commands are likely to work. It's not trying to teach everything an IF expert would know; it's just conveying the pattern.

Several formats are available:
blue lacuna
an interactive novel
Beach, Near the Abandoned Cabin
Morning sunlight beams over the top of the lava flow, warming the sand and the roof of the cabin in patches. Spotless white sand stretches in a great arc around the lagoon.

The beach stretches away towards the cluster of boulders or the rocky rise, or you could also head down to where the waves are breaking. The cabin lies back up the beach.

> undo
Abandoned Cabin
Okay, I’ve taken back your last move.

>
Three Goals

- Make a better interface
- Make a reactive NPC
- Let the player’s choices be meaningful.
A Reactive NPC

Galatea
“My wife was in this dream, you see. Dead. All dressed in white, trails of fabric rippling behind her for miles, miles. She asked me where our girls were, our daughters, and I had, I had to tell her... that I... I didn’t, don’t know...”
say "[one or] giving you a chiding look[or] confident in his lecturing[or] fully expecting you to listen[or random order];

else if bitter dad:
    say "[one or] speaking quickly as if sure you plan to interrupt him[or] waving a desperate finger at you as if in weak admonishment[or] trying and failing to adopt a stern, paternal tone[or random order];

else if disciplinarian:
    say "[one or] cutting you off with a stern glare[or] grabbing your arm as if expecting you to run away[or] rooting you to the spot with an angry, commandeering gaze[or random order];

else if toady:
    say "[one or] grabbing your sleeve in an almost pathetically eager attempt to secure your attention[or] eyes wide with pleading, begging you to hear his say[or] clutching your hand fawningly[or random order];

else if lover:
    say "[one or] closing his hands around yours[or] putting his hands on your shoulders[or] stepping close to you[or random order];

else if twitterpated:
    say "[one or]..."
Let the player’s choices be meaningful

**Epilogue A**
Rume is most important.
- Convo with dream Rume
- Player’s farewell in Studio

**Epilogue B**
Progue is most important.
- Convo with Lethe
- Progue’s farewell on outcrop

**Epilogue C**
The player is most important.
- Convo with Dr. Quick
- Solitary; hunting
Prom Week

(with Josh McCoy, Ben Samuel, Mike Treanor, and many more!)
Social Physics
Rich Simulation of Characters

- Traits
- Statuses
- Relationship networks
- Binary relationships
- CKB
- SFDB
Look, just because you’re going out with my friend doesn’t mean I have to like you.
Authorial Challenge...

- We needed at a minimum scenes to cover each possible change.
- More specific scenes make for a better story...
- ...but also make them less likely to appear for any given player.
Generic Stop Dating Scene

A: Hey, B, I don’t think we should go out any more.

B: No, probably not.

(result: A no longer dating B)
More Specific Stop Dating Scene

(precondition: A dating B, A dating C)

A: B, you jerk! I can’t believe you cheated on me with C!

B: It’s not what it looks like, A! C means NOTHING to me! I love *you*!

A: Tell it to the hand. We’re SO OVER!

(result: A no longer dating B, A angry at C)
Start Enemy

(precondition: A is friends with C, A is angry at C)

A: I’m so mad at you right now, C, I could kill you!

C: What are you talking about, A? We’re friends. I’d never hurt you.

A: You already did. Never speak to me again.

(result: A enemies with C, A likes C less, C is sad)
• (result: remember that C did something mean to A: “C stole A’s boyfriend.”)
More specific

(precondition: C did something mean to A in the last 5 turns)

A: I can’t believe you’d betray me like this, C.

C: What are you talking about?

A: You know damn well what I’m talking about. (the mean thing)!

C: I… I did. I’m so sorry, A …
Almost Goodbye
"Of course," I say, too loud, guilty. "I couldn't leave without the blessings of my harbinger."

"More just a binger these days, darling." I drum my fingers on the cobblestones. "When one runs out of drinking companions, one tends to do it alone, and to excess."

"It's been so crazy," I say, wishing I didn't have to be defensive, "the training, the work. You know how it's been."

"Can't say I do," he says, looking away. "It's been over a year since we spoke, Muriel."

It can't be. Has it? I say nothing for a little while, then I sigh.

"Oh, Harbin... I'm so sorry. I've been a miserable friend, I know."

I'm aware somehow of the planet slowly turning into darkness. He takes a deep breath.

"It's strange, Muriel." He stops for a moment. "I never thought of you as much of a gambler. But here you are, about to wager everything." He frowns. "Gamblers tend to be either stupid, or desperate. Wouldn't have thought you either."

I wonder how the sun can be going down already. "This mission isn't a gamble. We know what's out there."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," he snaps, suddenly angry. "You have scraps, love. Crumbles of data, some theories, some wishes. You're throwing away a life, leaving the world for the
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So Why Choice?
Thank you!
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