Games that Play Along with You

Brian Magerko’s group at Georgia Tech often talks about the problems faced by interactive narrative systems in terms of improvisational theater. Two actors begin in some kind of ill-defined situation, such as a meeting of superheroes. Then, one turns to the other and makes what is called an *offer*, such as, “Thank heaven you’ve come, Captain Giraffe!” The proper response to an offer is usually a “Yes, and,” which acknowledges the contribution of the first actor and expands upon it with another offer. “Looks like I got here just in time to search for the missing Zookeeper. I’ll go look on top of the roof!”

Narrative experiences have two major roles: storyteller and participant. What makes interactive narrative unique is some amount of give and take between these two. In role playing video games as they exist today, the game designers tend to make all the offers. The ultimate symbol of this is the yellow exclamation mark that appears over the head of a non-player character in *World of Warcraft*. It says, “Player, let me make you an offer.”

In early RPG’s, the only response (if you wanted to make any progress) was “yes.” RPG’s are an exercise in playing along with the game designer; do the laundry list of things that the king has laid out for you and then return later to get some experience points. The invention of the *side quest* expanded our list of options to “yes” or “no” for quests that were not essential to the main story. More recent games, like *Mass Effect 2* and *The Witcher 2*, pride themselves on branching stories that allow a limited number of “yes and” responses that have noticeable effects on the player’s character and the content of the game. Playing along with these games is beginning to feel like a truly interactive experience.

With me so far? Good. Hold that thought as I go down a seemingly unrelated tangent.

I love *Minecraft*. You wake up one day in a randomly generated world of cubes. The cubes on the ground are dirt, and they can be picked up and rearranged. The cubes making up the trees
are wood, which you can pick up and convert into tools. Use those tools to dig down into the dirt until you hit stone, and then (if you’ve like most Minecraft players), use that stone to build a palace of epic proportions.

The problem with Minecraft is that there’s nothing to do once you’re done building (except to start building something else). My palace had guest rooms, but no one ever came to stay the night. It had walls, but there was never an invading army to repel.

Maybe now you can see where this is going. When I built my guest rooms, I made the game an offer, and sadly it got no response. The game was not playing along with me. I think the next major innovation in the field of story-based games is this ability for games to play along.

Imagine a game that starts off like Minecraft or the Grand Theft Auto series, which gives you free reign to do whatever you want, but doesn’t end there. As you build a town or enhance your reputation as a car thief, the game reacts to you as if you were making offers. The game accepts your offers with a “yes and.”

So you’re establishing a small town on the outer rim of the Great Empire? Sounds like an opportunity for a roving band of goblins to attack! You fend it off of course—the game doesn’t want to annoy you by destroying everything you’ve built. Unfortunately, the goblins made off with little Timmy during their retreat. You could go after him yourself, if you like that sort of thing, but as the mayor of the town you decide that you can’t just leave at a moment’s notice. Instead, the game sends you a troop of brazen young adventurers seeking fame and fortune. These AI-controlled non-player characters come to you, the mayor, to ask for a quest. You task them with retrieving young Timmy in your stead. Now the player is one with the yellow exclamation mark over his head, and the game is playing along.

I do not write this post to criticize our current generation of RPG’s. I’m currently enjoying Star Wars: The Old Republic, and I appreciate all the effort that went into making its story feel interactive. I write this because of the current trend I’ve noticed in games: we can make a truly interactivity story by starting with a traditional RPG and adding in more “yes and” choices. I think this needs to be reversed. Rather than giving the player more ways to play along, let’s find ways to play along with them.