Most of the time in the field of interactive narrative we talk about how to design an experience for the player. Rarely do we talk about how to design an experience for several players or a party. Lately I’ve been playing (too much) Star Wars: The Old Republic. This game has labeled itself as the MMO with a storyline. While that is true to an extent, one of my colleagues pointed out that it is far from a multiplayer storyline experience. They did a great job of presenting a story for the single player in a multiplayer environment, but it is still mainly linear and a solo experience (with a few exceptions). This got me thinking: what would a multiplayer interactive narrative role playing game look like?

I immediately think of my experiences playing table top RPG's like dungeons and dragons. Here, the storyline is developed through all the players and the dungeon master making decisions together. Any choice one of the players make affects the game experience as a whole. The dungeon master will change the world accordingly and may change how events are told. A system for multiplayer interactive narrative would need to do both of these as well. First, it would need to be able to change the story for everyone, based on everyone's choices. One of the challenges for interactive narrative is how to handle the conflict between what the player wants to do and what the system wants the player to do. Now, not only would the system need to handle that, but it would also need to handle conflicts between each player. For example, how would you handle a situation where one player wants to slay a dragon, and another wants to befriend that same dragon. Some of this may be handle by allowing the group to figure it out amongst themselves, however some situations may be mediated by changing the story to allow for both.

Another issue which would need to be handle is how to show the events in the story. For a single player interactive narrative, generated cut scenes need to highlight the relevant exploits of the character which may have developed through choices the player made. In a multiplayer situation the system would need to consider all players. Now not only do you need to highlight the exploits of a player, but the relevant ones where the other players contributed. One example whould be showing assists in basketball. Not only do you want to show the dunk, but possibly the pass preceding it. Cut scenes which feature multiple players could be generated for key points in the story. Also, these cut scenes could be composed differently to show the same material, but from the view of the specific player's character. The system would need to be able to generate multiple cut scenes all of which communicate the same information but know which characters to highlight.

Some of the most fun I've had gamming was in tabletop games where we as a party decided to start messing with each other (mainly in the game Paranoia). We were able to do this because our GM was so good at adapting. Multiplayer Interactive narrative could also allow for
situations like these, where the point of the game is to hinder the progress of each other. Conflict in these types of games is encouraged. Many times the goals of one player will contradict the goal of another. Or even one goal for one person will contradict with another goal that same person has. With a multiplayer interactive system, this storyline player vs player situation becomes possible. The system could adapt the story to each player's failed or completed goal and how it affects the other players’ goals.

More and more video and computer games are starting to use storyline as a major selling point. The industry has move away from the more arcade, you'll never beat this game, style play to a story driven model where the game is designed to be finished. Furthermore some developers have started adding choice points to these games, which mildly effect how the story plays out. A true interactive narrative experience is one possible (and likely in my opinion) next step for these games to take. While MMO's are a little bit behind the curve on this issue, I think they are a great platform for an interactive multiplayer narrative experience once the technology is there.