Over the last few decades, games have evolved from a very scripted experience where the player plays a passive role in experiencing the author's unfolding story to a collaborative effort between the player and the author to tell a shared story. Current research in interactive narrative continues to push the envelope to give the player more and more control over the outcome of the story. The ideal outcome is to have a game where each user receives a unique experience based on his or her choices. The author still has some degree of control over the story, but the control is for the most part in the hands of the player. But is this what the players really want? As a interactive narrative researcher, I think it is valuable to reflect on whether or not our noble goals will translate into a product that the players will enjoy.

Critically acclaimed narrative games like Fallout 3, Mass Effect, and Skyrim provide great advances in many areas of gameplay, yet present a very simplistic model for storytelling. The story paths are for the most part linear, with some aesthetic choices thrown in to allow the player to express their character's personality. Few choices that the player makes affect the story in profound ways. This ultimately is due to the fact that the story options are hard-coded onto the game disc, which results in everyone able to have a narratively similar play experience. Researchers in interactive narrative hope to take the hard-coded quests off the disc and generate the narrative play experience dynamically. This would allow for a more customized play experience that it is assumed that the player will appreciate.

This assumption that players want this kind of personalized play experience should not be assumed. In a study that my lab mates and I performed [1], we measured players' sense of agency (control over gameplay experience) in a choose-your-own-adventure story. Players were randomly assigned one of three different versions of the story: one where their choices significantly changed the story they experienced, one where the story was linear but their choice was acknowledged, and one where the story was linear and their choices were not acknowledged. The intention of this study was to show that it is possible to simulate the branching nature of the first story by reducing it to a linear story where it seems like their choices matter, like in the second story. The third story was to show that this reduction from a branching story to a non-branching story will not preserve the player's sense of agency without the acknowledgement of their choices. However, the results of this study defied some of our expectations. In almost every question measuring the components of player agency, the three stories did not differ significantly in the player's sense of agency. This might suggest that the time and effort spent into personalizing the player's game experience did not increase the player's sense of agency over a very obviously linear version of the game.

Another reason players may not be able to appreciate a unique play experience is genre expectations. Players want to explore a variety of options, get the most powerful items and
abilities, replay sections of the game to see all of the different possibilities, and ultimately
triumph in the end. In the choose-your-own-adventure study, the players were ostensibly trying
to find the Crown of Power. In the version where their choices matter, they could choose
explore a location without the Crown of Power. Some players self reported that they still
expected to find the Crown, regardless of the path they took. Thus, at least for the decision of
where to explore, they actually didn't want that choice to matter. Also, consider two other
games where some players expressed discontent with the player experience being crafted
around their decisions. The first game is Heavy Rain. The story was told from several
characters' perspectives. It was possible for the player to get a character killed, which would
result in that character's story being removed from the rest of the game. Players were unhappy
because they were not able to experience that portion of the game, despite the system faithfully
adapting to the players' choices. The second game is Star War: The Old Republic. The game
is largely a single player role playing game in a multiplayer universe. As a result, there is not
the option to reload and choose a different choice, thus locking players out from exploring
multiple paths through the story. These kind of genre expectations clash with the kind of
experience a fully adaptive game would provide.

This is not to say that research in interactive narrative is not valuable. There is a time and place
for fully adaptive experiences, such as in the fields of intelligent tutoring systems and training
simulations. However, the possibility that interactivity does not increase player agency and the
clash between genre expectations and what interactive narrative provides should provoke
further reflection upon interactive narrative's place in games.


Matthew Fendt is a researcher at North Carolina State University studying interactive narrative
in games.