The Need to Adapt the Tools of Drama to Interactive Storytelling

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Game developers are beginning to realize that mindless, violent action, and fantastic special effects supported by ever advancing hardware will not hold the interest of core gamers forever. After certain point, advances in resolution and sound won't be enough to increase sales. The added effect will be negligible. In addition, mindless games without good characters and narratives will never attract a wider market, despite photo-realistic decapitation and volcanic eruptions of blood. Sure, we can always count on x-number of boys coming up through the ranks who will buy x-number of units. But why should we be satisfied with this small market when there is a much larger market to be nurtured and exploited? As a result, some have begun to reconsider the importance of story and character development.

A rising concern is, "How do we graft a story to our action game?" Story means linear...right? The whole idea of a story is opposed to the idea of interactivity...right? The basic concern is "How do we make an effective interactive story?" So what does effective mean in terms of interactive storytelling? There are two basic ingredients. These are intuitive interface design and compelling stories. In this article, I will address one of the two ingredients, the development of compelling interactive storytelling.

My definition of a compelling story is one that grabs and holds the attention of the audience. It must move and excite them. It must take them on an emotional roller coaster. Finally, it must make them feel like they have had a worthwhile experience at the conclusion.

What is it that engages and holds on to us in stories, interactive or not? What makes a story compelling and satisfying? An art form has evolved to deal with these issues. The name of this art form is "drama". Though the word "drama" is thrown around a lot, very few could accurately describe it. So before we begin to explore how the principles of drama can be adapted to create compelling interactive entertainment, we must first briefly review what drama actually is. After a brief overview, we will explore specific tools and suggest some ways to adapt them.

What is Drama?

There are many generalized descriptions of drama, which is actually a body of arcane knowledge compiled over thousands of years. The main points of agreement are that drama is a story of human conflict communicated by means of speech and action to an audience. Moreover, that which depicts human conflict will command attention and interest. Therefore drama uses the innate human interest in conflict to engage an audience for the purpose of communicating a theme. The theme must be something that we can all relate to.
In a dramatic presentation, conflict is expressed through visible action. Of course game designers understand the need for action. But to make a project compelling, the reason for the action is more important than the action itself. The forces that cause the action are what excite the audience, making the action believable, and holding the audience in rapt attention.

What are the reasons for action? In life and in drama, the study of the human being resolves itself into an evaluation of the motivation that provokes action. Whenever there is a balance of forces in our lives, we prefer to not act. However, when there is an imbalance of forces, and the motivation to restore balance is strong enough to overcome this basic inertia, some kind of action is taken.

The motivation to act lies in our wishes, needs, and desires. When any obstacle stands in the path of the resolution of these motivations, conflict occurs. In its barest form, a dramatic work all comes down to a character, or a group of characters, that we empathize with because they want something that we can all relate to wanting, and antagonistic forces that opposes the fulfillment of our want. The clash of these opposing forces results in dramatic action.

Human motivation can arguably be divided into four basic drives: desire for response, desire for recognition, desire for adventure, and desire for security. These are the motivating forces that control the actions of all humans.

Desire for Response: the need every human being feels for intimate contacts with others -the desire for companionship and fellowship- can be fulfilled by a dramatic work in at least two different ways. It can be a social institution. People seldom go to the theatre or to the theater by themselves. Of course massively multiplayer games hook into this aspect of dramatic presentations.

In a more universal sense, an interactive dramatic work can satisfy the desire for response by providing the participant with a chance to partake in the drive to resolve the conflict with others. The participant who is caught up in the imaginative whirl of the work feels a fellowship and an intimate personal contact with the dramatic characters — empathy, in other words. Instead of just the immediate thrill of a firefight, we also gain the desire of the participant to achieve a positive response from the characters by his or her actions. Thus, we have just made ordinary action more compelling.

Desire for Recognition
By way of the dramatic work we may enjoy all of the recognition denied us in life: fame, influence, authority, reputation, and renown. Drama is peopled with fabulous or fantastic characters to identify with. Traditionally we vicariously enjoy the homage given kings and heroic warriors. In the interactive realm we can directly receive the plaudits of a grateful society for bringing the bad guys to task. We can feel firsthand the rush of victory after a battle that would be much too dangerous in real life. If we choose to follow an outsider or anti-hero, we get the chance to feel much more special, unique, or unusual than in mundane life. But this only works if we have based our venture on the basic premise of drama: In its barest form, a dramatic work all comes down to a character, or a group of characters that we empathize with, because they want something that we can all relate to, but very difficult obstacles stand in our way. If we don't care about what the characters want, or if what we want is too easy to get, it won't move us. That is, it won't be fun.

The Desire for Adventure
No one's life is so complete that he or she doesn't desire vital new experiences beyond the possibility of attainment in ordinary life. The dramatic work is a land of action and adventure. We get to enjoy the thrills of romance and conflict that is frequently denied in life. We may grapple with the problems of a falling dynasty, or stand casually, blaster in hand, and then thwart the alien mob. We are the ones who get to protect the weak and destroy the wicked. (Or rid the cosmos of weak-minded inferiors).
The Desire for Security
In most dramatic works the hero emerges triumphant. When we identify with the hero we vicariously pass through the trials, the struggles, the crises, and remain reasonably sure that our cause will win out. This accounts for the popularity of films with happy endings. When we indulge ourselves with interactive entertainment we experience this firsthand. Some will say, "How immature! Life isn't like that." Of course, but most people do not go to the films or buy a video game to prove their maturity or to see life as it is. Life is complicated and our control of it is minimal. In our times not only our security but the security of life on earth is threatened. The feeling of helplessness in the face of it all is an every day fact of life. But in the dramatic work we get to indulge our emotional and imaginative sensitivity, to be stimulated and diverted, and to see life as it "ought" to be — more secure.

There are of course many other reasons that we seek out a good story, interactive or not. We may seek great intellectual as well as emotional values. They comment upon life and its problems, and perhaps pose specific argumentative propositions. A dramatic work can also provide deep aesthetic and artistic experiences. However, when all is said and done, the great attraction of a well done story lies in the opportunity to participate imaginatively in the dramatic action. A dramatic work can perhaps survive without art or intellect; it cannot survive without emotion.

Drama is a work that encourages empathy, but even more than that it promotes pathos — the quality that arouses feelings of pity, sorrow, and compassion. When a drama is successful, the audience is suspended in an altered state of hyper-awareness and emotion. The principles of drama are what make stories compelling.

Economy is the essence of clarity

Drama is an art form, and as such is a method of concise, powerful communication. In watching a film or a television episode we have declared our willingness to have something communicated to us. We are conditioned to think of a television or cinema screen as space within which significant things are being shown; we will therefore try to arrange everything that happens within this space into an understandable and significant pattern. Hence, anything that is unnecessary or does not contribute to that pattern will be seen as an intrusion, an irritant.

The dramatist limits and controls her imaginative flight within a well-defined dramatic structure. Her prime purpose is to project her interpretation of life clearly and forcefully, so that the experiences of the characters may become the experiences of the spectator. To do this successfully, the dramatist must follow the universal artistic process in adapting life to the stage. It is a process of informed simplification and refinement. The key steps in the creation of a work of art are:

- Selection
- Rearrangement
- Intensification

By careful selection, the playwright chooses the conflict, theme, characters, and situation that communicate the playwright's meaning. By rearrangement, they create a dramatic and exciting sequence. The playwright may intensify by highlighting certain characters and subordinating others. They may emphasize particular ideas to the exclusion of others. The Playwright may develop some situations fully and trace others only lightly. The meaning and the power of the drama will depend upon the elements the playwright intensifies. Finally, highly selected dramatic characters are placed in highly selected dramatic situations.
The headline that proclaims "Space Ray Destroys Planet Alderon" tells of an exciting action. It is compelling in and of itself, but only briefly — the reader wants to know more. What drove the this? How did it happen? What are the results of the action? The drama is the concise tale of the background of the climactic action stated in the headline. It traces in an exciting and clear fashion the interplay of the forces that ultimately drove the destruction of a small, peaceful planet. A dramatic presentation is the story of the struggle and conflict that caused the final action.

The Three Act Structure

In a dramatic presentation the pattern of human conduct is developed within the framework of a particular structure or dramatic form, which, despite passing innovations, has persisted over thousands of years. The study of this structure is the next step in understanding the principles of drama.

Dramatic structure is the destruction and restoration of the balance of forces. Simply, it is the process of getting into, and then back out of, trouble. Examine any compelling story and you will find that at the outset an equilibrium exists; the potentials of struggle may be present and even boiling under the surface, but the trigger has not been pulled. During the presentation or interaction the balance is destroyed. At the conclusion of the drama balance has been regained. It may be a balance of forces completely different from that found in the beginning, but a balance is present.

This balance-imbalance-balance structure is divided into five parts. The parts are:

- Exposition
- Complication
- Climax
- Resolution
- Conclusion

These five parts fall into three acts in the following way:

**Act One**

Act One is composed of exposition: the initial situation is described. Time, place, and the social and psychological aspects of the situation are set forth for the information of the audience or participant. The characters are introduced and the audience is given everything necessary to understanding their reasons for being. The theme is introduced, perhaps as foreshadowing, so that the spectator is aware of all the forces that will lead to conflict. Above all, the exposition must catch the interest of the audience. First you have to get their attention.
The exposition leads to the inciting action. The inciting action is the moment of destruction of the balance of forces — the trigger being pulled. Sometimes it is called the inciting moment or the overt act, meaning that it is the clear, visible action which incites the struggle.

**Act Two**
Act Two is composed of complications leading to a climax: once the balance of forces has been disturbed by the inciting action, the storyteller goes about the business of getting her characters into trouble. The complication is the body of the drama. It is the bringing together of the protagonistic and antagonistic forces in a series of more and more important crises in the struggle. The development of the conflict continues with increasing fury until it can go no further without resolution.

The climax is the high tide of the drama. From the spectator's or participant's standpoint, it is the high point of excitement. From the standpoint of conflict, it is the point at which the protagonist and antagonistic forces arrive at an impasse that allows no other solution but to finally resolve the difficulty. This moment is often a seemingly unsolvable problem.

**Act Three**
Act Three is composed of the inevitable unwinding of the conflict, governed by the turn the conflict takes at the climax, leading to a conclusion. During the resolution the tension drops somewhat, in that the audience thinks that it is able to forecast the final result, though not the method of reaching it. This unwinding must be handled without any loss of interest. Surprise and more suspense are the tools to solve this problem. Often a false climax is followed by the true climax, which is then followed by the true resolution.

Finally, at the conclusion, the questions of the audience are logically and finally answered. In contrast, a conclusion can also simply be an emotional pay-off, as in the final scene of *Star Wars*, which explains nothing, but communicates the victorious return of our heroes.

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Finally, at the conclusion, the questions of the audience are logically and finally answered. In contrast, a conclusion can also simply be an emotional pay-off, as in the final scene of *Star Wars*, which explains nothing, but communicates the victorious return of our heroes. Whether or not the conclusion is satisfying comes back to how we relate to the characters. How do we feel about the protagonist and her goal? If the protagonist has a clear and compelling goal that we can all relate to, if we care about the protagonist and feel that she has fought an admirable and tough fight against a worthy adversary, then we will experience a purge of emotions when the protagonist finally succeeds, or fails.
The idea of an interactive computer story probably at first knee-jerk implies that many of the tools used to enhance a story with dramatic elements are now in the hands of the player instead of the writer or designer. In other words, the point of view, order of settings, and order of the story events, are now all at the whim of the "audience". Potentially lost are the balance-imbalance-balance over-structure, and the five-part (exposition, complication, climax, resolution, and conclusion) sub-structure of drama. Decreased control of these tools equals a dramatic problem.

A way that we can achieve both a non-linear, free-choice environment and keep our five-part dramatic structure is by assigning the non-linearity to the micro-level, while maintaining a scripted structure at the macro-level.

That's a mouthful, I know. For simplicity sake, let's say that areas in an action/adventure game in which the participant is allowed to freely explore are made up of two elements: the environment and NPC's. This means that the dramatist has two ways to communicate information to the participant: through environmental design and events, and through the actions and dialogue of NPC's.

One approach to achieving dramatic structure while maintaining free exploration is to create environments and NPC's that are informed by the five-part dramatic structure.

A way to achieve both is to group possible environmental events and possible NPC actions and dialogues into five libraries: exposition, complication, climax, resolution, and conclusion. In other words, the participant can explore the various environments at will and encounter the NPC's at will, but as long as we are working from the exposition library, for example, no matter what happens, the events and NPC actions will be about the time, place, the social and psychological aspects of the situation, the introduction of characters, their reasons for being, the introduction of theme, and foreshadowing conflict. When the inciting incident has been enacted, and it is time to begin on the conflict library, no matter where the player goes, no matter who the player encounters, the environmental events and the actions of NPC's will be about conflict, and so forth. In this way we maintain a large degree of non-linearity, while maintaining enough control to guarantee our dramatic structure.

Suspense

The basic task of the dramatist consists of capturing the attention of the audience and holding it for as long as required. If the audience fails to concentrate on what is happening from moment to moment, on what is being said and done, all is lost.

The creation of suspense underlies all dramatic construction. Expectations must be aroused, but never, until the last, wholly fulfilled; the action must seem to be getting nearer to the objective yet never reach it entirely before the end. Above all, in order to maintain interest, there must be constant variation of pace and rhythm.

There are many kinds of suspense: suspense may lie in a question like, 'What is going to happen next?', or in 'I know what is going to happen, but how is it going to happen?' or, indeed, 'I know what id going to happen and I know how it is going to happen, but how is X going to react to it?' Suspense can also be aroused by a quite different type of question, such as, 'What is it that I see happening?' or by the question 'these events seem to have a pattern; what kind of pattern will it turn out to be?' One thing, however, is certain: some sort of basic question must emerge fairly early in any dramatic form so that the audience can settle down to the main element of suspense. At its most basic suspense depends on the existence of at least two possible solutions to the problem.
The human attention span is relatively short. One major suspense element is not enough to hold an audience's attention throughout the course of a story. Beyond the main question or theme or story arc, the rise and fall of subsidiary arcs, arising from subsidiary suspense elements, must be superimposed. For instance, while our main interest is held by the question of why Planet Alderon was targeted, at the same time, in a much shorter time span, we are eagerly asking ourselves how the princess now being questioned was involved and whether she had anything to do with the final action. The main suspense element inspires subsidiary suspense elements. There is an element of suspense needed for each scene or section of the action, superimposed on the main suspense element of the work.

Secondary questions, goals, or problems could be a part of the set design. For instance, a body is found; how was the character killed? The answer seems to be inside a cave, but is the cave safe to enter? What about the giant footprints leading into the cave? The machine at the entrance of the cave seems to be part of the answer, but what does it do? Or even more simply, 'The path doesn't look too safe. What is beyond that next corner?' A study of theme rides in amusement parks would offer many examples of the creation of suspense in set design.

In order to insure moment-by-moment interest, there must be a third, purely local, micro-level element of suspense at any given moment in a well-devised story — the line of dialogue or single detail of business the characters are engaged in at that moment. Good dialogue and good moment-by-moment action is unpredictable. Predictability is the death of suspense and therefore of drama. In addition, a character who never says a line which is arresting, witty, amusing or interesting, will have great difficulty in catching the audience's sympathy or, conversely, loathing.

If we are careful to design our "stages" in an evocative way, and if we populate our stages with unpredictable and interesting NPC's, we can get the player to wonder 'What is going to happen next?', or 'I suspect I know what is going to happen, but how is it going to happen?' or even 'What is it that I see happening?'.

Lessons from Other Media

It's worth taking a quick look at how drama has been adapted and expanded to accommodate new forms of communication over the years. The concepts behind these adaptations can and should be employed to create compelling interactive entertainment.

Theatre, Film and TV can be viewed as steps in an evolution of dramatic language. Interactive drama should be seen as the next evolutionary step. Let's look at how two forms of dramatic presentation differ in how the principles of drama are applied.

Stage drama, being 'live', has the excitement of spontaneity, however well-rehearsed it may be, and it has the feedback from the audience to the actors. The actors on the stage are trained to be hyper aware of audience reaction. From night to night the performers will intensify certain aspects of the presentation and minimize others depending upon what is working, for each audience is different.

Beginning during the Renaissance and lasting into the eighteenth century, traveling troupes performed the commedia dell'arte, the Italian comedy. The company's ten or more actors each developed a specific type of character, such as the Captain, two old men (Pantalone and the Doctor), the Zanni (servant-buffoons). Along with these comic characters were the lovers. The comic characters were archetypes, well-known to an audience of commoners, and usually contrived at the expense of the aristocracy.
Before going on-stage, actors would agree on a basic plot and a general idea of how it should be performed. These plots were often well-known stories. But the actors had specific comic business (lazzi) that they developed (a bag of tricks). Though they knew the outline of the plot, no one, not even the actors, knew which comic bit would be pulled out. If the bit didn't work with the audience, another actor would throw out another one. If this worked well with the audience, another actor would throw out one that would play nicely against the successful bit. In this way the audience was kept in suspense in terms of what would happen next, even though they knew what the eventual outcome would be. It's spontaneous creativity, but within a structure that everyone knows and accepts.

This can of course have an equivalent in interactive storytelling. If AI-driven NPC’s are "aware" of their "audience" (player or experiencer) through say, an interpretation of input actions, and if the NPC’s could pull from a "library" of possible actions that all serve the same dramatic and narrative intent of the moment, then these "actors" could also continuously adapt their "performance" (within reason of course) to the personality of the player.

Another analogue is to be found in jazz. Often a combo will play from musical charts that note only the chord changes, number of beats for each chord, and key changes. Sometimes these charts will be based on a well-known song. Each musician improvises within this basic structure. The fun is the spontaneous emotional creation, the playing off one another, and the kind of mystical growth of theme. No two performances will ever be the same.

The photographic nature of the film and television mediums, on the other hand, allows a great degree of environmental realism, and gives the director an infinitely greater scope for varying the venue of the action. There is much greater flexibility in structuring the action. The camera and the microphone are extensions of the director. They enable him to choose his point of view (or hearing) and to move the audience there by varying long-shots and close-ups, by cutting from one face, one locale, to another at will. It is much easier to focus the audiences' attention on important details, however small or vast those details may be — from a John Ford sweeping Western vista to an Alfred Hitchcock bomb under a seat in the foreground of a shot. The psychological aspects of the use of lens, framing, and camera angle are worthy of a book and beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, "film language" has much to offer towards the creation of compelling interactive drama and developers would do well to become familiar with film making.

Japanese anime is novel, flashy, and often startlingly beautiful, but it is also generally more philosophical and character-oriented than American entertainment.
Interactive entertainment can learn something important from Japanese anime. It's novel, flashy, and often startlingly beautiful, but it is also generally more philosophical and character-oriented than American entertainment. Even in humorous anime it is the hero's struggles and lessons learned that often form the core of the story. Japanese stories often stress things that many American stories forget, such as self-sacrifice, the search for meaning, the power of helping others, and the idea of redemption for the fallen — the stuff of drama.

Finally, even the most violent and well rendered action combined with an interesting plot remains without lasting impact if the audience does not know, does not like, and is therefore not sufficiently interested in the characters. How do characters become objects of affection or interest? It is true that we relate to characters who are motivated by what we are motivated by, but there is more to it than that. In theatre, films, and television casting is very important. The personality of the actors chosen to embody the characters can help a great deal. With past limitations in the quality of 3D animation and lip-synch it has been tough to employ great CGI actors. But this is changing rapidly, and soon we will have NPC's capable of communicating emotion sufficiently well. But there is more to it than this. Witness the attraction of Lara Croft. Any dramatic presentation is also a voyeuristic experience. We want to see attractive, or at least highly interesting, unique, characters. The most compelling characters are a mixture of an attractive and original look, motivated by what motivates us, and who say surprising things.

Review

Humans are innately interested in conflict. Drama uses the innate human interest in conflict, expressed as visible action, to engage an audience for the purpose of communicating a theme. The interest in conflict is not enough — we want to know the reason for the conflict. Conflict arises out of wants, needs, and desires that are opposed by other wants, needs, and desires. We identify with dramatic characters because they are driven by the same basic motivations we are. Drama is a form of communication. The communication must be forceful, therefore it must be concise. Drama is structured. It has a beginning, middle, and end — equilibrium, disequilibrium, and equilibrium. Drama is the story of getting into and out of trouble. Suspense is used to maintain interest.

Many of the basic principles used in the development of drama can be applied directly to interactive storytelling. Instead of relying on constant violent action and awesome graphic quality, we should begin think about the reason for the conflict. We should make sure that the motivation for the conflict is centered on wants, needs, and desires that we can all relate to. This will help us to identify more strongly with the protagonist(s), the theme, and the goal that has been set forth. Since drama is a form of communication, and since communication must be concise in order to be forceful, we must end reliance on busywork side quests and such to fill out a game, and instead develop dramatic activities that are not only exciting, but which also continually support the main theme without being repetitive. Puzzles should arise out of the plot complications rather than being artificially forced upon the action because "a puzzle is needed here". In general the total structure of a well wrought dramatic work depends on a very delicate balance of a multitude of elements, all of which must contribute to the total pattern, and all of which are wholly interdependent.

This has been only the briefest overview of drama and a few beginning ideas of how drama might be applied to the interactive realm. The dramatist has many other tools that can be employed as well to make a presentation compelling and meaningful. If we become aware of and begin to use the analytical and developmental tools drama provides us, it can only help to increase the value of the interactive experience. Hopefully a discussion will begin and other strategies for incorporating these tools will be discovered.

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