Denison University

Denison Digital Commons

2023

Branching Beyond the Author: How Narrative Games Rewrite Storytelling

Olivia Bernard
Denison University

Branching Beyond the Author: How Narrative Games Rewrite Storytelling

Olivia Lynn Bernard

Project Advisor: Margot Singer

Department of English: Creative Writing

Denison University Summer Scholars
2023

Abstract

My Summer Scholars project explored interactive narrative through the lens of video games. I studied narrative theory, analyzed literary and story game case studies, and created an original branching narrative game.

First, I studied how the rise of interactive narrative has both deepened and subverted storytelling by disrupting established notions of audience/creator relationships, the nature of authorship, and the future of the format. I examined scholarship on the mechanics of interactive narratives and video games, and analyzed issues such as the Paradox of Choice, what goals interactive fiction should pursue, and how the genre can or should fit into designations like "literary." I also explored how interactive fiction finds itself in conversation with philosophies of authorship written long before its heyday.

Second, the nonlinear novels and seven interactive story games selected for this project reveal a system of common hierarchies and structures critical to both analyzing and writing branching narrative games. Additional insights were gleaned from interviews with three professional narrative designers.

Third, I planned and wrote a branching narrative of my own. Through it, I experienced the unique creative challenges posed by nonlinear fiction, including the importance of planning, avoiding choice bloat, and balancing player choice with story structure. This practical dimension of the project adds a new perspective to the academic literature by looking forward to the future of storytelling overall rather than only looking backwards to specific existing works.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

In the world of creative media, video games are young. Over the past several decades, they have evolved from simple tic-tac-toe challenges to the pixelated passion projects of early programmers to the vast and growing world of triple-A titans and creative indie developers we inhabit today. Compared to thousands of years of fiction and theater and over a century of cinema, video games are positively fetal. Yet their core attribute, the beating heart of video games and what draws us to them, has enabled a new mode of narrative engagement that is rewriting storytelling as we know it: interactivity.

This isn't to say interactive stories have never existed in some form. Plays often indirectly involve the audience by breaking the fourth wall. Some even explicitly allow the audience to influence the plot itself, as in theatrical experiences like *Sleep No More.* Similarly, many kids have had the delightful experience of flipping to this or that page number in choose-your-own-adventure books to defeat this shark or befriend that dragon. Indeed, the earliest interactive story games were hypertext quests like *Zork* that functioned very much like a choose-your-own adventure book, enabling players to move between locations and interact with the environment by typing a finite set of commands into their consoles.

By now, however, digital media has enabled interactivity to balloon far beyond the possibilities of stage, paper, or even hypertext. Popular games now proudly boast extensive narrative components like rich worldbuilding, fascinating characters, and stories that fork and branch into elaborate trees based on the player's actions. With digital media's capacity to store near-endless amounts of data, it seems the only limit faced by a software-savvy writer is the extent of their imagination.

Of course, there are many who think that games have little to offer in the way of narrative, and they are often looked down upon by educators, scholarly discourse, and even public opinion. Despite the vast array of game genres and the millions of players who enjoy them, there remains a perception of games as a brainless pastime without much to add to "serious" creative discourse. But the world of video games is much broader than this narrow connotation allows. As this project endeavors to show, video games have a great deal to teach us about the workings of narrative, and the creative insights they offer are woefully understudied. The future of interactive narrative is bright and the possibilities endless.

2. Scholarly Perspectives

The existing body of scholarly work on video games—which began in earnest in the late '90s and early '00s—is relatively small compared to the vast swaths of literature on other forms of creative media. However, its size hasn't stopped video game theory from sparking spirited debates and putting forward new, interesting, and controversial theories that are well worth discussing here. The discipline will only continue to grow.

a. Ludology vs. Narratology

It's impossible to discuss the field of video game theory without acknowledging its tumultuous beginning as scholars struggled to figure out games' relationship to other forms of media and academic disciplines. Do video games fall along the same narrative axis as traditional media, or do they comprise their own category distinct from other media, which is perhaps even mutually exclusive with narrative itself? Ludology, as the latter viewpoint called itself, focused on the centrality of gameplay, rules, mechanics, and player skills/strategies to differentiate video games from other media, and proponents pointed to the absence of seemingly ubiquitous narrative features like narrators/narratees, linearity, and fixed temporality. Narratology, on the other hand, sought to place video games within academia's existing literary theories that encompasses movies, novels, and so forth.

Neither viewpoint ended up defining game discourse as it exists today, which has shaped itself into a field independent from both positions, though with elements of each. It would be shortsighted to completely disregard the challenge aspects of play that do not exist in traditional media, and it would be similarly hasty to point to these elements as reasons to exclude the possibility of storytelling. Strategy, reflexes, and certain skills are completely foreign to media like novels but highly relevant when discussing the video game genre. Similarly, game stories

share principles that govern other types of storytelling media and narrative theory can often be applied to the story aspects of games as it would be to a movie.

That said, ludology, in my opinion, was certainly the weaker stance in this early debate. Marie-Laure Ryan, in her seminal work *Avatars of Story,* provides perhaps the most comprehensive takedown of ludology in chapter 8, "Computer Games as Narrative." She dissects common ludological arguments, which largely boil down to simplistic assumptions about the nature of narrative. For example, the argument that games cannot be narratives because "they do not allow the rearrangement of events that marks the distinction between story and discourse" (Ryan, *Avatars* 185) is easily dismissed. While chronological scrambling might not be a *common* feature of games, Ryan points out that plenty of games use cinematic cut scenes to exposit the backstory of a character through flashback (*Avatars* 185). She adds that "I can think of some cases where flashbacks would not be detrimental to gameplay" (*Avatars* 185).

This essay was written over fifteen years ago, and Ryan's prediction has since come to pass. *As Dusk Falls,* for example, is a branching narrative that spans multiple timelines. The first narrative takes place in present-day, with Zoe, a survivor of the hostage crisis the story centers on, grappling with PTSD. The second takes place within the crisis, where the player controls Vince, Zoe's dad, whose actions determine the fate of the family and the extent of the trauma Zoe faced. A third timeline tracks the events leading up to the crisis, following the youngest and most innocent criminal, Jay, and his turbulent home life. All three timelines interact and intersect, and choices made in one define outcomes and crossroads in the others. Gameplay elements, like swiping, clicking, or circling the mouse, are mostly accessory to the story.

Another ludological argument asserted a similar fallacy by asserting that narrative must recount real or fictious events by way of one or more narrators to one or more narratees—

meaning that any events that unfold in real time, rather than being recounted, are not narrative (Ryan, *Avatars* 184). This narrow definition would exclude not only games, but theater and cinema as well. Ryan correctly points out that "the trend today is to detach narrative from language and literature and to regard it instead as a cognitive template with transmedial and transdisciplinary applicability" (*Avatars* 184).

Ultimately, Ryan settles on an open, intermediary interpretation of games' relationship to narrative that I tend to agree with: "some games have a narrative design and others do not" (*Avatars* 192). This connection is a continuum, not a dichotomy. It's difficult to tease a narrative out of, say, *Tetris*, and even more difficult to assert that it was designed with one in mind. Other games, like *Space Invaders,* more readily open themselves to narrative interpretation (a spaceship fending off the encroach of hostile aliens). Still others are undeniably narrative-focused, with the gameplay and mechanical aspects secondary to the story they tell, a la *As Dusk Falls*. The simple fact that game writing awards exist should be an indication that games and narrative are not mutually exclusive. Absolutist statements do nothing to help describe or define video games as they truly are and only serve as an exercise in pedantry and to obscure both the genre itself and the narrative concepts it complicates.

b. The Paradox of Choice

Once one embraces the compatibility of games and narrative, the question arises: how do game narratives work? One of the most prominent and perplexing challenges narrative designers face is what I call the Paradox of Choice. Simply put, it is the conundrum created by the fact that more player freedom means less structure in which a story can exist. Ryan describes it thus: "if the player's choices are too broad, there will be no guarantee of narrative coherence; if the choices are too narrow, the game will be boring" (*Avatars* 196).

The paradox forces the designers of interactive stories to be creative within this limitation. Open-world roleplaying games like *Fallout, Skyrim,* and others must consider the fact that players not only can go anywhere at any time but can also interact with the world in ways that could be potentially story-wrecking. For instance, if a player can kill any non-player character (NPC) in the world, they might well murder an undercover villain long before the final confrontation was designed to occur, thereby making that narrative thread moot. The stories of open-world games must therefore be highly adaptable, flexible, and reactive to whatever decisions the player makes.

The first broad solution to the problem of story-destroying freedom is restriction of player agency. For instance, designers might make certain characters unkillable, ensuring they'll be present when a later event plays out. While this is perhaps the most straightforward way to ensure that important events can occur as planned, the obvious downside is that it shatters the fiction that the player inhabits a living, truly interactable world. In turn, this reduces the believability of the game and creates a frustrating distance between the player and the game. It gives the player a sense of being railroaded, or forced along a predetermined path regardless of what choices they might otherwise have made.

The same immersion problem is arguably worse in the case of game cutscenes. In these short, cinematic interjections, the player has no control over their character or the direction the story takes. Because writers typically insert cutscenes during narratively significant moments to ensure the story unfolds exactly as planned, the player is actively excluded from participating in the story. This is not to say cutscenes and interactive narratives are mutually exclusive—after all, player choices made earlier in the game might lead to different cutscenes at a given story beat— but the cutscenes themselves are, by definition, non-interactive. At best, they engage the player

as a movie scene would and feel compelling and relevant to the game's narrative. But at worst, they're frustrating, restrictive distractions.

The other common path designers take to balance story with agency is focusing on player exploration and discovery over having a distinct plot. Rather than one specific narrative, storytellers might focus on creating a rich and compelling universe whose lore serves as its largest story component. Rather than participating in an explicit, unfolding story, the player is invited to uncover mysteries, secrets, and backstory at their leisure while they explore an extensively interactive world. By talking to NPCs and investigating significant locations, players can construct and uncover the world's story-rich history without restriction of gameplay or agency. Additionally, engaging with these story elements is often entirely optional and ignoring them will not be detrimental to any player's experience of the game. The main features are the mechanics and challenges of gameplay: combat, strategy, hand-eye coordination, and so forth.

At its best, the Paradox of Choice forces game designers to be creative and design solutions in which, as Ryan puts it, "gameplay and narrative remediate each other's deficiency" (*Avatars* 198). Poetically, she describes video games as "an art of compromise" (*Avatars* 198) between these two forces.

c. Against the Holodeck

Ultimately, all games will be limited in some sense by storytellers' production capacity. Humans cannot design an infinite world with unlimited interactivity, whether said interactivity is in narrative form or embedded in the mechanics of gameplay. Some elements will have to be preprogrammed, hard-coded, and therefore not alterable by the player. And it's likely impossible to have a game with both full narrative cohesion and complete player agency. This raises an interesting question, however: *would* the ideal game be one that's infinitely interactive, able to

sculpt a compelling narrative from *whatever* choice the player makes without limiting the player's agency as a tradeoff? Or is that a poor ideal even in theory?

The "Holodeck" theory of game design bases itself on the Holodeck portrayed by *Star Trek,* in which a player can physically enter a simulated, three-dimensional, fictional world whose hyper-advanced AI will react coherently to anything they say or do, enabling it to sculpt a story out of any action. The Holodeck model was proposed by Janet Murray, one of the first theorists to explore technology's influence on narratives in her controversial 1997 book *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace.* Murray set forth the idea that the Holodeck should be the ultimate aspiration of game design.

A perfect Holodeck experience would encompass the player completely, adapt to any choice and action the player makes, and ultimately put together a compelling narrative from those choices to create a satisfying game and story experience. While great bounds in AI advancement have taken place over the last year—and these are undoubtedly already being incorporated into the next generation of games—humanity is still far from developing something as immersive and comprehensively reactive as the *Star Trek* Holodeck. Should that be the goal?

For this project, I spoke to three narrative designers. Georgia Symons and Jason Bakker worked on *Wayward Strand,* while Brad Kane was the lead writer for *As Dusk Falls.* I posed the Holodeck question to all, and their answer was a resounding no—a sentiment with which I agree. Bakker pointed out that the design of *Wayward Strand* is pretty much directly antithetical to the Holodeck ideal in how it plays with and limits player agency. In the game, the player controls a thirteen-year-old girl, Casey Beaumaris, whose mother is the head nurse aboard the titular airship hospital. Casey has been conscripted to help in the short-staffed long-term care ward following the abrupt departure of a nurse, and her goal is simple: spend time with the other characters. The

stories of the NPCs—most of whom are the elderly residents of the hospital—unfold whether Casey is present to witness them or not, and it is up to the player to decide which characters to talk to and what story paths to pursue (investigate the history of the airship? Learn about the recently deceased Hugo Falk? Solve a mystery about a goat?).

In this way, *Wayward Strand* is a game about radical reduction of agency, and this is arguably its central theme. Young Casey and the elderly residents have little control over the events unfolding around them, in contrast to most games, which position the player's character as the centerpiece of the world and whose actions determine the fate of everyone and everything around them. In a very telling interaction that's even featured in the trailer for *Wayward Strand*, Casey expresses her confusion to one of the hospital residents, Ida. "I hear people talk about things, but I'm not sure what they're on about," she says. To this, Ida replies, "That sounds a bit like the life of an older person. Nobody explains to us what's going on. We just have to piece it together as best we can." In effect, this can be understood as the thesis of the game. Because the player is so limited, *Wayward Strand* opens space for the NPCs to have more dynamic, engaging, and interpersonal storylines.

A Holodeck version of this same premise would completely miss the point of the game. By definition, a player character with the ability to do anything would disrupt the limitation that is so central to what makes *Wayward Strand* compelling to begin with. Bakker takes this a step further and argues that a similar necessary constraint applies to *all* stories, not just those focused on limiting agency as *Wayward Strand* does. What makes stories emotional and engaging, he says, is fundamentally different from the experience a Holodeck would provide.

Bakker likened the Holodeck to the experience of playing tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) such as Dungeons & Dragons, which are arguably closer to the Holodeck than video

games because nothing is pre-scripted and the game master (GM) must come up with reactions

to players' choices on the fly. In the Holodeck, the player would essentially be an inexperienced

RPG player in a world that tries desperately to make them a hero. Even if the GM warps and

reshuffles the story world around the player to make any action they take plot-relevant, the

resulting narrative would still be unsatisfying. The player might act arbitrarily and inconsistently,

or bumble about without motivation or direction—all poor traits in a main character. And even in

TTRPGs, the story is still a collaboration between players and the GM, rather than the GM

having ultimate power. Players cede power, and thereby part of their agency, to the GM. This

agreement creates the understanding that the players will follow the GM's story hooks to the plot

points they've designed. Games also involve players working within the GM's (limited) world to

make the story more interesting, fulfilling, and exciting. All of this shows that even in a

Holodeck-like scenario, audiences still crave structure.

There's also the problem of players being unable to do the sorts of things required of

heroes in the sorts of stories they wish to inhabit. Because the Holodeck's infinite interactivity

puts no limits on what the player can or can't do, it must physically encompass the player to truly

do its job. This is problematic for obvious reasons. Do you want to play a martial arts master in a

high-octane heist? Well, you'd better learn martial arts, then. A soldier in a medieval battlefield?

Time to learn sword fighting. A clever diplomat in a political drama? Better read up on rhetoric

and public speaking. A hostage in a tense motel standoff (as in *As Dusk Falls*)? Try not to have a

panic attack. While the narrative output of the theoretical Holodeck might be infinitely adaptable,

the player is not, and a Holodeck scenario might ironically lead to the player feeling frustrated

and disempowered because they personally are unable to do the sorts of things that they'd like to

see from a main character in the story they're hoping to experience. Essentially, they are reduced to playing themself, not a hero.

Marie-Laure Ryan takes a more conservative approach to the Holodeck theory in her essay "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories: Towards a Poetics of Interactive Narrative." Though she still views the Holodeck as a theoretical design ideal worth considering, she writes, "The Holodeck, as a whole, may be a castle in the air, but this does not take anything away from the validity of its individual features as goals to pursue for researchers and developers of interactive narrative" ("From Narrative Games," 47). From the Holodeck, she argues, we can take away four main features that game designers can more realistically implement: natural interface (47), which deals with the problem of players' physical disempowerment discussed above; integration of user action within the story (50), which must address the Paradox of Choice; dynamic creation of the story (51), in which the Holodeck must compute the effects of player actions in real time and renew itself with each playthrough, as with TTRPGs; and the pleasures of interactive narrative (53), which she further divides into several different kinds of immersion that video games can foster.

Ryan's interpretation of the Holodeck aligns much better with how game designers approach the major challenges of interactivity and the much more realistic goals many game companies have for the genre, especially in big-budget games and the emerging field of virtual/augmented reality, which provides a different form of interface than was even possible when Ryan published this essay in 2009. However, it is worth remembering that not all games strive for greater player agency, as in the case of *Wayward Strand*. While extension of player choice is fascinating and worthwhile to pursue, it can be just as interesting (or perhaps even more so) to break from this goal as it is to further it. Creativity thrives within limitation.

d. A Theory of Authorship

The infinite branching potential of the Holodeck also obviously complicates the concept of authorship, given that a hyper-advanced AI would be generating the story concurrently with any actions or choices the player makes (rather than any human writer). How this would change our definition of "author" might seem like a far-off theoretical question, but more subtly, and in my opinion, more intriguingly, the definition of authorship is already blurred even in entirely human-made games.

i. Common Definitions of Authorship

The question of "who's the author?" is a deceptively simple-seeming one. Video games add an interesting wrinkle to this already tricky matter, which been posed to and grappled with by many other forms of media in the past. First, it's helpful to identify general "common sense" views of authorial credit. The platonic ideal of an author is someone who conceives of, writes, edits, and publishes a novel without input from any other people throughout the process. A step away from this model, wherein the process includes other parties like editors, publishers, and beta readers, generally doesn't sway the status of the original writer as the definitive author of the work. Sometimes works are written by multiple authors, in which case they all get the recognition, despite lack of clarity about who wrote which portion of the manuscript (or the use of a collective pseudonym). Anthologies and collections typically credit an editor and each individual contributor for the stories within it.

By contrast, stories written by credited or uncredited ghostwriters (as in many celebrity memoirs) are more difficult to pin down; still, authorship remains generally attributed to the name on the book cover. An even more thorny—and ethically questionable—complication is the possibility that stories might soon have AI contributions, in which case authorship might be

attributed to the AI, to its programmers, to the company selling it, or to the millions of (uncompensated, unidentified, and nonconsenting) authors who wrote the works it was trained on. We simply don't know yet.

Further complicating common notions of authorship are cinema and theater, simply because their production involves the efforts of so many people. Playwrights typically minimize stage direction to allow actors the freedom to make dramatic choices with their performances, and reading the script of a play is a far cry from seeing it performed. This suggests that an audience has not experienced the work itself by only consuming what the original writer put to paper—a play *requires* the participation of others to be complete. Surely the divergent ways different actors might interpret and perform the same characters, thereby altering an audience's experience of the play, implies some kind of individual authorship through dramatic choice. Still, the authorship of a play is credited to the original writer, and individual performances are instances and derivatives of the original work. When one looks up the author of *A Marriage Proposal*, the search results show Anton Chekov.

Both movies and plays also share the fact that massive crews are required to bring them to fruition—costume designers, managers, lighting experts, prop builders, and so forth. The scrolling credits at the end of a film often involve hundreds or thousands of names. Are these people, too, authors? Or does the sum of their work constitute an immaterial "collective" author of some kind? Interestingly, person who tends to receive the most credit for a movie's creation is *not* the original scriptwriter(s), but the director (though sometimes they overlap). Video games are also group efforts, especially those produced by triple-A studios, where there may once again be hundreds of people in the credits. But when one considers interactivity, an additional complication appears.

Adapting the platonic ideal of authorship to an interactive context adds a whole new dimension to this debate. Even an interactive story that is written, coded, and published by a single person would not have as straightforward a claim to authorship as the writer of a linear narrative, for one main reason: the writer could never experience the entirety of their own story, even if they wrote every individual part of it.

Branching stories are a case in point. These interactive narratives are made of nodes that split off in different directions depending on the choices a player makes. These branches rapidly exponentiate. If a single node branches into two, and those two nodes branch into two more each, there are now four possible paths through the tree. The pattern will continue increasing at a rate of 2^n nodes, and a full narrative map might have dozens of these splits. However, even this is oversimplified: branches will link back to each other, nodes will branch to more than two paths at a time, or the game will make use of variables and other tricks to determine what nodes the player is able to access based on their previous choices. This means that branching narratives are a confusing, interwoven tangle which, if each possible individual path through them was considered, might easily contain hundreds or thousands of unique stories. A single creator could not play through all of them. (If you think you're up to the challenge, I invite you to try to chart every single route through the jumbled labyrinth of a branching narrative I wrote as part of this project. More on that later.)

Each person who interacts with a branching narrative will almost certainly have a different experience. Arguably, even taking on different strategies in combat-heavy games and dispatching of enemies in different ways might qualify as having a different story experience—after all, combat might well be part of the narrative. The creator of a branching narrative has

assembled a collection of story parts (often in the form of nodes) but has not put them together—

that's up to the reader. The creator isn't the determinant of the story the reader experiences.

ii. Death of the Narrative Designer?

One school of thought relevant to this question comes from Roland Barthes in his famous

essay "The Death of the Author." Barthes critiques the "capitalist ideology, which has afforded

the greatest importance to the author's 'person'" (1), a figure who has come to overshadow the

work they wrote, the readers who consume it, and even language itself. "The explanation of the

work," Barthes argues, "is always sought in the man who has produced it, as if, through the more

or less transparent allegory of fiction, it was always finally the voice of one and the same person,

the author, which delivered his 'confidence'" (2). Barthes writes approvingly of the role

surrealism has played in helping "secularize the image of the Author" (3). Secularization allows

for broader analysis of a work and acknowledges the role of readers in its interpretation.

Without the supreme figure of the Author, a text transforms in ways that bear an uncanny

resemblance to video games. For instance, Barthes claims that "the modern writer (scriptor) is

born simultaneously with his text; he is in no way supplied with a being which precedes or

transcends his writing […]; there is no other time than that of the utterance, and every text is

eternally written here and now" (3). In other words, the author is displaced by the text itself,

which is conceived of as a presence that's created in the process of being read and understood—

rather like the creation of a video game story that actively unfolds as it's played rather than

arriving as a definitive pre-written, predetermined package that a passive reader simply

consumes. Barthes argues that "to give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop

clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing" (5). One cannot "explain" the

text by way of its creator—in fact, to Barthes, writing should even throw off and "evaporate" meaning altogether.

Barthes provides perhaps the most direct parallel to video games in his conclusion. He argues that the "multiplicity" of a text—the culture, history, etc. that a writer inevitably pulls from when they write—is united not in the author, but in the reader: "the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of; the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination" (6). The presence of a reader is when a text truly comes into existence. Certainly, it would be disingenuous to call the totality of a branching story map the true "story." Rather, each path the reader/player takes through it constitutes the real story—hence, it exists only through the interaction of a reader, as Barthes suggests.

Barthes passed away in 1980, right around the time that the first video games were turning the corner into pop culture. Were he to see how far they've come, he'd likely applaud the how they've complicated the relationship between the creator and the reader/player. Yet the question now remains: what *is* that relationship, and how are we to define it?

iii. Authorship in Video Games

Unlike Barthes, I believe the "author" is still a worthwhile title and point of reflection if one is to fully understand a piece of interactive fiction. However, the role of any author on the creation end of the game production pipeline is necessarily reduced, not just because of large studios having teams of writers, but because of the nature of interactive narrative itself. Even in the "platonic ideal" of game authorship, the single writer behind the game cannot be considered the end-all be-all author, either. Because interactive narratives are choice- and engagement-based, any reader/player will largely be the master of their own plot, involved in the act of story creation. And what is an author if not a creator?

The realm of meaning, too, is almost entirely that of the reader/player. While the creator writes the potential plot points a reader/player might encounter, the way each piece of the narrative falls into place is determined by the path an audience member takes through them. A single node or passage of a story in isolation cannot create meaning; meaning is the sum of all parts. The question of what a story is "about" is essentially generated by each reader/player as they partake in one of many possible stories. One playthrough of a game might yield a story about bending beneath the crushing weight of social norms, while another playthrough of the same game might become about defying and casting off those same norms.

This isn't to say that the reader/player entirely supplants the original creator. Their name still belongs at the top of the credits. But the title of authorship in interactive narratives must also be united in at least small part with each player who engages with the story. Every game contains a multitude of stories that any member can experience through their choices, leaving interactive stories in a strange gray area of authorship that simply does not exist in other forms of media.

This should prompt us as creators to reconsider the boundaries of what an author can be. Instead of an individual, the title of "author" can consist of a *relationship* between parties who experience a piece of media. Perhaps expanding this definition can also help theorists tackle other gray-area situations discussed above in the cases of theater, television, and cinema as well.

e. Games as Literature

The inability of interactive stories to name a single author also upends traditional notions of literature, which are usually focused on "great" historical works by "great" historical authors (Jane Austen, Franz Kafka, George Orwell, William Shakespeare, etc.). While these notions are mainly focused on novels and plays, cinema has now been around long enough as well that movies have been inducted into the "classics" category, such as *Casablanca* or *The Godfather*.

Video games, however, are new enough to the playing field that there's little consensus on what constitutes a classic, and even less consensus on what it might mean for a game to be "literary." While certain games have come to be considered *iconic,* this is usually tied to their place in the history of the genre or their recognizability rather than any "literary" quality they might possess. Many of these have spawned vast franchises, like *Super Mario Brothers, Final Fantasy,* or *The Legend of Zelda.* Others are widely known for being the first popular games of their kind in the early days, like *Pac-Man* or *Tetris.* But overall, games are not iconic because they embody qualities associated with "literature" in other mediums; instead, iconic status has more to do with memorability and prominence in pop culture. This, plus the fact that story games are evolving and improving, because they're so technology-centric, and because they thrive along the cutting edge of tech, makes it difficult to pin down a historical work to pedestalize or deem foundational in the sense of a "literary classic."

To me, this is a good thing. I am wary of the impulse to canonize any game as "literary," a category I take issue with even in its present context. At its worst, the term has too often been used to differentiate "true" art from the "mass market," lending itself to a kind of elitist academic snobbery that has done little except exclude most modern stories from an equivalent esteem and encourage disproportionate focus on outdated works over the thriving media landscape we have today. The existence of decades of analysis written about this or that "classic" only serves to foster an unproductive impression that these are the only stories worth analyzing or admiring, an exclusive class that modern stories cannot broach simply by nature of not having the existing groundwork of excessive scholarship about them.

A similarly troubling trend in this designation is the tendency to pit "literary" fiction against "genre" fiction, a false dichotomy that excludes fantasy, science fiction, romance, and

other popular genres from literary status. Ignoring the fact that literary fiction *is* a genre, and that it sometimes cherry-picks works (like *The Lord of the Rings*) from these same categories, often this false distinction is used to look down on speculative fiction for being only "entertainment value" (and thereby implying that *any* stories written to entertain their audiences are also inferior). Literary gatekeeping essentially refuses "genre fiction" the academic esteem, attention, and respect given to "literature." There's also often the implication that the first or most famous work of a genre is also the best in that genre (such as *The Lord of the Rings, Dune, Foundation,* and others credited with a boom of a certain genre), when in fact subsequent works have done a much better job developing the ideas introduced then.

The more that is written about video games in academic circles, the closer we veer to instilling this problem in the game industry, as well. The "first is best" impulse has largely been avoided, given that the earliest games were extremely rough and, while important for kickstarting game development, have since been surpassed by obviously stronger works, often by the same companies who produced those early iterations. However, I sense an inclination for critics to turn away from the mainstream simply because it is mainstream and therefore overlook the contributions to game storytelling that big studio games might be able to offer. I worry that games that are confusing or poorly made might be upheld as literary classics simply because they don't resemble mass market games like *Overwatch* or *Fortnite*.

One example of this tendency is the analysis of the titular game in Marco Carraciolo's essay "Playing 'Home': Videogame Experiences Between Ludic and Narrative Interests." Carraciolo analyzes how a game like *Home* constantly reminds the player of their choices and complicates temporality through a past-tense narrative voice despite the game unfolding in the present. These are interesting notions to contemplate. Yet the game Carraciolo upholds as

exemplary of these techniques simply sounds like a bad game. He describes how "During most of the game, the player finds a number of leads that *almost* seem to coalesce into a coherent answer to all these questions, but the picture is never complete—there is always something that resists the player's attempts at making sense of the plot" (241). Similarly, "no matter what the player does or how carefully he or she explores the game world the plot still remains blurry, and the game keeps reminding the audience that they might have 'missed something' along the way" (Carraciolo 242). He describes the game's ending: "no matter what the player chooses the story still won't make any recognizable or satisfactory sense" (244); in fact, he admits that "the suspense and curiosity elicited by the game's narrative cues are frustrated by a system with unexpectedly lets down the audience, asking them to choose their own story and leaving up in the air the previously established plot instabilities" (245).

The impression of *Home* one comes away with after reading this essay is not that it's an introspective and clever look at the mechanics of game narratives, but simply a bad game that trips on the curtain and reveals those mechanics incidentally: all empty intrigue and no payoff. Its inability to tell a cohesive, compelling narrative is not an indicator that it is secretly good. While the author finds that it's an insightful, important intuition, it's taken an entire essay to justify this position while providing description that, to me, only serves to explain that *Home* is not a good game or a good story worth emulating or praising.

Carraciolo writes, in conclusion, that "there is no reason to drive a wedge between the canonical narratives of film and literary fiction and videogames: both can, if sufficiently thought-provoking, encourage recipients to connect their experiences to broader thematic concerns through interpretation, which is—of course—our main strategy for coping with the unusual, the incomprehensible, and the stubborn in artistic practices" (247). In other words, Carraciolo is

suggesting that video games—namely, *Home,* as he has tried to prove in this essay—ought to be inducted into the pre-existing literary canon, which already includes the film and fiction genres.

It is here that I see the most worrisome impulse emerge. Inaugurating games into the present literary canon—and setting the precedent for *what* types of games can be canonized with the weak option of *Home*—would only further the problematic inclinations of the designation that I discussed earlier. Instead of trying to fit games into this prevailing paradigm, I would like to encourage game-interested academics to use this new genre to rethink what classifications like "literature" and "classic" mean to begin with and not take for granted that ambiguity, confusion, and experimentalism are necessarily indicators of depth. Games, perhaps more so than other media, are unabashedly entertainment, and they veer readily into speculative fiction with magical worlds to explore and great monsters to tame. None of this means they have nothing to say. I urge academics to engage with these games on their own terms.

Even more problematic than the canon wars is the public perception of video games, which currently considers them to have little artistic merit. Instead, they're often characterized as brain-rotting, unproductive pastimes that encourage violence and sloth, meaning that games are often overlooked as the powerful form of narrative media that they are. Just as there's little consensus about what it means for a game to be "literary," there's even less on whether a game *can* or *should* be literary to begin with. Some academics assume that analyzing them in any serious context an exercise in futility, characterizing the video game genre as one that cares more about gore splatter effects and explosions than narrative relevance. Viewing games in such a way only reveals that these academics have played few of them.

I would love to see games elevated to the respect for storytelling potential that novels, plays, and movies currently hold. We take for granted that other mediums are capable of telling

thought-provoking, nuanced narratives that feature deep characters and rich thematic content—a supposition not commonly extended to video games. But games are just as able to tackle real-world issues, engage the reader in emotional and nuanced storylines, and imagine flawed characters navigating difficult worlds as other media—and they can do this while still being entertaining and fantastical. Games thus provide us with a unique opportunity to rethink literary canonization itself. Promoting exclusionary notions of "literature," which would likely only uplift a select few games that are unlikely representative of the whole, is a poor way to do so.

f. The Ontology Problem

The question of games as literature feeds into a larger point about the relevance of scholarly discourse to the game industry itself. Because it came up in both interviews, it's worth mentioning that game designers themselves don't feel particularly represented by the claims academics put forth when analyzing the games these selfsame designers create, nor by the marketing of games themselves on the part of the companies that sell them. The definition of a video game isn't as clear-cut as the market would lead one to believe, and a lot of the distinctions between games and other forms of interactive media are theoretical rather than practical in nature. Ontology—the question of what something is and what it's like—is always complex, even under the best of circumstances.

Brad Kane, for instance, argues that difference between a video game and other interactive media is really an academic one. As an example, HBO allows you to pause a movie and learn about what went on behind the scenes, but this is hardly a game despite being broadly "interactive." Similarly, anything nonlinear is commonly viewed as a video game, but interactive theater also exists. Calling something a video game also carries social stigma that might repulse audiences who might otherwise greatly enjoy the stories they tell. Games are excluded from

certain storytelling awards (such as the Emmys) on the basis that there cannot be tests of skill involved—even though, in games like *As Dusk Falls* (ADF)*,* failure is as valid a story outcome as success and will lead to just as interesting of a narrative.

ADF's "tests of skill" are quick-time (QT) events that determine the outcomes of physical conflicts. When the character they control gets in a fight, the player is prompted to swipe, click, or mash the mouse in certain amounts of time to win the fight. If they're too slow and fail the QT action, the story accounts for their loss and branches accordingly (unlike games like Mass Effect where successfully winning a fight is crucial to progressing the story). ADF was designed around these gamified elements as much as it was around the story, resulting in a marriage of the two. However, Kane does not really think of ADF as a video game; he sees its peers as primarily TV shows, not games. If it were up to him, ADF would be classified as interactive television—even though from a studio standpoint, it makes more sense to be sold as a video game, and the academic outlook would likely categorize it as a game as well.

Wayward Strand also straddles definitions, in no small part due to its creators' expertise and the ethos with which they approached the project. Georgia Symons, one of the game's writers, never intended to do narrative design. Before her involvement in the project, she had no video game experience but a strong theater background, with some work on board games and escape rooms on the side. She noted that there's recently been a shift in theater from audience-agnostic plays that do not acknowledge the existence of onlookers to bringing the audience back into the performances themselves. Before the Renaissance, theatergoers were much more involved in the enactment of a play than audiences are today; actors would speak straight to the spectators or respond to their reactions onstage, creating a low-level kind of interactivity. The most obvious incorporation of the audience in modern plays are directly interactive experiences

like *Sleep No More,* but the encouragement of audience involvement is a larger trend that Symons has been privy to. She took this knowledge to *Wayward Strand*, the producers of which intentionally sought out a game industry outsider to bring fresh perspective to the project.

For Symons, the swing from theater to game writing came with a few major adjustments. She had to learn to let go of giving scenes a strong "narrative spine," instead allowing the dialogue to go in multiple directions, with the options presented to the reader creating a broad tree of choices rather than sticking close to the trunk. Because of her theater background, she put much thought and care into creating outstanding moment-to-moment dialogue as well as cultivating the role of silence in scenes. Her background, then, was instrumental in making *Wayward Strand* what it is, and perhaps it also sculpts parts of the game more towards something like a play than like a traditional video game. (Interestingly, though perhaps coincidentally, the visual design of *Wayward Strand* also calls a stage to mind, with conversations taking place in rooms with an invisible "fourth wall" through which the player looks.)

When asked to define branching narrative, both writers responded similarly to Kane, pointing out that categorization questions can be distractions, and one must ask what their utility is in the actual creation of a game. Certainly, they help with marketing and identifying an audience, but from a creator standpoint, classification is less relevant and useful. Symons also pointed out that branching narrative and interactive narrative are not the same; branching is a subset of interactive narrative, yes, but there are a multitude of patterns and structures that fall under the same umbrella. This makes answering categorization questions a much more nuanced and interesting endeavor than just assessing whether a work is a video game or not.

Symons' observations about the vast array of structures in interactive fiction is especially relevant when analyzing other story-based video games, as I'll explore below.

3. Exemplary Works

While the academic theory written about video games can yield fascinating insights, the best teachers of video game theory are not scholarly articles, but the games themselves. I chose works that not only complicate traditional notions of narrative, but also challenge even the already innovative conventions of the story game genre itself.

a. Three Print Trailblazers

Video games were my focus for this project, but they're hardly the only form of media to experiment with narrative structure, which is why it's worth appreciating other stories that push narrative boundaries. Because of their ink-and-paper limitations, none of the three novels I read for this project were "interactive" in the sense that video games can be. However, they challenge the limitations of conventional narrative in interesting ways that go beyond interactivity—most notably, by playing with temporality, perspective, and the reader's relationship to the text.

Italo Calvino's experimental novel *If on a winter's night a traveler* is a mischievous, labyrinthine story. The plot, broadly speaking, follows a second person "Reader" who starts and then is foiled, in increasingly contrived ways, in finishing ten different stories. The titles of these stories ultimately add up to a single sentence/poem when combined at the novel's end. Along the way, the male-gendered Reader meets Ludmilla, his love interest, and is swept up in a rather tongue-in-cheek conspiracy involving a devious translator, a struggling writer, a censorious autocracy, several fictional nations, and a shady publishing cabal.

Despite its nature as a printed text, *If on a winter's night* nonetheless seems to invite the reader to interact with it in ways uncommon for novels. After all, the second person "you" seems to implicate the reader's involvement with the way the story unfolds, even though "you" ends up being the Reader, a character who is separate from the actual reader. By setting this frame in the

second person, Calvino implicitly claims that you would act the same way, and that the Reader's actions are by extension your own.

The story also plays with giving and taking agency; the Reader is active in that he pursues the novels that he is constantly interrupted in reading, and yet the circumstances of their disappearance are far beyond his control, leading to an interplay of intrigue and frustration. Of course, the literal reader of the novel has no agency, but they still feel the same thrill of the chase and annoyance at its foiling that the Reader does—the *illusion* of reader agency created by second person and identification of the Reader's actions with any reader's. So, although the reader cannot literally affect the story, *If on a winter's night* still encourages a different relationship between the story, the reader, and the main character than most novels attempt.

Richard Powers' *The Overstory* is more concerned with time than perspective, which is important given the novel's central focus on trees and the great time scales in which they dwell. The modern world generally conceives of time as a linear motion, closely linked to human sensibilities and measured in days, months, and years that unfold in a straight path from past to future. Powers instead pushes his readers to reconceive time as a cycle—seasonal, regular, circular—that rotates on a scale much larger than a human life.

Unlike a traditional narrative, where the plot's resolution is left unknown until the reader gets there, Powers frequently reveals long in advance what will become of the characters. The narrator is not bound by linear time; readers learn, for instance, that Ray will suffer a stroke dozens of chapters before it happens. Similarly, the most spiritual and nature-connected character, Olivia, has premonitions as well that seem to upset linearity; she communicates with beings of light that elevate her beyond immediate, trivial, human concerns and allow her to look at the greater picture that sprawls far beyond the lives of the humans inhabiting it. Despite being

written in a medium that cannot branch or loop, *The Overstory* challenges its own linearity and stretches the boundaries of novel time. Everything comes around, so to speak—and these great natural cycles will outlast any temporary, linear human timescale.

Briar Rose by Robert Coover, a dark retelling of Sleeping Beauty, was probably the closest these novels came to having a true interactive component. Its sections are designed to be read in any random order, like a shuffled deck of playing cards. While one could technically do this with any novel, few are written to *facilitate* randomness and create a cohesive experience out of whatever order the reader chooses. The story of *Briar Rose* is less a story and more an atmosphere that the novel creates through presenting many versions of similar scenes featuring three major characters—Briar Rose, the wicked fairy who cursed her, and the prince attempting to rescue her—that coalesce into timeless loops of dreaming and searching that refuse to resolve. Never does the prince reach Briar, never does Briar awake, and the experience is an endlessly grim, cyclical, and surreal one. Even if a reader has read every section in the book, the components can still be endlessly reshuffled. Readers can make of this what they will—and whether the book is successful in what it attempts through these techniques—but *Briar Rose* avoids easily settling into any semblance of plot. It certainly underscores Brad Kane's point that it's incorrect to categorize any nonlinear narrative as a game, however tempting that might be.

All of this goes to show that one does not necessarily need a new storytelling medium to challenge existing conceptions of narrative. And while the nature of video games leaves them especially primed to try new things with their stories, it's worth appreciating the genre-benders that have pushed limits in other mediums as well.

b. Patterns & Structures

I played seven video games over the course of this project, each of which tackled its story in a different way and offered different insights into how storytelling works.

i. A Hierarchy of Terms

The category of "nonlinear narrative" is a broad label. When people use this term, they tend to mean one of two things. The first definition refers to stories that are *internally* nonlinear, which are told chronologically out of order with respect to the fictional timeline (e.g., the film *Memento*). The second definition, and the one this project is most interested in, is interactive stories, which are nonlinear in that there are multiple ways to experience the events of the story based on the audience's interactions with it. Interactive stories can further be broken down into a few general kinds of interactivity:

- INVESTIGATIVE. The audience is encouraged to uncover story elements by interacting with a staged environment; the narrative itself usually has either already happened, exists primarily as lore, or unfolds without the audience's direct participation. The interactive element is solely or primarily environmental exploration; character interaction is minimal, unimportant, or peripheral. This is most commonly found in open-world RPGs (*The Elder Scrolls, Skyrim*), location-based hypertext stories, or interactive art instillations with a narrative component (*Omega Mart, Otherworld*). Interactive theatrical experience *Sleep No More* also mostly falls into this category.

- IMPROVISATIONAL. The story is neither scripted nor staged; instead, it's almost entirely spontaneous and results from direct interaction between the creator and audience. Prime examples of improvisational interactivity are tabletop roleplaying games, wherein an adlibbed story emerges from the collaboration between the Game

Master and players, and improv theater, which is loosely structured around the actors'

playing games for which the audience provides prompts.

- CONSTRUCTED. The audience is given a set of tools to create their own world in

  which they can orchestrate and imagine stories for themselves without one in specific

  necessarily being planned or intended at all by the developers. Story elements are

  low-level and not central to the interactive portion of the experience. If a player

  doesn't build any story for themselves at all and simply enjoys the gameplay, nothing is

  lost. Examples include card games such as *Magic: The Gathering* and video games

  like *The Sims, DragonVale,* and *Minecraft.*

- BRANCHING. The story is pre-scripted to branch in any number of directions,

  enabling the audience to decide which of several options and paths they want to

  pursue. Aside from the player picking whichever of the available choices they please,

  no elements are spontaneous. This is the category into which story games and choose-

  your-own-adventure stories fall.

Branching narratives like the ones I studied for this project can be even further split into a

few types of specific structures, which will be discussed later.

ii. Two Types of Choice

Choices generally affect the story on two different levels: character and event. Choices

made during conversations, for example, tend to develop relationships with NPCs and shape the

ways the NPCs view the player character (PC). These choices tend to have few immediate

consequences and only affect the plot overtly in the long term. Whether you are rude,

sympathetic, or neutral to a given character affects how they think about you and how they'll

interact with you in the future. If you acted nasty to an ally, they might refuse to work with you

in the future, leading to plot challenges you wouldn't have encountered with them on your side. In relationship-heavy games like *Oxenfree,* the player's attitude towards PC Alex's friends can easily alienate and turn them against her. The same is doubly true for games that are *entirely* based in character interaction. In *Wayward Strand,* the way in which you interact with characters (and who you choose to spend the most time with) affects what information they're willing to share with you and how comfortable they are around you.

On the other hand, event-centric choices are concerned with the course of action you take in a scene, and their effects are generally seen right away. The very first choice *The Stanley Parable* presents to its player is whether to go through the left door, obeying the narrator, or the right door, defying him. In fact, *The Stanley Parable* directly confronts the Paradox of Choice in this moment by pointing out the contradiction posed by the illusion of decision in this moment (given that whichever way the player goes, they are following a path designed by the developers and are thus still within the structure of the game). The effects are seen immediately, most obviously in that the player is now witnessing a different part of the building than if they'd picked the other door.

In a less overly self-referential way, other games pull the same trick. *As Dusk Falls* is a great example. Decisions are split between huge branches, with significant impacts down the line, and dialogue trees without lasting story impact. For example, choosing to help Dale ransack the sheriff's house in addition to completing the main plot point of stealing his money has few lasting impacts, while arguably the largest decision of the first "book"—whether to select Vince's injured wife or six-year-old daughter for a hostage swap—has massive ramifications and can lead to character deaths if the player takes certain paths. The game does a good job balancing

these two types of choice; one fleshes out character relationships, the other moves the plot

forward in drastic ways. The outcomes are both immediate and delayed.

Of course, character and plot choices are not mutually exclusive. What a player decides

to do in a particular scenario can affect both how that situation plays out *and* NPCs' opinions of

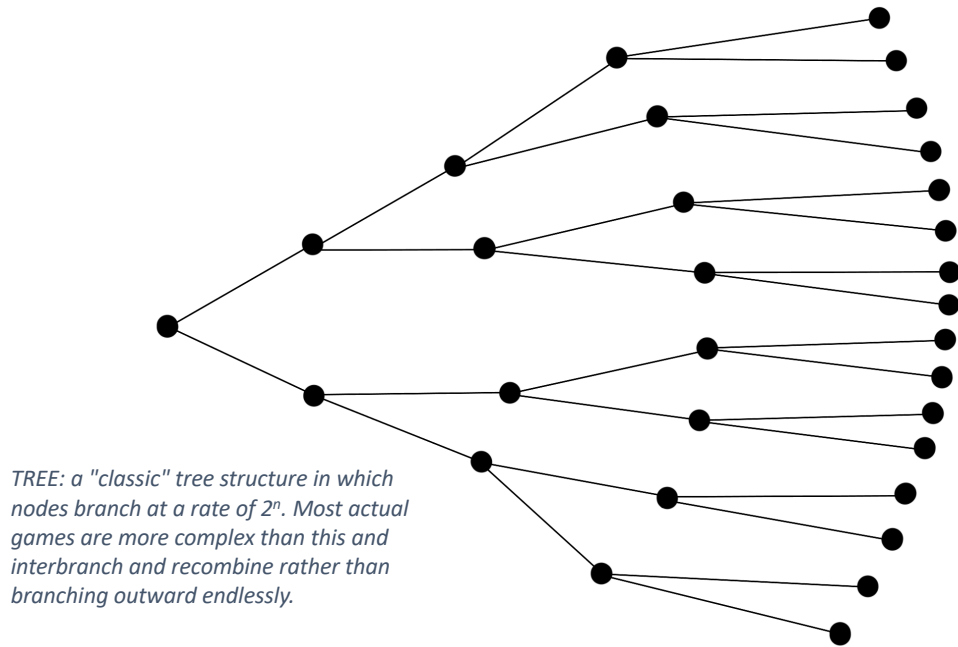the player. But generally, choices are weighted more towards one or the other.

iii. Common Structures of Branching Stories

While game dialogue and relationship-focused choices tend to be organized in trees, the

classic tree structure is only one of many ways to organize an interactive story's overall plot, and

few story games (especially longform story games) stick with a "true" tree format because of its

exponential branching. Instead, games tend to use a combination of different structures

depending on what level the game is currently operating on: moment, scene, or story.

Moment-to-moment interaction constitutes the smallest scale of a story, followed by

scene-level conflict, followed by the overall plot itself. The structure of a single conversation

might not necessarily mirror the structure used by the entire game itself. Dialogue might be a

tree, but the plot overall might be linear.

On the broadest level, I've identified five common structures:

o   TREE. This is likely what most people think when they hear "branching narrative":

players traverse nodes that split into other nodes, which split into further nodes, and

so forth based on their decisions. As mentioned above, this seems to be most used for

in-game conversations.

TREE: a "classic" tree structure in which nodes branch at a rate of 2^n. Most actual games are more complex than this and interbranch and recombine rather than branching outward endlessly.

The closest game to follow a true tree that I played was *As Dusk Falls,* which was

impressive in its quantity and diversity of branches across both "books" in its story.

To avoid exponential growth, however, it melded tree branching with the diamond

structure discussed below; the game never allowed itself to branch more than three

nodes deep at a time (except on crossroads choices) before returning to its main

throughline.

o DIAMOND. Players take branching paths through the same set of events that start and end at the same points (whether that be points in time or plot points) regardless of what choices the player made during the body of the diamond. The biggest benefit of diamond structure is that it provides a built-in defense against choice bloat, as it requires choices to resolve themselves as they reach the cusp of the next event.

DIAMOND: events begin and end at the same white dots, no matter how complex the branching within the diamond's body becomes.
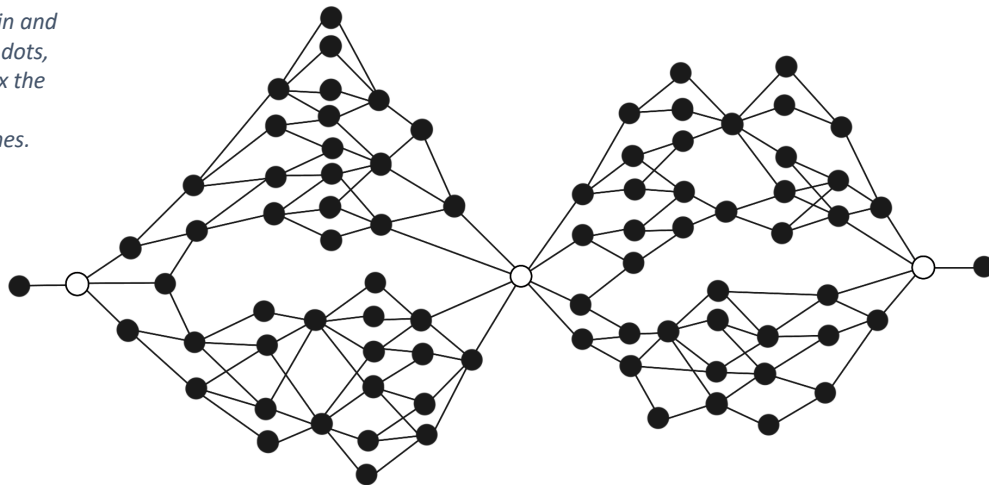
Choice of the Deathless employed this structure most obviously; the player always faces the same challenges in the same order. It progresses through each of the cases they tackle in the same order: the exploitative contract, the conference, the goddess deposition, the demon negotiation, and the climax. However, the content of those challenges can change based on their stats and decisions. There is usually more than one simple outcome to each event even if they end at the same major plot point.

o FOREST. Players follow a mostly linear narrative populated with encounters that branch into dialogue trees on the scene level. These encounters and their outcomes don't affect the main narrative in major ways. However, it's likely that the game is at its most interesting when the player pursues these side paths.
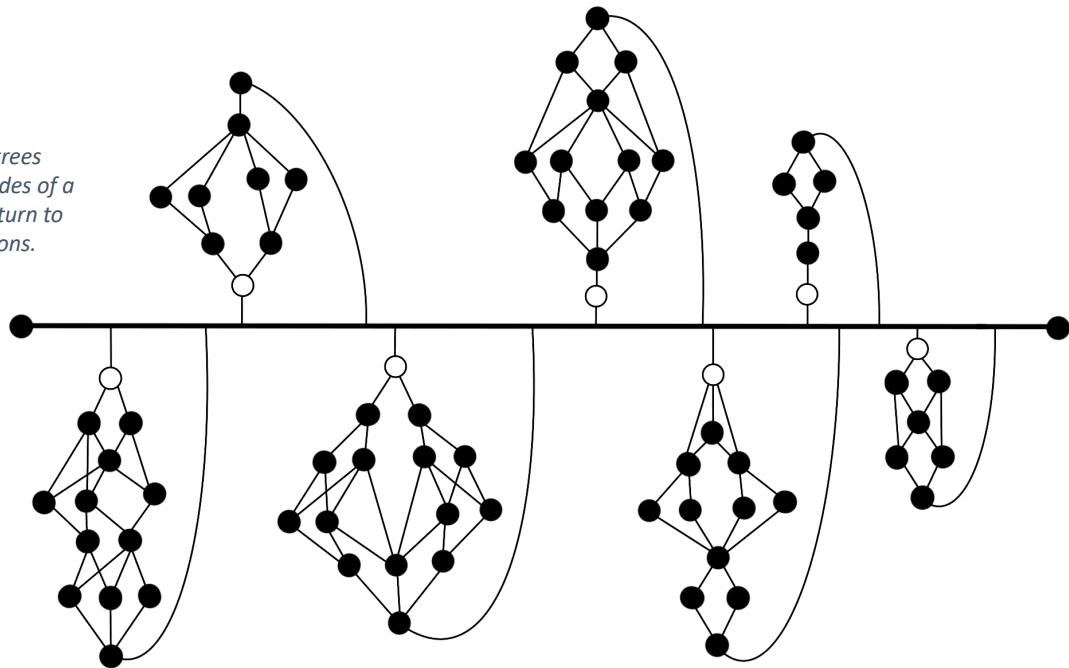
Wayward Strand is the most prominent example of this type of game. The story takes place over the same three days no matter what the player does, and the major events that unfold around Casey—Esther's sepsis scare, Agnete's visit, Mr. Pettigrew's panic over the VIP—happen no matter what the player has her do. The events of the world are larger than her, and the main story follows the same path each time. But she can decide to stop and speak to whomever she pleases, and that yields different interactions and personal relationships. In other words, it's always the same forest and the same path, but you can choose what trees you want to climb and how. (Credit to Georgia Symons for coming up with this metaphor for her game.)

o QUEST. This structure is usually found in investigational narratives, but it can be a subset of branching narrative as well. While exploring a largely plotless world, players chance upon encounters that prompt them to complete tasks with story components. For example, they might negotiate a treaty between towns, track down

and kill a local threat, or retrieve an item for an NPC. For the duration of the quest, a

loose narrative unfolds.

QUEST: the player's random wandering leads to encounters that can turn into mini quest narratives.
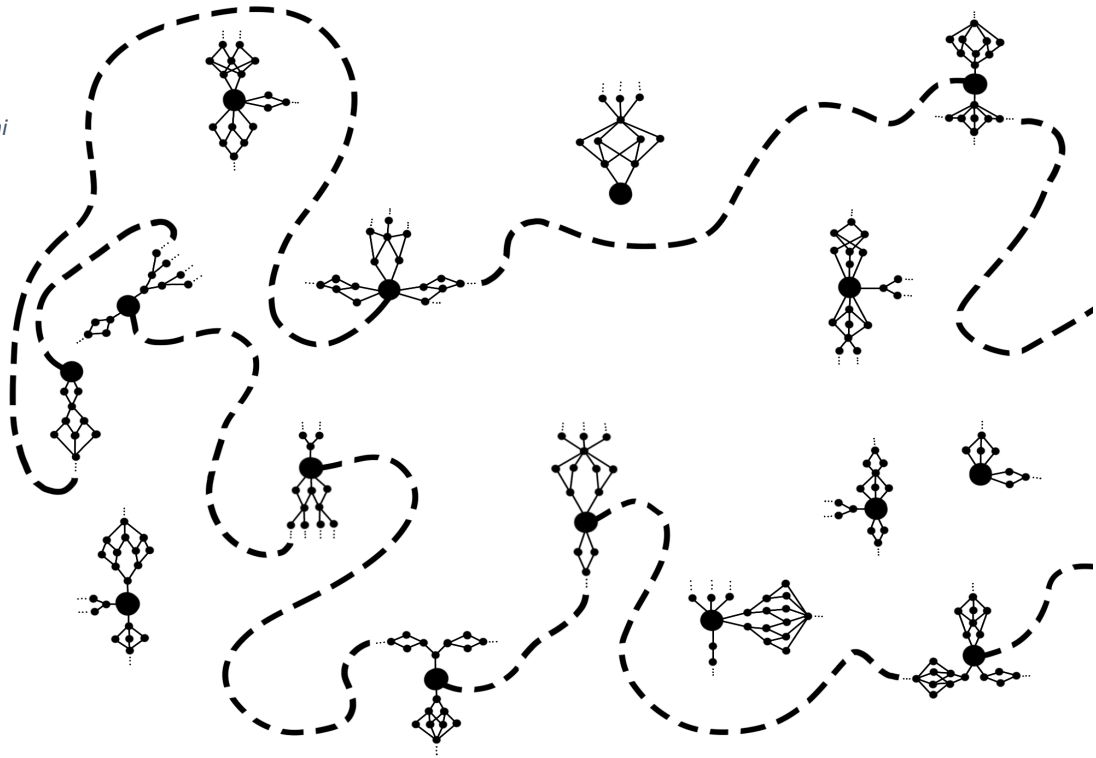
This structure works well in open-world games because it populates the world

with interesting characters while keeping the story-intensive elements optional, which

doesn't hinder the player's explorations. They can choose whether to take on the

quest or not, after all—though quests also usually come with a gameplay incentive

like in-game money or gear that one receives when the quest is completed.

Big studio games like *Mass Effect* often utilize this structure, most likely because

it's much easier for their many writers to work on lots of small, compelling quests

rather than a single massive story. *Mass Effect*'s quests and main story alike also use

the success state structure described below.

o SUCCESS STATE. To advance the plot (which itself might take on any of these other

structures), the player needs successfully to complete a gameplay challenge. If they

fail to complete the challenge, they must restart it and continue attempting until they pass. Note that this is different than a structure in which failing the challenge is *also* a valid story outcome; in success state structures, the player must win to continue. This is commonly used in combat games where the stakes are life or death, because if the main character is killed during conflict, there's no way for the story to continue, so the player is sent back to the beginning of the fight to try again. When they win the conflict or successfully reach a target, the plot can proceed.

The downside of this structure is that, at its worst, it can feel like a movie that randomly pauses itself sometimes and forces you to win a game of basketball before you can continue. It doesn't feel as genuinely interactive if the story must go on hold every so often in favor of a different kind of entertainment. Besides, it can be frustrating for people who are invested in the story but bad at the gameplay elements to have to struggle before they can go back to the aspect of the game they enjoyed.

SUCCESS STATE: players must pass the challenge before the story can continue.
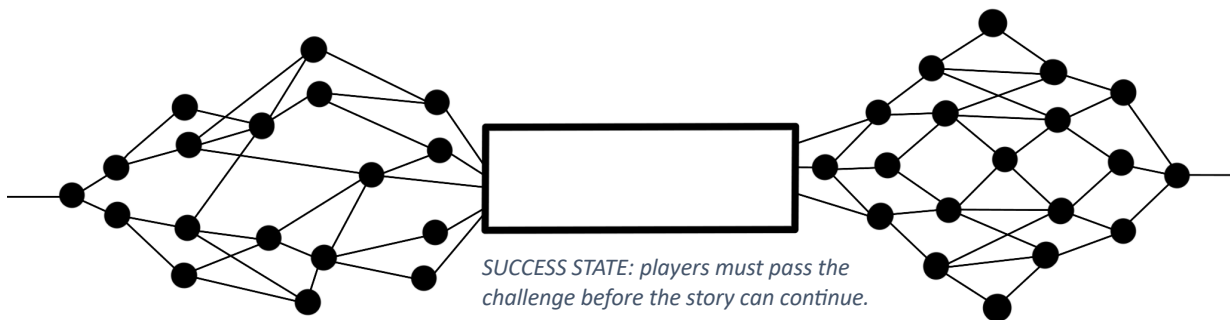
Interestingly, *The Price of Flesh* also follows this route. Players can explore their surroundings while Celia is away, but if she returns while they're outside their room, she'll kill them. Hence, the success state is not simply surviving between her appearances, but rather, effectively balancing how long it takes to look for an escape with their estimation of how long Celia will be absent.

Obviously, not all branching stories fall cleanly into these five categories, and games often mix and match depending on the stories they want to tell and even their production limitations. A game without a team of writers, lots of time, and a huge studio budget to back it up will likely stick to a structure like the diamond pattern which, while more restrictive than the tree-based structures, has built-in rails to keep the story from getting out of hand. Programming capability also places some limits on who can build what types of games. After all, if one wishes to build a success state narrative, one needs to know how to code and implement interesting challenges as well as make them feel relevant and not tangential to the story parts of their game. There's a reason most complex games need a studio behind them to reach their full potential— which has made the final part of my project, designing a branching narrative of my own, both especially interesting and especially challenging.

4. Creative Reflection

The completed Twine map of my story.
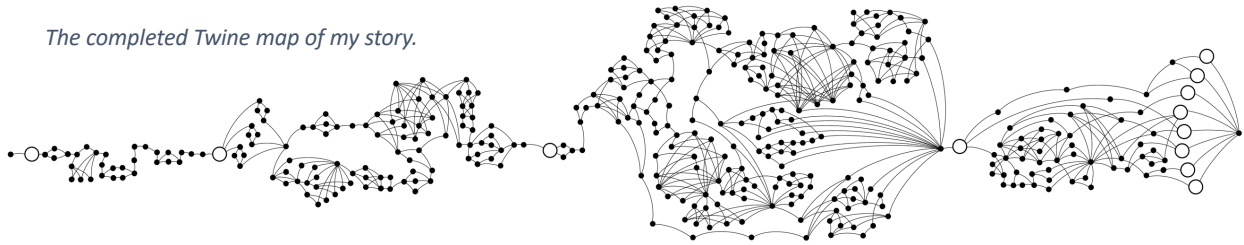
The capstone to my project was planning and designing a branching narrative of my own using a simple software called Twine. Rather than taking a solely academic look at gaming, the creative writing element enabled me to put into practice the theory and advice I'd studied throughout the rest of the summer and gain insights from the experience that observation alone can't convey.

a. A Disciplinary Bridge

As a student of both creative writing (my major) and computer science (my minor), this project was an exploration not only of the video game medium, but also of how truly interdisciplinary of a subject it is. While I was studying theory and playing through my reading list, I also made a point of taking two courses in Udemy to strengthen my understanding of how game engines and technical software function behind the scenes in my favorite story games.

In creating my own game using Twine—an extremely basic branching narrative software with minimal code elements—I found myself thinking like a computer science student far more often than I expected. Keeping track of and incrementing variables, thinking through if/else statements, and quantifying game elements like character relationships behind the scenes were all informed by my time writing code and pondering programs. Certainly, one would be able to create a simple Twine game without incorporating variables and if/else statements. But it would be difficult to design a game with a noticeable amount of narrative interactivity without these technical elements. Even without any dedicated "coding" in the creative portion of this project, it

helped to be able to think like a programmer: anticipating irritating bugs, keeping my work well-marked and easy to follow, and giving forethought to how the branching elements interact with each other. All of these were critical to keeping my project streamlined and under control.

This becomes exponentially truer in large games created in real game engines rather than the simple HTML of Twine. Unity, the industry standard game engine, is an incredibly complex beast that utilizes the C# programming language to interface code and design elements, and it's difficult to understand just how intricate this system can become if one hasn't attempted to learn how to use Unity to begin with—and infinitely more so if one hasn't even touched a programming language before. This is why I believe it's important for anyone interested in narrative design to have at least a rudimentary understanding of programming and how their writing will be implemented by other designers. The video game industry is one of intense cross-discipline collaboration; contributors from business to marketing to programming to user interface must all work together to create a coherent final product. It's important for everyone to understand and appreciate the fields they will be working alongside.

b. A Creative Future

Scholarly work tends to look backwards at the past—what's already been written—rather than ahead at the future. But the most interesting question when it comes to video games is not what video games have done already, but what they might do next in the hands of the subsequent generation of writers.

As interactive narrative becomes more mainstream, incorporated more fully into big-budget games and given the spotlight in conventions, conferences, and creative circles, it's inevitable that the medium will only strengthen. Software like Twine, Fungus, and Articy are widely available and easy to learn, allowing writers to explore the basics of the format without

too steep of a learning curve, and the more determined among them can learn the code behind these programs that will enable them to strengthen and deepen their stories. It wouldn't surprise me if a writer with no computer science background whatsoever would find that learning a programming language becomes easier after experimenting with branching narrative, as it seems to require similar mental muscles, and the two are deeply wedded within the game industry. I anticipate the software for producing interactive fiction, as well as general knowledge of this new storytelling medium, will only become more accessible and widely recognized.

Just as important as the availability of software is the inclusion of interactive fiction as a subject for education, giving current students the tools to innovate in the already innovative genre with their own future interactive stories. As it gains more attention in academic circles and a new wave of students who grew up on games become educators, scholars, and professors, game stories might even become a subject of college classes and popularized as a subdivision of creative writing. The commonly taught formats for fiction are currently short stories, longform works, and flash fiction, but perhaps soon, interactive fiction will be added as well. Video games are not a field confined to the computer science department, as this project has shown; they have as much to teach an English student as any Austen novel—and, considering how many students game, quite an attractive one for any student perusing a class catalogue. Given the popularity of the lone video game class offered at Denison, this is an interest schools should absolutely lean into. Video games and the stories they boast are not the tiny niche they once were. Interactive fiction has worlds to teach.

c. Creative Challenges

As wonderfully full of potential as the genre of interactive fiction is, the act of writing it is not always rosy—a lament as old as the written word. Like the branching text itself, creation is a nonlinear process of looping around, diverging, and rejoining.

i. The Importance of Planning

I found planning an interactive narrative to be both absolutely necessary and fairly difficult, especially as my normal creative process involves discovery writing and figuring stuff out as I go. In many ways, plotting turned out to be a microcosm of writing out the narrative itself. Because the text is nonlinear, this stage required deciding on the overall structure of my game, the major branch points, and their outcomes long before I'd written a word of the actual story. I didn't want to risk setting myself up for choice bloat that could quickly escalate out of hand. Early in my writing process, I had to cut out an entire half of the story (which previously had included an alternate mother character) because I hadn't realized just how much extra work it would be to include this element on top of everything else. It would have effectively doubled the already extensive conversations and interactions between the player's character (PC) and her mother. While this might have been interesting for players, I simply didn't have the time or capacity to include this entire second element on top of everything else.

Yet even at this stage, it's difficult to tell whether the branches I'd planned were properly sized or whether even these would turn into more massive of a task than I bargained for. I suspect this is something that will become more intuitive the more branching stories I write, but as a first timer, I severely miscalculated how much work some of these would take.

ii. Choice Bloat

I intended to follow mostly a diamond pattern to avoid excessive bloat. This only sort of worked, in no small part due to underestimating how much certain story elements would branch

within the body of the diamond. The first chapter of my story was mostly introduction; it was straightforward enough, with two major choices that set up later events rather than branching the whole narrative immediately. The second chapter ballooned once those choices paid off. In chapter 1, the player can decide whether their character graduated or quit college, and the outcome of that choice determines whether they work for a grocer or a legal firm. This meant that when they went to work in the second chapter, I essentially needed to write two different versions of the chapter—one at the firm, and one at the grocer. Added to this was a complicated conversation that took place at the chapter's end, and I was already struggling with choice bloat.

Chapter 3 was the chapter from hell. I wanted the player to have three main choices at the beginning of the chapter: to go to a photoshoot with their controlling fiancé, to attend a Bible study with their peers, or to seek out an enigmatic character who'd shown up in the previous chapter. If the player had decided to keep their job in the last chapter, I also needed to include a confrontation with the fiancé no matter where they chose to go.

Two of these three paths included extensive conversations. When the player can respond to a given prompt two or three ways, conversations get complicated fast, even with only one or two outcomes to the conversation as a whole. I needed to hold all these possible paths in mind and calculate how they might recombine and condense in a logical way to keep from having to write five or six versions of the same conversation. The fact that paths might loop back on each other also added a layer of visual confusion to an elaborate conversation, even with software like Twine that provides a story map for the benefit of the writer. Conversations became spread-out, tangled webs that were difficult to make sense of.

Bringing each of these three major paths to a natural confrontation with the groom was also both challenging and necessary for the narrative. I essentially had no choice but to write four

different versions of the confrontation scene, which differed based on location and other characters' presence. Simply changing the scene description was not enough and would have required lengthy, confusing chains of if/else statements, so, believe it or not, writing multiple versions of the same scene was actually the simpler option. On top of this was a mess of variables keeping track of the groom's feelings towards the PC, the PC's statistics, and the PC's relationships with other characters in the scene. All of this added up to a very headache-inducing experience that took two weeks to write.

iii. Scope & Scale

Could the chaos of chapter 3 have been avoided with better planning? Parts of it, perhaps. But the tendency of interactive fiction to bloat is, to some extent, inevitable if one is hoping to tell a story like this. I could have reduced the player's options by choosing an in-depth conversation without detailed branching, but this risked the player feeling like they didn't have much input into what was happening (the Paradox of Choice, once again). Conversations are not simple in real life and could split in any number of ways, so if I wanted to have a scene involving a realistic conversation that also gave the player a good range of options to choose from, there was no way forward but a tangled web.

Perhaps a better question—and a much bigger one—is how much time and energy the author has to pursue a story of a given scale. Generally speaking, I found that the more characters the PC has relationships to, the more tangled a narrative will become. Descriptions don't tend to add much bloat by comparison. A mostly silent story about exploring a location alone will be much less time-consuming and complex to write than a story featuring many character interactions and conversations. The difference is in the inherent premise of the story: one of these will require a lot more interconnected branching than the other. Of course, there is

probably a way to make the exploration as convoluted as the conversation, but the premise lends itself to that much less readily. Deciding on a premise that fit my time and energy was imperative to avoiding later complications (including choice bloat).

iv. Choosing Choices

On the scene level, I also had to decide which choices were worth presenting to the reader/player—a balancing act central to addressing the Paradox of Choice. Part of this was the difficult dance of predicting where a player might expect to have a choice and where I could assume they'd be happy to just follow the story. In some cases, they might expect a choice, but the story required that a certain event happen to progress, and potential frustration about a lack of choice on their part is a tradeoff I realized I would have to make. "Trimming the fat," so to speak, was even more important in a branching narrative than it is in a linear one, given that the fat could exponentiate out of control if left untrimmed.

I found that there are two main types of choice: aesthetic and consequential. Aesthetic choices can be fun, but they're an indulgence that takes extra time and energy on the writer's behalf. In one scene, I gave the player the option to choose between a blouse and a dress, which meant that every subsequent description of clothing had to be tagged with a tedious if/else statement depending on which aesthetic the player chose. This amounted to busywork in the scheme of the story. I also had to beware of choices that *seemed* consequential but were actually aesthetic. I learned to identify this trap when I found myself writing several versions of the same scene, just with the descriptions and some peripherals changed.

A true consequential choice *feels* like a different story is being created—something significant has changed that the player would not have encountered in the other branch. It's also the sort of choice that should be included in high-level planning and plotting, to account for all

the directions it might take. The three different paths in my huge chapter 3 qualify as consequential, because each one leads to a unique scenario. By contrast, the quit/kept job choice from chapter 2 has a few consequential elements but, in hindsight, is largely aesthetic.

There are ways I could have made some aesthetic choices consequential. For instance, a choice of what to wear could have had a positive or negative affect on a character's impression of the PC later in the story, changing their relationship. But these are decisions I would have had to make in advance and not fix as the story was being written. It was very difficult to go back and make an aesthetic choice matter later in the writing process.

A related, side challenge to this complication that I encountered was a mental one: I found it was simply hard to determine if I was being repetitive when I was writing similar scenes that necessitate similar dialogue. Had I mentioned the rain or the dust too many times? It was hard to tell, because different nodes that might not interact at all might still have similar descriptions, and so the repetition was entirely on my end and not the player's. A similar issue arose with physical gestures and character locations. If paths rejoin after a few branches, and the rejoining node makes mention of a hand on someone's shoulder, I had to make certain that each of the nodes leading into it included that hand. This was more a small, frustrating wrinkle than a large problem, but worth mentioning here.

v. Character (In)Consistency

From a story perspective, the personality of the player's character also posed a problem. Because the player controls her actions and responses to in-game situations, the character might act arbitrarily abrasive one moment and incredibly kind the next due to most branching options generally having either a rude/kind choice dichotomy or a docile/proactive one. This led to readers reporting that the character felt inconsistent. While these choices altered variables behind

the scenes, their immediate outcomes weren't visible to the player and mostly just showed up in an "insights" node at the end of each chapter. In a sense, they were frustrated that past choices didn't push them towards different dialogue options.

This was a hard dilemma to tackle because it poses a contradiction: the players feel that the character is inconsistent, but really, it's the players themselves who, through their choices, are making her act inconsistently. The trouble, then, seemed to be that the choices offered were inconsistent with past actions, and the apparent solution would be to have past choices affect future available options. For instance, if a player acted rude in the past, then the dialogue options presented to the player in the future would also be ruder, because they had chosen to make the character a rude one.

However, restricting player agency in favor of character consistency that didn't sit well with me. Orchestrating the game so that a player is literally unable to say something kind because they were rude in the past felt like too far of an overstep on my part, like I was railroading the player down a particular path without recourse even if they'd technically chosen the precursor to that path. If they *could* say something nice, why shouldn't they have the option?

In the end, I decided to live with the possibility of character inconsistency. For one thing, I didn't have the time or technical ability to slowly nudge the story in such a subtle way, where future social choices become more and more constricted based on a cumulative tally of the player's past decisions. It would be possible, but certainly beyond the scope of this project. But from a more bird's eye perspective, the question of character consistency in general is a wrinkle of the Paradox of Choice that I don't have a good answer to.

vi. Time Management

Almost all the previous challenges boiled down to time management and using my available time as effectively as possible. Time was perhaps the biggest limit on my project—not my technical know-how, not my writers' block, but time. Just looking at the expanding conical shape of the narrative I wrote, as it became progressively more complicated with each chapter, speaks to a learning process of the role time plays in the creation of interactive fiction.

Of course, time management is an important consideration in any creative discipline, but I'd argue that it's especially crucial in a medium where any decision I made at the start could balloon into dozens of paths if I wasn't careful. Once I'd poured hours into making a certain path work, it was incredibly difficult to decide to remove it—even if continuing to pursue the path would lead to more work than I had bandwidth down the line. The ratio of time spent to content lost—and the mental tax from losing that content—is a high one. (This is why, in a professional setting, the game development pipeline is so rigorous and rigid. Time lost to a story that turns out to be irrelevant could mean thousands of dollars lost, as well.)

Looking back, it would have been wise to first start out with small scenes to get a sense of how long it would take me to write branches. It was impossible to know my creative bandwidth without first testing the waters, and my past exploits in writing linear fiction did not directly translate to the experience of navigating a nonlinear story. Tackling smaller projects first would have given me better insight into how to plan a branching plot, keep choices in check, and pick a narrative premise that fit both my available energy and my ten summer weeks.

If I could do this project over, my focus would be this: devoting myself more fully to the pre-writing process and setting myself up for success down the line by doing so. That said, it was more or less inevitable that I had to go through time-consuming trial and error to find my footing and my process for writing this kind of narrative. My stumbling blocks and mistakes will inform

any future interactive fiction I tackle, and I feel much more confident in the genre than I did when starting out. So, despite some poor time management on my part, my creative project was doubtless a success in everything I learned from it.

Works Cited

Bakker, Jason, and Georgia Symons. Personal interview. 22 June 2023.

Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image, Music, Text*, translated by S. Heath, Fontana, London, 1977, pp. 142–148.

Calvino, Italo. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. Translated by William Weaver, Harcourt, Inc., 2018.

Caracciolo, Marco. "Playing Home: Videogame Experiences between Narrative and Ludic Interests." *Narrative*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2015, pp. 231–251.

Choice of the Deathless. Version 1 for Windows PC, Choice of Games, 2013.

Foucault, Michel. "What Is an Author?" *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, edited by James D. Faubion, Allen Lane, London, 1998, pp. 205–222.

Jahn, Manfred. "Narratology: A Guide to the Theory of Narrative." *Poems, Plays, Prose: A Guide to the Theory of Literary Genres,* 2021.

Jones, Dave. "Narrative Reformulated: Storytelling in Videogames." *CEA Critic*, vol. 70, no. 3, 2008, pp. 20–34.

Kane, Brad. Personal interview. 14 June 2023.

Koenitz, Hartmut, et al., editors. *Interactive Digital Narrative: History, Theory and Practice.* Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2017.

Mass Effect. Version 1.03 for Windows PC, BioWare, 2007.

Ostenson, Jonathan. "Exploring the Boundaries of Narrative: Video Games in the English Classroom." *The English Journal*, vol. 102, no. 6, 2013, pp. 71–78.

OXENFREE. Version 3.2.16 for Windows PC, Night School Studio, 2016.

Powers, Richard. *The Overstory*. Random House UK, 2022.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories: Toward a Poetics of Interactive Narrative." *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2009, pp. 43–59.

The Stanley Parable. Version 1.07 for Windows PC, Galactic Café, 2013.