Dear Esther: An Interactive Ghost Story Built Using the Source Engine

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Abstract. This paper reflects on the design and production of an multimodal, environmental storytelling experiment constructed in the first-person game engine Source. Rather than being based around the resolution of conflicts and acheiving goals, Dear Esther presents a sparse environment with no embedded agents, relying purely on the player's engagement with and interpretation of a narrative delivered through semi-randomised audio fragments. Dear Esther was released for free download via a number of modding sites in June and this paper reflects on the experience of building and the response by gamers.

1 Introduction

In 2007, we were awarded a speculative research grant from the Arts & Humanities Research Council, UK, to develop three mods, each exploring a different angle on storytelling, or affective structures, and release them freely on the internet, tracking their responses. We were not interested in creating mods that only had value as objects of study, but wanted our results to succeed as games in the public domain. In other words, rather than produce media which was primarily of interest to an artistic or academic audience, we wanted to release games that pushed the envelope whilst remaining appealing for gamers.

Dear Esther runs as a first-person game, with no visual representation of the avatar. There are no goals or action sequences, just an environment to explore with embedded music and voice-over triggers. Additionally, the game contains no AI, making the player's engagement with the piece rest entirely with the narrative, visual environment and audio. The environment is custom-built, but it uses texture files pre-existing in Source, plus a small number of new visual elements as required by the narrative. A new entity was coded which allowed us to fire one of three audio files for each trigger point. In this way, the story is effectively randomised. Dear Esther is superficially familiar as a ghost story, though it becomes more abstract and psychological as it progresses. Two plots develop simultaneously: the avatar's visit to a deserted island, following the text of a 17th century cartographer, and memories of a car accident. We begin to understand that whoever Esther is, she has been killed in the accident and the avatar has come to the island because he believes he is being drawn to find her. This is complicated by the introduction of Paul, the man he believes caused

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the crash, although it is inferred that these memories also refer to the biblical character's conversion on the road to Damascus. This is indicative of the collapse of symbols within the story: his memories of having kidney stones leads to the inference that the island is itself some kind of metaphoric stone; the identity of a shepherd who died hundreds of years before becomes confused with the narrators; his job as an electrical engineer becomes an obsession with interconnections; the aerial that towers above the landscape becomes a conduit for redemption. Esthers identity is never revealed and ultimately, there remains the question of whether the island is real at all; whether the accident ever happened; whether the narrator himself exists in any real sense. Compounding this, the randomisation of the narrative fragments and contradictions coded into the text means a closed reading of the events is impossible to ever reach.

2 Development

The plot was developed with a consideration of exploratory diversity and the economics of building. It was important to have a structure that would encourage exploration and a drive to complete the experience. Conflict was discarded, along with agents. Taking the basic idea of a ghost story, which enabled a mysterious, empty landscape, with aspects of a psychological drama, where the player-avatar relationship would be pushed to the fore, we decided on a remote island as a backdrop to the story. Localisation, the separation of the game environment from the wider, inferred world, is a common strategy in games, as it allows a greater control to be taken of the contents of the presented environment. Researching islands to base the environment on also led us to historical documentation of Boreray, a Hebredian island. There were a number of advantages of using an island in this location: we could constrain exploration with believable geographical features (cliff edges, steep valleys and the ocean), use vertical features as focal points, and bring in a limited set of human markers (Boreray was a grazing point for lone shepherds). It also enabled us to make use of Source's fog effects to limit draw distances and cover-up the limitations of the environment's size, and the textures pre-existing in the engine. Finally, it allowed us control over visual diversity, so features would stand-out, increasing our ability to use visual focalisation. We established a focus point in an aerial on a mountain, giving the player an indication of their ultimate exploratory goal.

Freed of the need for microgoals and ludic set-peices, we had the opportunity to write and build simultaneously. Rough timing of exploration was used as a way of determining the number of plot triggers that could be used, at this point nearly fifty cues were embedded. At this stage, the overall plot arc had been determined, so it was a case of trying to ensure that triggers were evenly distributed, whilst keeping momentum. Visual symbols, picking up images in the textual fragments, were also built, ranging from cave paintings to creating parts of the geography to fit the narrative. What was telling from the first version was that the story was not simply competing for space with gameplay, but the combination of a rich environment with open exploration meant that the project

felt 'overstoried'. Although trigger positions had been carefully worked out, the narrative fragments were more or less constant when running the direct path of exploration, resulting in a very uneven experience if the player chose to return to a prior space. Further to this, randomisation meant that the plot had become too abstract, shifting from any kind of recognisable narrative to a barrage of textual symbols. Thus, the number of plot points was reduced, and single triggers replaced random triggers in key locations. We also wanted to avoid versions of the same text at randomised triggers, and this meant that we to make sure that key points were not lost. Although the use of bottleneck triggers was kept as small as possible, it nevertheless represented a compromise and illustrated the limitation of completely free association with a coherent narrative line. Whilst we wanted to enable free exploration, we had to balance the triggers against one another to ensure we were not getting crossovers - firing one cue whilst another was already playing. Adjusting the speed the avatar moved at was one way of doing this, but had to be constrained by the playability of the experience: beyond a point, the whole thing became unnaturally sluggish. In a few instances, the environment was linearised, to force the player around a lengthier route; this created an environmental sub-plot structure, where sections of exploration were avoidable. A riskier strategy was to try and direct the player by using more explicit focalisation devices. On three occasions, a gull takes off near the player and flies in the direction they are being prompted to take. We also, very sparingly, used a human agent, always viewed at a distance, to serve a similar purpose. The importance of music also became more apparent: it was critical to establish a continuity of mood, to allow us to be more fragmented with the actual text. By embedding music cues with a common stylistic base, spanning multiple trigger points, a sense of linear development could underpin the interactive explorations. Additionally, music also helped to create an affective score which enabled us to manipulate the player's emotional experience, orientation and position in the wider story arc, and even adjust exploration.

3 Response from the Community

Dear Esther was launched in June 2008 via www.moddb.com, one of the key mod community sites. At the time of writing, it has been downloaded over 4000 times and feedback has enabled us to assess its reception. This suggests that using mods as research tools has a real value in terms of reaching gamers, outside more formal academic settings. The response has been extremely positive, with negative comments focusing on three things. Firstly, shortfalls in the quality of the environment's build. Secondly, some players dislike the slow speed and 'bunny-hop' to speed the game up, causing multiple triggers to fire over each other; others find ways to escape the maps and are frustrated by clips used to prevent this a diegetic alternative was created for the second iteration. Finally, and inevitably, others hate the lack of gunplay and find the whole thing boring. What is surprising for us, however, is how few comments of this sort Dear Esther has attracted: generally, the community has loved the mod and it has even

drawn comparisons to commercial games, S.T.A.L.K.E.R. being the most notable example. Attention has been drawn to the quality of the music, voice acting and writing. The last of these is the most surprising as the ambiguity, contradictions and lack of closure in the script is where Dear Esther really deviates from a normal game. However, players seem to understand that this is due to an open, abstract plot rather than structural problems in the delivery; the notion of an unfolding mystery that is never solved seems to appeal to them. Whilst some players find the lack of action frustrating, for most, the atmosphere and drive to find out more about the story is enough of a pull to get them all the way through the experience and for a few to go immediately back and play again for further answers. For these players, the speed of the game is not an issue, and they draw attention to the need to consider Dear Esther as requiring a different attitude to a game system. In terms of affective response, many players report being scared and others describe the experience as eerie, moving and very sad. These last two are emotions that normally fall beyond the affective range of games, especially first-person games.

Dear Esther has proved that FPS players want more than just guns and gore: work that is driven purely by story, with no action or goals, no closure and that denies the player any final understanding of what they have experienced. The value of this kind of storytelling experiment being released to the public domain is clear.

References

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