

Being in the Story: Readerly Pleasure, Acting Theory, and Performing a Role

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Abstract. It is common within the interactive narrative research community to conflate *interaction* with *changing the outcome* of a story. In this paper we argue that reimagining interaction as *participation* in a story opens up an important new design space for digital narratives: one which emphasizes the readerly pleasure of transforming into a character rather than the authorial pleasure of rewriting the events of the story. We draw on theories of method acting and performance as a model for participating within a story and provide examples from several recent games that support this type of narrative.

Keywords: Games and Narrative, Acting Theory, Agency, User Experience.

1 Introduction

One of the challenges facing theorists and designers of interactive narratives and games is the prevailing assumption that interaction is fundamentally at odds with story. The pleasures of reading a book and viewing a film are often pleasures of surrender, of allowing an author to weave a compelling story which whisks a reader or viewer away to a place she might not have gone on her own. In contrast, we have this conception of the interactor in a game or interactive narrative exerting her own preferences over the outcome of the story: perhaps she wants to be the hero, or the villain, or an observer, or something different? Perhaps she doesn't want the story to resolve in a traditional manner? We contend that this conception of the interactor is limiting and ultimately harmful to the project of designing compelling digital narrative experiences.

We propose a shift away from thinking of digital narrative experiences in terms of "interaction" and instead suggest that we discuss digital stories in terms of "participation". We argue that an actor performing a role on stage and an interactor playing a character in an interactive narrative or game are engaged in cognitively similar activities. This sensation of performing a role is an unusual blend of freedom and constraint; it is a type of *bounded agency* that results in a unique narrative pleasure. We position this argument alongside longstanding discussions of improvisational theater and interactive drama within the interactive narrative community and introduce a new domain of literature from which to draw our interaction metaphors: Method Acting.

To explore this in more detail we take an interaction model informed by method acting and performance theory and discuss the analytical and design implications that

result from a commitment to this perspective. To render this concrete we consider how this model may be used to understand narrative in several commercial games, while considering new design principles for Interactive Digital Storytelling (IDS) systems that arise from its application.

2 Interactive Drama, Improvisation, and Bounded Agency

In IDS research, much has been written about interactive drama [1-3]. A common metaphor for interactive narratives is improvisational theater [4-6], in which actors collaborate within a framework of rules to create a story. Most dramatic performances are rooted in Plato's concept of *mimesis*, as articulated for modern narratology by David Bordwell [7]. Mimetic narratives are enacted rather than recounted; they are performed and *shown* in action rather than *told* by a narrator. Interactive drama positions the interactor as the main character, experiencing the story from a first person point of view. Drawing on improvisational theatre for inspiration, interactive drama proposes that the goal of the interactor is to make dramatic offers that result in meaningful changes to the outcome of the narrative. The pleasure of interaction and improvisation is a creative pleasure rooted in the desire of the interactor to collaboratively *author* the outcome of the story in conjunction with the IDS system by making choices about the actions that the main character takes. A common approach to the design of interactive drama proposes an interactive environment populated with intelligent actor agents who can improvise and perform with the interactor, as in the case of Façade [2] or the more recent experiments by Magerko into improvisational micro agents [8]. We contend that the ideal of the interactor as author is actually a trap for designers, one which leads into a dangerous territory where the pleasures of experiencing authored narrative are subverted by the well intentioned designer who is trying to facilitate creative pleasures for his interactors. One of the earliest works on interactive drama, Brenda Laurel's *Computers as Theatre* cautions against this:

“What is the relationship between the experience of creativity and the constraints under which we perform creative acts? In fantasies about human-computer systems, people like computer-game enthusiasts and science-fiction writers tend to imagine magical spaces where they can invent their own worlds and do whatever they wish—like gods. Even if such a system were technically feasible—which it is not, at the moment (the rhetoric of virtual reality notwithstanding)—the experience of using it might be more like an existential nightmare than a dream of freedom...A system in which people are encouraged to do whatever they want will probably not produce pleasant experiences. When a person is asked to “be creative” with no direction or constraints whatever, the result is...often a sense of powerlessness or even complete paralysis of the imagination. Limitations—constraints that focus creative efforts—paradoxically increase our imaginative power by reducing the number of possibilities open to us.”[1]

The desire to design for freedom and creativity in IDS parallels the game design community's desire to design for unrestricted agency.

2.1 Bounded Agency and Narrative Pleasure

Within the discourse of game design, it is assumed that providing the player with more freedom will result in more agency, and thus in more pleasure [9-11]. In the case of both unrestricted agency and improvisational theater, by offloading the creative responsibility of telling the story onto the player, the designers have effectively cut themselves out of the loop, or else placed themselves in a situation where they must author *against* the intentions of the player, rather than *with* them. We believe that it is from this problematic framing of interactive narrative that the aforementioned assumption about interaction and narrative being fundamentally at odds with each other arises.

Recent work on agency has complicated our understanding of the phenomenon in productive and interesting ways. Wardrip-Fruin et al. write that agency is not simply “free will”, but instead occurs when the dramatic probabilities of a game world are in balance with the actions supported by the underlying computational engine [12]. In our previous work we argue that for narrative games, agency can be understood as a process by which the player commits to specific communicative meanings through action (or inaction) [13]. This notion of commitment to meaning argues that a player in a narrative game (or an interactor using an IDS system) receives pleasure from being able to take actions that express specific narrative meanings within the system. This treatment of agency emphasizes the narrative *context* in which an action occurs, rather than the *systemic outcome* of that action. This is a crucial departure from models of unrestricted agency because it relies on a mutual understanding between the interactor and the system of the narrative meaning of any given choice. Narrative play from this perspective sees interaction as a language which the interactor and system use to communicate with each other. Successful communication requires something that Winograd and Flores have termed *communicative competence* [14]. Due to the limitations of AI systems, in order to achieve this level of mutual communicative competence, it is necessary to design systems which reveal their interactional grammar to their interactors and obey the rules of that grammar.

We call this treatment of agency *bounded agency* and it can reinforce narrative pleasure when it aligns with the designed capabilities of the game system. It breaks down when the meanings committed to by the player are not recognized by the system or are in conflict with it. Bounded agency works when the player is performing in sync with the designed possibilities of the game or, to put it in theatrical terms, following the script. This is in contrast with the discourse around unrestricted agency in game design mentioned above. The result of this shift away from unrestricted agency to bounded agency is that it supports a participatory model of narrative game play in which the actions of the player are constrained to a small set of communicatively meaningful choices, rather than a large set of meaningless capabilities. One way to think about bounded agency and commitment to meaning is to consider it in terms of scripted narrative, which brings us to the discussion of method acting.

3 Method Acting as an Alternative to Improvisation

We propose a new approach to interactive drama by reimagining the interactor as an actor in a *scripted* drama rather than in an improvisational scene. While this might seem like a minor point, it has significant implications for design and entails different intellectual commitments about the type of narrative pleasure derived from the experience by the interactor. In an improvisational theatre model of IDS, the core interactive pleasure is a creative, *authorial* pleasure of taking actions and experiencing the consequences of those actions. By instead imagining the interactor as an actor playing a role within a play, the pleasure becomes a participatory, *transformative* pleasure where the interactor becomes a character and experiences that character's emotions and desires instead of her own. This is not a new idea for digital narratives. Murray writes persuasively about the poetics of transformation in digital media:

“Digital narratives [offer] us the opportunity to enact stories rather than to merely witness them. Enacted events have a transformative power that exceeds both narrated and conventionally dramatized events because we assimilate them as personal experiences.” [15]

We see this type of transformation as a fundamentally *readerly* pleasure. Readerly pleasures involve surrender to the story, rather than an active attempt to write a new story. As authors and designers we often assume that the pleasure we take in creating new narratives is a pleasure that our interactors want to share in. However, just as not everyone who goes to the movies wants to be a filmmaker, not everyone who engages in an interactive story wants to be an author. Shifting away from the model of improvisational theatre moves us to a place where we can think about our interactors as readers. Readers place their trust in an author to take them to places that they would not or could not get if left to their own devices; they welcome being challenged by an author and enjoy being surprised by the outcome of a narrative.

To better understand the cognitive process of transforming into a character, we turn to the literature on actor training that has evolved out of the seminal works of Stanislavski, whose writing led to the development of the American acting system often simply known as the Method.

3.1 Method Acting

Relatively little has been written about method acting as it pertains to interactive narrative, in spite of the popularity of drama as a metaphor for IDS systems. We choose to investigate method acting because as a practice it leads to a unique and participatory narrative pleasure. Acting trainer Robert Benedetti writes:

“Actors often speak of the release that playing a role gives them from what Alec Guinness called ‘my dreary old life;’ acting gives them permission to have experiences they would never have in real life.” [16]

Acting is a challenging activity, but it is also a deeply pleasurable one. There is something profoundly enjoyable about the experience of performing a role, becoming a character, and enacting a narrative script. Acting is a powerfully creative act, both in spite of and because of the relationship to the scripted page. Acting involves

adopting a mental state in which the performance of prewritten lines can feel like a spontaneous and emergent choice. This experience is a promising template for the design of an IDS system.

Method acting has its roots in Stanislavski's teachings as interpreted and extended by the founding members of America's Group Theater, which includes Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, and Sanford Meisner. Citing Clurman, David Krasner writes about the history of method acting, which he describes as a system for training actors with an emphasis on combining research into the life and experience of the character with the personal experiences and worldview of the actor [17]. The relationship between the actor and the character is at the heart of the Method, and is essential in understanding how these techniques can lead to a transformative experience. Acting theorist Peter Lohdell writes:

“The Method supports actors’ abilities to live actively in the center of a paradox—namely, they are at once the character and not the character. They must live simultaneously within the imaginary given circumstances of the play and on the actual stage—allowing both and denying neither.”[18]

This paradox is described by Benedetti as a form of *dual consciousness* in which the actor is able to “maintain artistic choice while simultaneously becoming the character.”[16] These notions highlight how the process of acting requires a particular state of mind or consciousness. Acting trainer Kurt Daw describes this as the “creative state”.

3.2 The Creative State

Daw frames his book *Acting: Thought into Action* as a clarification of the Stanislavski system [19]. He attempts to explain why Stanislavski's system works through the application of ideas from artificial intelligence and cognitive science. He argues that Stanislavski had intuited a number of correct principles about how the brain works, but was lacking the knowledge to accurately describe or explain them. At the core of Daw's acting method is the concept of the “creative state”. He writes:

“Acting is creating a sense of life... Actors create this sense of life not by manipulating appearances, but by experiencing the action as it occurs. They are in the ‘here and now,’ a state where concentration on the details of the moment preclude the distractions of the past or future. In this sense, they have a great deal in common with those other ‘players,’ athletes.” [19]

Acting teachers often invoke game play and childhood make-believe as models for the actor's mental state. Lohdell discusses this creative state in terms of sensory imagination.

“The Method trains actors to invent behavioural metaphors that illuminate their characters. Strasberg's assertion that *concentration is the key to what has been loosely thought of as imagination* is central to my argument. I will frame my position around an extended discussion of actors' imaginative use of their senses.” [18]

Daw also relies on the idea of sensory imagination, but he builds it into a model of embodied experience informed by cognitive science. He visualizes this as a pyramid: on the bottom and most important level is sensory processing, followed by the social layer, and the verbal, and finally the logical layer at the top. He attempts to ground his acting work in the sensory layer, which he argues is the basis for most of our experience of the world. He uses exercises that relax the mind and direct the actor's attention away from analytical thought and toward sensory reactions to induce this reactive, immediate, and creative state.

“While doing this creative work, you may experience a feeling some people describe as *spacey* or *floating*. It is a different state. The usual first sign is a dropping away of the conscious ‘voice’ you hear while labeling and ordering things. A lost sense of time or a great lessening of urgency is typical. There is no longer a feeling of logical order, but instead a feeling of intense concentration on the object. For most people, this combination of effects is very pleasurable. In fact, in trying to re-create this state, the single strongest guide is a generalized feeling of well-being.” [19]

The creative state described by acting teachers is similar to the immersive state of *flow*, which has been used to characterize engagement in games [20]. In Daw's interpretation of the Method, transformation occurs by working first from a sensory state of embodied cognition. Other approaches to acting take this further, arguing that *action in the world* leads to a cognitive shift for the actor. This approach to the Method most closely resembles Sanford Meisner's version of the technique:

“The radical nature of Meisner's work is expressed in the core principle of *doing* and the manner in which this alters the basic definition of acting. The emphasis on doing, or action, as opposed to the expression of emotion is the primary characteristic that differentiates Meisner work from [others].” [21]

These current theories of method acting lead to an unexpected conclusion, namely that acting is a process that uses external perceptions and actions to transform the internal state of the actor. This runs counter to common-sense thinking about acting that imagines the actor first creating an internal world from which to motivate her performance.

3.3 The Magic If

Benedetti uses the phrase “artistic choice” to describe the acting process: actors playing roles are making choices constantly *as if* they are the character. These are deeply meaningful choices, even though they are within the confines of a scripted set of events. This notion of *as if* is key to much acting theory

“Your experience of your character's significant choices is the mechanism by which the Magic If produces transformation. When you have entered into your character's circumstances as if they were your own, felt their needs as if they were your own, and *made the choices they make given those needs in those circumstances*, then action follows naturally and with it transformation.” [16]

Our concept of committing to meaning [13, 22] aligns well with the treatment of choice in acting theory. By “fully choosing” his actions, an actor *commits to the meaning of those actions*, as if he were experiencing them for the first time. Likewise, a player may commit to meanings even within highly scripted play situations. The pleasure of agency, in these situations, is not one of changing the outcome of the story, but one of fully participating in the events of that story.

Transformation is thus seen as an *outcome* of the acting process, rather than a necessary precondition for acting. Benedetti and Daw both emphasize *choice* as a central element of a performance. It is often assumed that acting is merely reciting lines as written by a playwright, and indeed some schools of thought in the theater hold that this is all that is required of an actor [23]. However, many theatre training programs teach that acting is about making the choice that the character is making, *as if for the first time* [19]. This type of preordained choosing resembles the imaginative immersion of the “willing suspension of disbelief” [15, 24]. It is similar to the immersion engaged in by a reader rereading a book for the second time, or an audience watching a familiar Shakespeare play. Margaret Mackey describes this particular mental state as the “subjunctive mode” or the state of experiencing a narrative “as-if” for the first time:

“Inside the world of the *as-if*, the fiction is *lived*, is *felt* as hopes, fears, assumptions, surprises: it is experienced prismatically through the lenses of human emotions coming to terms with an unknown future. As Gerrig points out, even when we do actually know the end of the story, once we step into its purview we experience it as if we do not know what will happen.” [25]

When an audience watches *Romeo and Juliet*, they do not disregard the first four acts as meaningless because they know that the lovers die in act five. The pleasure of the experience is in experiencing it from an imagined state of innocence. This is often enhanced through anticipation of the outcome, creating an oscillation between knowing and not knowing. This is the basis for dramatic irony in narrative. The same is true for an actor, where one pleasure of playing a role is making the choices of the character within the moment, as if they were new. When done right, a performance is experienced as spontaneous and alive.

3.4 Transformation and Masks

In the above sections we have discussed how external actions and choices can lead to internal transformation. The most extreme example of this comes from a tradition in theater known as “Mask work” that stretches back to primordial rituals (according to Keith Johnstone [26]), but which has been formalized in a variety of traditions including Italian *commedia* and Japanese *Noh* theatre. Mask work most commonly uses physical masks, but can also use costumes and makeup as gateways into characters and identities that Johnstone argues exist within all human consciousness at some level.

“It is not surprising then to find that Masks produce changes in the personality, or that they first sight of oneself wearing a Mask and reflected in a mirror should be so disturbing. A bad Mask will produce little effect, but a good Mask will give you the feeling that you know all about the creature in the

mirror. You feel that the Mask is about to take over. It is at this moment of crisis that the Mask teacher will urge you to continue. In most social situations you are expected to maintain a consistent personality. In a Mask class you are encouraged to ‘let go’, and allow yourself to become possessed.” [26]

Johnstone cites Stanislavski, who also wrote about the Mask state in *Building a Character*. In this example a student discovers a character in himself through the (mis)application of grotesque stage makeup. Astonished, he describes the experience in terms of divided consciousness [26]. Mask work is often described in terms of trance. Johnstone writes about a number of actors who report dual states of consciousness: “they speak of their body acting automatically, or as being inhabited by the character they are playing.” [26]

This tradition of Mask work is especially interesting to us as theorists of interactive narrative and games, because it uses an external character representation as a cue for an internal character transformation. In games, we can imagine a player’s avatar as a form of Mask with a set of powerful character associations built into it. Johnstone describes a wide variety of Masks that are tied to a range of human emotions and characters. For us this raises the question of whether or not the current generation of games and IDS systems provides the same range of Masks for interactors to put on.

3.5 Method Acting for Interactive Digital Storytelling

We propose method acting theory as the basis of a new interactor model for IDS. The interactor that we envision through this model approaches the narrative as an opportunity to transform herself into a character. This process of transformation is not one which she must attempt without external support, however. The narrative system provides her with a script, a role, and a set of actions to take within the framework of the narrative. Through the process of committing to the goals and desires of the character by taking in-character actions, the interactor experiences a cognitive transformation, entering into a new state of consciousness. The pleasure of this interactive narrative is one of participating in a story, of enacting a role and experiencing a mimetic narrative through the eyes of a character.

To put this another way, we believe that there is a pleasure that comes from “being” in a story and “doing” narratively important things. This pleasure is a form of make-believe that we all used to engage in as children, and it is rooted in the experience of following a known narrative script. We find it easy to imagine a group of children playing a game of “superheroes and villains”. The pleasure of this make believe play is not a pleasure of subverting the conventions of a known genres but about experiencing what it is like to become the superhero or the villain. This approach entails us as designers to re-imagine IDS systems in order to create experiences that afford and enrich these participatory pleasures. Currently, the best examples of systems that support this type of narrative participation exist mostly in the realm of commercial digital games.

4 Examples from Commercial Games

4.1 Mass Effect II

The first game we will consider from this perspective is *Mass Effect II* (Bioware, 2010). *Mass Effect II* is a science-fiction action role playing game in which the player assumes the role of Commander Shepard, the leader of a team of human and alien scientists, warriors, and engineers who must defend inhabited space from an ancient race of sentient, starship-sized aliens who periodically destroy all other sentient life in the universe. Gameplay in *Mass Effect II* is divided between combat missions and extensive social interactions with squad mates and other inhabitants of the storyworld in the form of branching dialogue trees. *Mass Effect II* allows the player to perform the actions of Commander Shepard, along several moral vectors through ongoing dialogue options. As the player progresses in the game it is possible to create a version of Shepard that leans toward one of two moral extremes, maintains a neutral stance, or becomes a collection of different moral inflections, guided by the choices of the player. The moral spectrum of Commander Shepard is split between “Paragon” and “Renegade”, but these are not a binary opposition in that it is possible to build a character with both traits well represented. While this model is outwardly simplistic, in practice it results in a complex set of evolving character possibilities depending on how the player chooses to perform the role.

The choices that the player makes are seldom about the outcome of events. Instead, much like an actor, the player makes choices about the *inflection* of the character performance. While the player is often given control over *how* Shepard will accomplish a goal, the game seldom gives the player control over *what* goal will be accomplished. In this sense, the events of the game are highly scripted, but within the boundaries of that script the player is free to explore different *performances* of the main character’s personality. The resulting game narrative supports the readerly pleasures of surrender to an author while still allowing the player to participate in a highly personalized way with the world of the game, via Shepard.

One thing that complicates the nature of the character performance and transformation in *Mass Effect II* is the nature of the player’s relationship to Shepard’s dialogue. Players are provided with a number of choices on a “dialogue” wheel, which correspond to different emotional performances of the same core communicative message. The game does not provide the player with knowledge of exactly what Shepard will say, it instead gives them access to an abstracted content domain and an emotional valence for the utterance. As a result, the relationship between the player and Shepard is more like a director giving instructions to an actor on how to perform a line. This puts Shepard “at arm’s length” from the player at times.

4.2 Uncharted II: Among Thieves

Another recent commercial game, *Uncharted II* (Naughty Dog, 2009) takes a more linear and cinematic approach to interactive narrative. In this action-adventure game, the player assumes the role of Nathan Drake, a “bad boy” treasure hunter who travels the world solving historical mysteries and invariably fighting off waves of mercenary

thugs. *Uncharted II* asks the player to surrender herself to the flow of the story by providing linear, obstacle filled environments that must be traversed and survived. *Uncharted II* is a highly mimetic narrative. The story unfolds through action sequences rather than through narration or other “external” text, and, unlike *Mass Effect II*, the player is given no control over the appearance or social behavior of the main character. Unlike many games where the main protagonist is designed as a blank vessel into which the player projects her identity, *Uncharted* distinguishes itself by explicitly specifying Nathan Drake’s personality and history. The player is thus given an opportunity to suspend her own identity and instead take on the character of Drake. This is slightly different from the character of Shepard in *Mass Effect II*, whose distinctive personality emerges as a function of the players’ choices. In the case of *Mass Effect II*, the choices of the player provide “inertia” to the character’s personality. Consistent actions along either moral vector will open up additional conversation options for Shepard, while also transforming the character’s appearance. In this way, the game provides external perceptual evidence of the character’s personality that reinforces the transformative process. To put this in the terms of Johnstone’s discussion of Mask work, *Uncharted II* provides the player with a predefined and unchangeable Mask, while *Mass Effect II* allows the player to slowly change the properties of the Mask. In both cases the player is given some sort of external support for transforming into a character.

4.3 *Dragon Age: Origins*

The third game we will consider from this perspective is the recent fantasy Role Playing Game (RPG) *Dragon Age: Origins* (Bioware, 2009). Unlike the first two games we discussed, we find *Dragon Age* to be unsuccessful at creating opportunities for character transformation. *Dragon Age* is a return to an older style of RPG in which the player creates a generic hero character by selecting a class, a gender, an appearance, and some abilities at the beginning of play. Bioware made an interesting choice to reflect the personality and choices of the player in the actions and attitudes of the NPC companions to the hero, rather than in the personality of the hero itself. This is emphasized by Bioware’s decision to make the player character the only character in the game without fully voiced dialogue. The result is that we often felt like a bland, indistinct silent observer rather than a particular hero with a personality and motivations. In this case, the design choices did not provide us with a character to transform into, and so the experience was oddly rudderless, in spite of a rich and branching set of choices within the world of the narrative. Unlike the first two games we discussed, *Dragon Age* lacks any Mask for the player to put on. Instead, the player is invited to simply project herself into the game world.

These three examples from commercial games demonstrate how we can use the perspective of method acting to unpack and analyze the design of interactive narrative experiences. They also point to several design choices which can be made by designers seeking to support transformative participatory narrative pleasure.

5 Conclusions

In this paper we have argued for a new perspective on Interactive Digital Storytelling that emphasizes participation and transformation as the core narrative pleasures. We have drawn on the literature surrounding method acting to provide a model for the cognitive experience of transforming into a character, and connected it to theories of bounded agency in games. To illustrate how this model may be used to understand narrative interaction, we have used it to briefly analyze three recent narrative games.

One crucial lesson about designing for participatory transformative experiences that emerged from this analysis is the importance of a well specified player-character. In actor training, character transformation revolves around a commitment to the goals, intentions, desires, plans and actions of the character being played. In order for this process to work, the actor must understand these aspects of the character's psychology as they are expressed through the script of the play. If we are to offer this same experience to our interactors it is necessary to either provide them with this information about their characters (as in the case of *Uncharted II*) or provide them with the means of expressing a permutation of these qualities and traits (as in the case of *Mass Effect II*). In the second case, it is of paramount importance that the character expressed by the player be legible to both the player and the system. *Dragon Age: Origins* illustrates how rendering the character illegible to the player can impede the process of transformation entirely.

IDS research needs new models of interactor desires and expectations. We need a more robust understanding of how the brain experiences narrative, of the different types of narrative pleasure to be had, and of the literacies and languages needed by our interactors to get the most out of the systems we design. In this paper we propose one possible new direction for the field that leverages the cognitive experiences of game players and actors in order to open a new design space for interactive drama.

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