Towards a Theory of Choice Poetics

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Games can tell stories.
They can do things other media cannot.
We don’t understand this very well.
Meaning in Games
Choice Poetics
Choice Poetics
(explicit discrete choices)
Outline

- Introduction
- **Background & Motivation**
- Example choice
- Choice poetics
  - Modes of engagement
  - Choice idioms
  - Dimensions of player experience
Story Games

- The Cave of Time
- Journey Under the Sea
- By Balloon to the Sahara
- Space and Beyond
- The Third Planet from Altair
- Deadwood City
- Who Killed Harlowe Thrombey?
- The Lost Jewels of Nabooti

ILLUSTRATED BY P. GRANGER

expressiveintelligencestudio

UC Santa Cruz
Story Games

Mass Effect
- Mass Effect
- Mass Effect II
- Mass Effect III
- Your Own Adventure
- Your Own Adventure
Related Work

Aristotle
Meaning in Narrative
circa 335 B.C.

Bogost
Meaning in Games
20XX
Practical Advice

From the Choice of Games game design blog category:

▶ 4 Common Mistakes in Interactive Novels
▶ 5 Rules for Writing Interesting Choices in Multiple-Choice Games
▶ Make a “Choice of” Game Your Own: Authorial Intent in IF
▶ By the Numbers: How to Write a Long Interactive Novel That Doesn’t Suck

*http://www.choiceofgames.com/category/blog/game-design/
Outline

- Introduction
- Background & Motivation
- Example choice
- Choice poetics
  - Modes of engagement
  - Choice idioms
  - Dimensions of player experience
Would you like to escape with me?
Some observations...

- Binary (Yes/No)
- Low-information
- High-stakes
- Outcomes aligned with narrative
Example Choice

Dramatic effect...
▶ Transition between narrative arcs
▶ Contextualizes play going forwards
▶ Feelings of uncertainty and/or regret
Choice Poetics: Overview

- Modes of Engagement
- Choice Idioms
- Dimensions of Experience
Choice Poetics: Overview

- Modes of Engagement—How players approach choices
- Choice Idioms
- Dimensions of Experience
Choice Poetics: Overview

- Modes of Engagement–How players approach choices
- Choice Idioms–Specific choice structures and their effects
- Dimensions of Experience
Choice Poetics: Overview

- Modes of Engagement—How players approach choices
- Choice Idioms—Specific choice structures and their effects
- Dimensions of Experience—Things that choice structures affect
Example: Modes of Engagement

Dramatic effect...
- Transition between narrative arcs
- Contextualizes play going forwards
- Feelings of uncertainty and/or regret
Modes of Engagement: Avatar Play
Modes of Engagement: Role Play
Modes of Engagement: Power Play

Timmy, Power Gamer

Summon Legend

4: Put a creature into play from your hand.
"Just wait till I get my Leviathan . . . ."

Illus. Edward P. Beard, Jr.
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Example: Modes of Engagement

Dramatic effect...
- Transition between narrative arcs
- Contextualizes play going forwards
- Feelings of uncertainty and/or regret
Example: Choice Idioms

Some observations...

- Binary (Yes/No)
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- Outcomes aligned with narrative

Would you like to escape with me?
Choice Idioms: Blind Choice

NORMAL
DIFFICULT
PRESS START
Choice Idiom

▶ **Blind choice**

▶ May appear more important than it really is.
▶ May lead to regret or frustration.
▶ May encourage exploratory play.
Example: Choice Idioms

Some observations...

- Binary (Yes/No)
- Low-information
- High-stakes
- Outcomes aligned with narrative
Example: Dimensions of Player Experience

Some observations...
- Binary (Yes/No)
- Low-information
- High-stakes
- Outcomes aligned with narrative
You didn't side with Kenny.

What other choice is there?
Some observations...

- Binary (Yes/No)
- Low-information
- High-stakes
- Outcomes aligned with narrative
An approach to understanding the narrative effects of choices by asking:

1. How do players engage with games (and how do games encourage/discourage certain modes of engagement)?
2. What idiomatic choice structures appear in games?
3. What qualities of the player’s experience are affected by choice structures?

(this work is only a beginning)
Choice Poetics

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An approach to understanding the narrative effects of choices by asking:

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3. What qualities of the player’s experience are affected by choice structures?

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Questions?

- Choice poetics
  - Modes of engagement
  - Choice idioms
  - Dimensions of player experience
Would you like to escape with me?