Creating "maybe make some change"

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ABSTRACT

"maybe make some change" is an interactive fiction incorporating video, audio, and animated text to explore a frozen battlefield moment from six violently conflicting perspectives. Inspired by a true story of Adam Winfield, a US soldier accused in 2010 of war crimes in Afghanistan, the piece was first exhibited in the spring of 2011 as part of the author's MFA exhibition in Digital Arts & New Media.

Author Keywords

interactive fiction, electronic literature, playable media, Afghanistan, Maywand District killings

ACM Classification Keywords

J.5. ARTS AND HUMANITIES: Literature.

General Terms

Design, Documentation

INTRODUCTION

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DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK

Exploring a frozen battlefield moment from a half dozen violently conflicting perspectives, "maybe make some change" merges text-based interactive fiction with video, sound, and images. Inspired by the currently unfolding trial of twelve US soldiers accused of war crimes in Afghanistan, the project asks what interactive stories can say about contemporary, real-world events, and what the role of documentarian becomes in a participatory space.

The core of the piece is a recurring moment of a soldier being unexpectedly confronted by an Afghani man who may or may not be holding a gun. This is described through text from varying perspectives, while in the background video clips from first-person shooters set during contemporary wars play on loop. The nouns of the text are highlighted, as well as a series of verb words the player slowly learns. The participant interacts by typing in verb/noun commands. The text is framed as from the point of view of a series of narrators from the soldier's past and future: an uncle warning him about the "savages" he'll face on his deployment; a lawyer cross-examining him about the incident; a threatening squad leader planning revenge; and three others. Each of the six narrators describes the scene very different, demands the player use his terminology to refer to the things and characters in the scene, and has his own expectation about what the appropriate action the player should take is: to shoot, to miss, to threaten. As the player cycles through this moment over and over again and learns the rules of each narrators vision of the scene, he or she learns more and more verbs that can be used to interact with the components of the vignette.

If the player performs contrarian actions (which are viewed as morally or practically wrong by the current narrator), a second layer of text behind the primary layer becomes increasingly visible. This second text describes not the story world, but the narrator telling this interpretation of the story world. With each contrarian action this text flares up and becomes more visible, eventually overshadowing the original text. Effectively this makes visible the distinction between the plot level and the discourse level of the narrative, the *fabula* and *sjužet* [2]. As with the nouns in the story-level text, the nouns in the discourse-level text are also highlighted. Eventually the player realizes they can use the verbs they've collected to interact with discourse-level nouns (the narrators). Each narrator is matched to one of the verbs: you can threaten your bullying staff sergeant, or miss your uncle. As the player uncovers these combinations, the verb and narrator annihilate each other: the verb disappears from the list and may no longer be used, and that narrator and his version of the story are removed from the cycling sequence. Once the player has eliminated every verb and narrator, a final concluding sequence plays which is based around a real-life transcript of a confessional Facebook chat between soldier Adam Winfield and his father from February 2010. Winfield was later accused of the murder of an Afghan civilian.

Drawn from research into the so-called "kill team" of soldiers accused of systematically murdering innocent civilians

[1], "maybe make some change" hopes to draw attention to an underreported story in an underreported war, and asks participants to question their own sense of morality, duty, and complicity.

TECHNICAL CHALLENGES

The piece was written in Inform 7, a domain-specific language for creating textual interactive fiction. Since Inform 7 does not have strong support for multimedia or interaction with web-based components, a technical infrastructure had to be built up around the core story file. The Inform 7 code simulating the story world and narration was compiled to the Glulx format (a 32-bit virtual machine for interactive stories). A modified version of the extension Custom Library Messages by Ron Newcomb used to inflect verbs properly based on the temporal point of view of each narrator. Custom hacks allowed events within the Glulx VM to send text strings representing function calls to the browser's Javascript layer, which could then be executed with an eval() function. Within the browser, Andrew Plotkin's Quixe, a JavaScript Glulx interpreter, displayed the main text of the story and received keyboard input from the player, and a jQuery infrastructure was used to dynamically position elements, animate words, turn on and off video and audio streams, restart the story, and set up the introduction and conclusion. As the IF story file passed narrative state changes (such as a change in narrator) to Javascript, these could then affect the jQuery-driven display layer by, for instance, flashing verb words or changing the color and visibility of the various text layers. This framework should allow for eventual distribution of this project on the web, although the complex interconnections of systems and media files means this will take some effort to make cross-browser compatible. (Since the initial exhibition of this piece, several projects to make cross-browser frameworks for two way communication between web technologies and interactive fiction projects have begun [3].)

Authoring for "change" comprised of defining how the six narrators described the story world, and thinking up appropriate responses for every likely combination of action and narrator, as well as labeling which were complicit or contrarian from the perspective of each narrator. These responses are the way the player learns about the agenda of each narrator, which helps them understand the increasingly visible *sjužet* layer and also to determine which verbs to use to eliminate each narrator, so it was important for them to help characterize the narrators as efficiently as possible. As many responses as possible also had to work in one of the six verbs, to minimize the time spent by the player as they try to collect them all, which proved to be an interesting constraint: trying to repeatedly work the word "hug" into a bullying sergeant's jeers, for instance, took some effort. About 70% of responses ultimately incorporated one of the six verb words.

"maybe make some change" and its companion project, *what if im the bad guy*, are described more fully in my MFA thesis, *A Sequence of Possibilities* [4].

CONCLUSION

I had several opportunities to exhibit and refine "maybe make some change" before the MFA show, which pushed the piece towards being more transparent as to the underlying mechanisms and allowed modes of interaction. Many participants have been unwilling to engage with the piece by typing the first required command, shooting the Afghan (described by the first narrator using a racial slur). This is a reaction to the piece that I find completely acceptable, and has provoked a number of fascinating discussions as to why so many gamers are willing to engage in much more graphically realistic depictions of firing on foreign combatants (as in the first-person shooters playing in the background), but will not participate in the system presented here. I feel "maybe make some change" qualifies as a story system (although its narrative is not coherent to all participants), and uses the procedures of how the narrators relate to both the player character and the event they're retelling to tell a meta-story about a soldier replaying an imagined or regretted incident over and over again in his mind. I am particularly proud of the way "change" demonstrates both how interactive fiction can be used as a platform for reflecting on current events, and a significant departure in both affordances and presentation from what most people think of as IF.

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