Albert Goes Narrative Contracting


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Abstract:
RPG’s (Role Playing Games) and improvisational theatre have some obvious similarities. Both require the participants to work together in real-time to construct dynamic narrative elements. Seeing communication in terms of ongoing narrative contracts is a well-accepted principle of improvisational theatre (Johnstone 1981). Any time a new narrative element is introduced it is seen as an offer. The respondent can either accept the offer, block it or make a counter-offer. This paper describes a study of subjects engaging in a controlled online ‘encounter’ with RPG elements. The encounter is titled ‘Albert in Africa’ and the study draws on the previously described Fun Unification Model (Newman 2004). In this study subjects’ individual predispositions, and their responses are correlated with the number of acceptances, blocks and counter-offers they make during their encounter. From this emerges a view of the complex interactions that make up the simple universal construct of fun in an RPG environment, and the identification of certain combinations of predisposition and ‘environmental affordances’ which act as predictors to the subject’s fun response. The fun response is described in the model as the combination of enjoyment, temporal dislocation, focused immersion, innovative play and narrative engagement. Interactive entertainment must be fun for the target audience, and developers of games and RPG communities spend significant time and resources trying to increase the fun factor of their next product. It can be completely hit and miss as to whether their efforts bear fruit. To what extent can fun as a construct be meaningfully measured or is it simply too ill-defined and subjective? This study correlates the individual subjects’ predisposition for fun, their fun response to the encounter, and an analysis of each subject’s narrative contracting activity derived from the session transcripts in order to demonstrate that fun can be defined and measured with some degree of confidence. The Fun Unification Model draws on a range of previous constructs for measuring users’ experience including absorption (Tellegen and Atkinson 1974; Agarwal and Karahanna 2000), immersion (Witmer and M.J.Singer 1998), narrative engagement (McNeil 1996; Newman 2004), playfulness (Webster and Martocchio 1992), emotional useability (Logan 1994; Kim 1997), hedonic quality (Hassenzahl, Platz et al. 2000), foundational elements of experience (Marsh 2003), fun-scale rating (Read and MacFarlane 2000), and humor mechanisms (Meyer 2000). Essentially the model breaks an individual user’s experience into 3 parts; the individual’s predispositions, environmental aspects of their experience, and their responses to their experience. This can be summed up as: 1. he/she is a fun person (predisposition) 2. that’s a fun game (environment/affordances) 3. we had fun doing it (response) Into these three groupings various constructs can be inserted depending on the specifics of the activity being tested. In “Albert in Africa” the subjects are tested for engagement with elements of narrative and role-playing, so the individual predisposition to hearing and telling narrative is of interest as are the individual responses of innovative play and narrative engagement. General expectations: It was expected that, given that it was an online environment, most people would be prepared to go along with some of Albert’s various outrageous claims, and that at the very least most people would be content to humour him. Those people who were found to have a significant predisposition to finding and creating narrative were expected to find ways to further the narrative elements of the encounter by making additional references to the narrative elements. The correlations between Predispositions, Responses, and their narrative contracting activity is expected to reveal the following. 1. Subjects with strong narrative tendencies are expected to experience high levels of narrative engagement and innovative play. 2. Subjects with strong narrative tendencies are expected to exhibit a higher incidence of acceptance than blocks. 3. Subjects with strong narrative creating tendencies are expected to exhibit a higher incidence of counter-offers than others. 4. Subjects with strong immersive and narrative tendencies will experience a high level of fun – defined here as the combination of enjoyment, temporal dislocation, focused immersion, innovative play and narrative
engagement. The paper describes the methodology of the study, reports on the correlation of the three data inputs and discusses the results.

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