
Adapting Games From Literature: Game Verbs for Player Behavior

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Abstract

This case study outlines a methodology for adapting digital games from literature. The process maps key narrative events to human computer interactions via game verbs. Game verbs are distinct player actions that help the player accomplish their in-game goal. Through the use of tightly coupled narrative events and game verbs, the game engenders the spirit of Edgar Allen Poe's short story The Tell Tale Heart. Like the story's protagonist, players move from controlled actions to erratic behavior as they manipulate their device. Players are required to propel the narrative through accelerometer and touch-based actions. The resulting game's physicality is designed to match the narrative's drive toward madness.

Author Keywords

Games ; Digital Narrative ; Game Verbs; Game Design

ACM Classification Keywords

K.8.0. Personal Computing Games

Introduction

As mediums evolve it is common for the next generation medium to investigate its unique ability to retell stories that have been told. Typically called adaptations, these works take form in film versions of Shakespeare's work or the retelling of Moby Dick

through Japanese emoticons [1]. Inevitably the task of converting mediums has elements of curatorial practice as each medium offers opportunity and limitation. The task of those converting between mediums is both respecting the defining elements of the previous medium's version and exploiting the unique benefits of the new medium. To that point, there remain many unanswered questions about the use of interactive media as a medium for adapting historical literature.

Historically the first approach to adaption is simply transcription. The literal content of one medium is simply transcribed into the next, as is common to the digitalization of printed text. Like Gutenberg and Fust's 42-Line Bible, the movement to the then new medium require adaptation not simply transcription [2].

Transcription is distinct from adaptation. Adaptation attempts to convert the previous medium into something new by selecting the essential aspects of the origin work to the benefit of the new work. Adaptation for interactivity continues to be a fairly immature practice.

Accepting the dichotomy of adaptation to transcription, this project sought to examine a collection of text to be converted to digital playable media. The objective was not simply to transcribe the story, but to retell the story using the unique characteristics of the medium. To do so the design team chose the public domain short stories of Edgar Allen Poe, an American writer who's visual language places him on the cannon of top historical writers. Since this was an experimental approach to game design, Poe's short stories were selected over novels and longer historical narratives.

Upon review, the team selected Edgar Allen Poe's The Tell Tale Heart. This particular work has a heuristic rich history of adaptation from musical adaptation[4] through contemporary animated television [5].

The goal of the project was to test a methodology for adapting literature through interactive media. The team wanted to test the ways in which playable interactive media, could be generated from literary elements as a way of retelling short stories and novels. This research extends previous work in understanding game design through game verbs [6] and literature [7].

Methodology

To construct a game from a 200 year old story the team used deconstruction. First each candidate game was diagrammed into key narrative elements. The narrative elements are first deconstructed into a basic 3 act structure. The game's exposition, climax and resolution are determined. Once these three elements have been understood, all other key elements are noted. Events that fail to support the logical trajectory of 3-act structure are culled (e.g. backstory or thematic events).

Starting with these enumerated story events the designers move to mapping events to actions. These narrative actions become playable game verbs. Game verbs are operational units for which users and players are responsible. Game verbs are the actions the players is required to do in order to meet their game goal.

The Design

Beyond reading, team members examined how much attention was given to each event in the story. Attention was generally measured by the number of

words and the number of events precipitating from the event. In the selected text, much time is spent describing the author's care in sneaking into the victim's bedroom to commit the deed (approximately 300 words). Less time is spent describing the actual murder (130 words). It is clear that the murder is the event from which all subsequent narrative precipitates. Balancing attention with logic assured the game adaptation made sense.

The deconstruction yielded the events listed in table 1.

1. Methodically opening the door to the victim's room
2. Covering the victim to suffocate
3. Sliding the victim's body parts under the floor
4. Cleaning the evidence
5. maintain composure while the heart beats to distraction.
6. Guilty resignation

These key events mapped to the game verbs *open*, *cover*, *slide*, *scrub*, *maintain*, and *surrender* respectively. Each of the game's levels requires the player to do these actions to further the narrative.

The game begins by requiring the player to move their device slowly forward as if opening a door (open verb). The door creaks, and if opened too quickly it shuts, restarting the level after a clock winds through another day. If the player successfully opens the door they must then suffocate their victim (cover verb). To suffocate the victim the player must tilt the device forward and hold it forward moving the device back and forth as the victim moves from under the cover. Players must move the device left, right, forward and back to keep victim's face obscured. When this is done

successfully, the player must then hide the body in the floorboards of the home (slide verb). To do so, they must slide the dismembered body parts into a single hole by rocking the device back and forth. The bloody evidence of this work is left on the floors and must be scrubbed by the player on the next screen (scrub verb). Players must rock the device back and forth to scrub the blood from the floor.

The final level of the game requires the player to respond to visiting police about the disappearance of the victim (maintain verb). The player must tap speech bubbles that appear over a speaker's head as they appear. At increasingly intermittent times the player must shake the device vigorously to shrink a heart which appears in front of the speakers. This sequence of tap, tap, shake can continue indefinitely if the player can maintain it. Once the player stops, the player surrenders and the game ends with the guilty plea and the beating heart in full focus. A diagram of the player actions associated with each level are illustrated in figure 1.

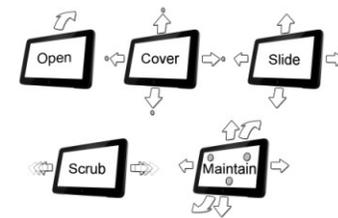


Figure 1. Game verbs and device movement

Since the original narrative is told in the 1st person the player actions map neatly to game verbs. The design incorporated Poe's theme of insanity by moving the player from controlled and deliberate movement to

vigorous and erratic behavior. The final moments of the game are a series of device shaking, stopping, multiple taps, more shaking in erratic rhythms. It is hoped that the casual observer would wonder what the player is doing with such odd gestures, perhaps inquiring about the player's mental state, as readers question the protagonist.

The game was designed to be language agnostic, providing little instruction and propelling narrative through action. Ideally, this would make Poe's work more accessible to a wider audience thus capitalizing on the unique characteristics of playable media. Considering universal accessibility, the game can be played without audio and by the color blind. The team selected an aesthetic that relied on high contrast black and white graphics similar to book illustrations of the 1840s. Color is used rarely and for emphasis (e.g. the victims blue eye). Screenshots of the final game are provided in figure 2.



Figure 1. Game Screenshots

Observations and Conclusion

The game was released for free download on Google Play and the Apple App store. The game provides little instruction and requires players to use their device in atypical ways. People who have not played many mobile games have a much harder time understanding the game's experience. This is further complicated by a significant difference in accelerometer responsiveness between mobile devices.

This case study in game design is meant to demonstrate the potential of adapting literary text using a game verbs and key events framework. It is not provided as a one-size-fits all solution. Instead it provides evidence of a methodology for formalizing the seemingly abstract process of game design. This same approach can be applied to the design of social impact games, advergames or other games with a clear message to deliver. It is intentioned to demonstrate how well-conceived adaptations offer opportunities not previously available in the medium.

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