Designing Beyond the Game: Leveraging Games to Teach Designers about Interaction, Immersion, and Ethical Perspective

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Connecting the Dots: Skyrim, Interactive Narrative, and Ethics in Context

In 2012, RIT offered a course that used a popular, recently released role playing game to engage students in discussions about game design. In addition to common topics one might associate with role play, design of open world interaction and writing highly interactive narrative, students were challenged to explore the game with an eye toward ethical perspective inherent in play, to read and discuss ethical theory, placing it in conversation with their experiences in game play, and ultimately to modify the game to enhance the representation of ethical perspective within it. The course was an experiment in cross-disciplinary synergy within the context of a single course, using the students pre-existing excitement and engagement with the game to expand their understanding of well-aligned course content, and to use their increased understanding of out of game ethics to improve the game itself, and their own ability as designers.

The goal of the course was ambitious: to connect *Skyrim*, a single-player computer role playing game with the broader affordances of immersive, interactive narrative to enhance player understanding of ethics, proven and made concrete by bringing that understanding back to the design of the game. Though ambitious in scope, the design is based on a belief that there exists a line of connection from role play to potentially enhanced understanding of ethics, though the line that connects these concepts may require a bit of explanation.

The study of narrative-intensive games is still early in its formation, and the best practices underlying instruction of courses on highly interactive literature is very much still in formation. Some excellent works on interactive design from industry professionals and from academia have been released in recent years (Murray, 1998; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004; Fullerton, 2008; Schell, 2008; McDevitt, 2010; Sheldon, 2013). The discussion of best practices and models is lively within the field, but there are some general understandings across the field. Among these include a sense that interactive play should be centered on the actions of the player, not centrally focused on the world or on actions of characters outside of the player's control. There is also a pervasive sense that being a story is importantly different from telling a story. Particularly in role play, there is a distinction made between the strength of good role play to engaging in effective storytelling, and the strength of most other narrative media to create compelling story as a final product (Hindmarch, 2007; Simkins, 2011). In other words, the goal of role play should be seen as creating good opportunities for storytelling, not creating a good story.

The focus on interactive play, on development of emergent narrative, is building an understanding that games can tackle serious issues, but that it may do so in a somewhat different way from more traditional narrative. The main difference turns on what it means to experience another's story, as in most traditional narrative, versus experiencing a story as one's own, as one does in most games. Some good traditional media invites the reader to be a character of the story (Calvino, 1982), but the relationship of reader to character is always strained. During immersive play, the character is aligned with the player from the outset - what the player does in play is reflected in the character. The character becomes separate from the player only, becomes an "other", only when something in the play draws a separation between the player's intent and action and the character's. Of course, artifacts in a game can serve to draw a distinction between the player and the character. A cut scene is one example. Essentially mini-movies using traditional media techniques to convey story, cut scenes allow for the infusion of authorial style and intent into the narrative. The designer, not the player, is in control of the character and the scene. The player's lack of control may or may not be met with frustration, but regardless of how welcome it is, the experience is normally one of at least momentary alienation of player from character. The character is portrayed as having her own experience of the world separate from, though still connected to, the player, perhaps as an agent in her own right, or perhaps as an object merely responding to forces in the world.

Despite what one might assume initially, the intentional distinction of player from character can be a useful device. It lets the player see the character as someone with her own desires, drives, and context rather than simply applying the player's own background to the game's world (Simkins, 2010). However, it is not the only way to take advantage of this easy empathic connection between character and player in game play to create opportunities for role play, where takes on the character's role. In the first moments of *Skyrim*, the game uses cut scenes to force action on the character, but even within these initial moments the lack of control is justified by the player's imprisonment (Simkins, Dikker & Owen, 2012). The release from custody in the game's first moments marks a point of transition as the player gains full agency over the character's actions.

To play *Skyrim* is to role play. What the character does in the game is under the player's control, and those actions have consequences that can change and shape the world. This play is always treated as if it is the character taking action. The player's freedom in an open world, within limits set by and consistent with the physical and social context of the world, allows the player's role play to be a form of identity exploration. This identity exploration is not in a vacuum, however, for the players actions affect the game world, and those changes to the game reflect back on the developing identity of the immersed player's character (Gee, 2005). Through this interchange, the player's own identity is also at play (Turkle, 1997; Bowman, 2010), and the player can play with contextualized, situated ethics (Kierkegaard, 1985; Wong, 1984) from the perspective of a character. It is this perspective on situated ethics that was chosen as the central theme for the Skyrim course, and much of the course's readings and discussion were focused on the theoretical underpinning of situated ethics, the cultural frameworks around the game that inform the game's social and ethical context, and how a game designer might afford a player legitimate exploration of their ethical identity.

Skyrim Course Design: Methods and Approach

Despite its potentially high brow aspirations, the course had concrete goals and was focused not only on the understanding of contextual ethics within role play, but also on modding the game to enhance and take advantage of ethical context. The proof of understanding is, therefore, in the products as teams of students design experiences that enhance ethical play within Skyrim's world.

There were thirty undergraduate students and six graduate students participating in the class. Few of the students had any experience with ethical philosophy and none had experience with medieval nordic history and culture, which forms the basis for the fictional culture of the *Skyrim* game world. All of the students game design and development majors and had extensive experience playing and developing games.

The course design was structured to introduce ethical concepts briefly in the first two weeks of the ten week course (Simkins, 2010). The third week focused on *Skyrim's* cultural context, using readings from modern warrior culture (Venkatesh, 2008), medieval nordic society (Roesdahl, 1999),and *Beowulf*, an example of Anglo-Saxon literature (Heaney, 2001).

The middle five weeks of the quarter were dedicated to readings on game design and theories of play that focused on play in context, including Hocking's discussion of *Ludonarrative dissonance in Bioshock* (2009), Elrod's *Accomplishments of Ultima Underworld* (2009), Wallis's *Making games that make stories* (2007), Sivak's *Half-life 2: Being Gordon Freedman* (2009), Costikyan's *Games, storytelling, and breaking the string* (2007), Fortuno's *On a measure for marriage* (2007), Malaby's *Play as a disposition* (2008), Steinkuehler's *Mangle of play* (2006), and Simkins's *Negotiation, simulation, and shared fantasy (2011).*

The last weeks involved a survey of ethical systems, focusing on sections from central works of philosophical ethics, including utilitarianism and consequentialism (Mill, 2007), Kantianism (Kant, 2002), situationalism and deontology (Kierkegaard, 1985), and post-structuralist ethics (Foucault, 1984).

In addition to readings, students produced weekly journals of game play for six weeks (weeks 2 through 7) in which they were to respond to the following questions: What did I do in the game this week? How did the non-player characters and the world of Skyrim respond to my character's actions? Assuming, to the best of your ability, that the non-player characters and world responded sensibly, why do you think the non-player characters and world responded to your character actions as they did? What worked or did not work for you in the way the NPCs and world responded to your actions? How might the reactions have been improved? Students were invited to respond to the first question, about what they did in game, from the perspective of their character. At the end of week 7, students were to deliver a short paper to summarize the experience throughout the six weeks of journaling. This assignment was called an analysis of ethical context.

The final assignment was completed in groups of 3 to five. Students developed a "mod" for *Skyrim* - an expansion to the game that changed the game's play. They were to use the Creation Kit, which was released as the quarter was beginning. The creation kit allowed players to modify the game in a variety of ways, and was derived from tools used by the game's designers to create content. Students were tasked with developing mods that enhanced the immersive nature of the game and were encouraged to use their experience from journaling to determine what they would develop. Groups proposed mods, and mod ideas were evaluated for scope and effectiveness in enhancing immersion. The final products were shared with and presented to the class at the end of the course.

Character Creation, Journals, and Summary

Students were to play through the short tutorial and introduction, and to use that experience to create a personality and background for their character, similar to the work an actor might do to prepare for a role. (Moore, 1984) Furthermore, they were asked to role play their Skyrim play. That is, to make decisions and take actions in the game in-character, not just for the benefit they might receive. The intent was to create a disjunction right away between character and actor, allowing the player to immerse into the game through their character, rather than just experiencing the game as themselves.

Example Character 1: V the Vengeful

The student who created V. was already familiar with Skyrim, having played through dozens of hours of the game before starting the course. She incorporates that prior knowledge as she describes her character, writing,

> V grew up in the city of Markarth hearing tales of the Forsworn and harbors resentment towards them for their actions. Her father, H, fought for Ulfric Stormcloak's militia during the Markarth Incident. He was killed in battle, leaving V in the care of her mother who fell into a depression and slowly wasted away. V considers her father to be a hero for his sacrifice and despises her mother for her weakness of spirit.

She began her explanation of V with specific reference to one of Skyrim's large cities, Markarth, and to the central tension that creates guides conflict and many of the quest's plot throughout the region around the city, the tension between the ruling nords and the rebellious, indigenous group called the foresworn. Not only does she position herself within the context of Skyrim's conflicts, she creates a background for the character, a father who participated in one of the two large scale plots offered by the game, the civil war between Jarl Ulfric's Stormcloaks and the Empire that has ruled Skyrim for millennia. By placing her father firmly on the side of the Skyrim nationalist Stormcloaks, and creating a tragedy around the death of her father that leads to the death of her mother, she offers motivation for her character to take a clear side in this overarching plot.

Out of character observations by the student show the strengths and weaknesses of this approach to integrated character design. The student repeatedly notes how NPCs fail to react sensibly to many PC behaviors and to context. As one example, the student writes of her chance encounter with a friendly NPC bard on the road:

> Why was he standing next to a random dead bandit? From a world building perspective it was confusing. The bard did not acknowledge the body, and yet it must have gotten there somehow.... Most reasonable people and consequently characters do not choose to stand near bodies. This was very perplexing for my character that a reason was never given. From a designer perspective, it's probably a coincidence where the bandit got killed by a bear, and the bard just happened to stop along his route there. As a player though, it brought up a lot of questions that were unanswered. Possibly, this sort of interaction could have been remedied by changing the NPC's awareness and response of his surroundings.

This theme of NPC obliviousness to the player's character and to the NPC's surroundings was a common theme. One character envisioned his character as having a particularly horrific appearance, but Skyrim's characters were not scripted to respond to the player character's appearance. In fact, generally, non-player characters reactions to the player's character were not particularly dynamic, and when there was mirroring it was either straightforward, such as fight or flight responses to a character's acts of violence or was highly scripted based on the plotline the NPC was starting or continuing with little or no regard for who the player was, what they looked like, or what their former reputation might be.

Perhaps more significantly, students found that *Skyrim* assumes that the player will be a hero. One of the students challenged this by creating a character who felt no internal call to action. He writes of his character, who we will call T, "My character is not a hero. He is a blacksmith wanting to do his job and make things. He initially has little knowledge of how to use a weapon or wear armor, though he knows how to make them." Later, he writes, "It is frustrating that everyone is constantly treating me as if I am a hero who wants to solve their problems for them. They act as if I am a wanderer wanting to find adventure, and really I'm just a blacksmith. It is confusing."

He wanted to experiment with denying the implicit assumption of heroism in the game by creating a character that fits into the society. He chose to create a local nord, a blacksmith, who merely wished to ply his trade. He hoped that the events of the game would provide him with a call to action, a reason and need to respond to the events of the world around him. Instead, while the game provided many opportunities for adventure, it provided few reasons to seek it out - at least not reasons that would apply to a humble character not seeking an adventurous life. This is not surprising given that, as an open world RPG, the game is focused on providing opportunities and intentionally not on requiring any particular path for game play.

We might forgive Skyrim for merely following the genre traditions of heroic fantasy RP. In fact some of T's difficulty comes from the course assignment that requires students to create a backstory and personality for their character prior to play. Players who simply leap into the game do not tend to notice any disjunction between what their character wants to do and what their character is initially offered as long as they are familiar with and abide by the genre conventions. Within the stories of player action, they are provided in the first ten minutes reasons to care about dragons, the civil war, and direction toward one of the cities (Simkins, Dikkers & Owen, 2012). They can choose to ignore this direction, but without a prior existing character background, that is more a player choice to ignore what is in front of them than a choice by the character. Still, from the standpoint of the course on RP design, it was extremely helpful to have players create characters, bringing these tensions to the fore that might otherwise be ignored.

Another interesting outcome of playing within a perspective was the role of leadership in the world and the general lack of responsibilities tied to roles in Skyrim society. Many of the students noticed that even when they were not trying to rise to the leadership of organizations they joined, the stories built around those organizations led those who follow them to a point of decision where leadership is offered. Interestingly, once leadership is achieved, rather than becoming the beginning of stories where the player's character must support, defend, enhance, or otherwise promote the organization's goals and interests, the player is given a reward and that quest line is considered complete.

Students also noted with aggravation the thin interpersonal and especially romantic relationships offered within the game. Romantic relationships in the game are established through a succession of relatively mechanical steps. The player character must win a potential partner's trust by performing a single favor for the NPC. They must then go through a relatively simple rite to show their interest in marriage. If both PC and NPC agree to marry, there is a brief scene where some of the other connections the player character has made show up to the ceremony and the player's character and NPC are wed, the NPC offers to move into one of the player's houses, if they have one. From that point on, the married NPC loses almost all unique personality, at least with regard to the interactions about the relationship. There is no real sense of ongoing romance, the struggle to maintain a connection, or even joy in being together. Though some of the students were thrilled at the freedom to choose a partner, to marry within game, and to have a wedding ceremony that involved other notable NPCs from the character's story so far, all groundbreaking for sandbox RPGs, the students were generally frustrated that romantic relationships are reduced to brief trust-building interactions. Marriage is reduced to gaining an NPC resident in the player's house who cooks, cleans, and opens a shop to sell goods and make money for the player's character.

Modding Skyrim

In the final weeks of the course, the students were given the opportunity to take the lessons learned from their journals and summaries, building a mod using *Skyrim's Creation Kit*, provided by Bethesda Softworks, to enhance role play immersion in gameplay.

There were five group projects. Three of them were focused in enhancing immersive role play by creating or enhancing particular game characters (NPCs) that would have ongoing and evolving interactions with the player's character. Of these, one created an Inn to serve as a hub for quests, and ongoing interpersonal interactions. Another created a new NPC companion who could travel with the character and provide additional dialogue, quests and more personalized interactions. The third did the same, not by adding a new NPC, but by enhancing an NPC that was already available in game.

The third was an attempt to mirror one of the mechanisms the game uses to give consequence to player character's engaging in illegal activity. The game assigns a bounty to a player when they commit a crime witnessed by an NPC, but there is no in-game representation of the bounty, other than the reaction of guards to the player. The students created a mod that placed wanted posters around cities where the player had a bounty. The player's face was to be placed as an image on the poster and NPCs in the vicinity were scripted to respond by approaching the poster and looking at it, then reacting to the player's character with distrust or fear, depending on the severity of the crimes.

The remaining group completed a mod that removed fast travel from the game - an out of character feature that allows a player character to jump to a visited location without traveling overland. To avoid an onerous burden on the player, they added sites with a magic portal that allowed in game teleportation between standing stones, important magical features already present in *Skyrim.*

In each case, the students used mods to enhance aspects already existing in game. Given limited time to work on the mod and limitations in the *Creation Kit*, some of the features of each mod could not be implemented, but even the process of designing the mod revealed some of the potential, and many of the challenges, in trying to create interactive narrative in an open world RPG. By actually working to implement improvements, students were reminded of just how difficult it is to account for all possible circumstances effecting a game with *Skyrim's* scope, and how impressive the game was in achieving as much mirroring and consequence as it had, and the benefit of providing the player population tools to tailor and enhance their own game play.

A Schema for Game Courses

The Skyrim course was generally successful, with excellent attendance, an active and involved student population, and with students completing more and higher quality assignments than I generally feel I can expect from even quality students. The excitement about the subject matter certainly helped the students to focus and excel in the course, and it also kept the discussions of games and ethics, of game design, and game development centered on a game the entire class had played together. *Skyrim* was by no means the only game we used as an example during the course, but it provided shared experience that formed a touchstone for discussion.

As a course structure, the model could be expanded to a wide variety of games. The core model presented here involves three key components - a primary subject matter that overlaps well with the themes and affordances of the central game, a game that is of sufficiently high quality and that has enough variety and play to provide a good touchstone for use throughout the course, and a thematic and game genre focus that allows for students to engage in "modding".

In this case the primary subject matter, contextualized ethics and critical ethical reasoning (Simkins & Steinkuehler, 2008), *Elder Scrolls Skyrim*, and the availability of the *Creation Kit* provided an effective synergy. However, a course could easily be structured to focus on philosophies of history, *Civilization V*, and the *Civilization* development tools included in the game. Even games that are not conducive to direct modding can use the same framework, with students creating small games in GameMaker, Unity, or other game design tools, or even creating non-digital games or creating design but not completing development on additions to the game. Of course, more courses developed in this framework will help us to determine how to best generalize it, but we hope this framework helps to inform efforts to more effectively teach effective game design, as well as teaching broader topics made concrete and practical by tying the topics to game design.

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