Do (Say) The Right Thing
Choice Architecture, Player Expression, and Narrative Design in Fallout: New Vegas

J.E. Sawyer
Project Director, Obsidian Entertainment
My Background

- Project Director, Obsidian Entertainment
- System Designer and Adapter
- Occasional Writer
- Tabletop RPG and CRPG Player
- General Console and PC Gamer
Dialogue Styles

Linear/Cinematic

Uncharted: Drake’s Fortune

Keyword/Subject

Diablo III

Branching Trees

Mass Effect

Leah
The Return of Cain
Life with Cain
Adria
Adria’s Death
Cancel

Fai Dan: Looks like a dozen. Maybe more.
Can I help?
What’s going on?
Only a dozen?
Why Use Branching Trees?

- Grant story agency
- Grant character agency
- Force tactical / strategic choices
- Reactive narrative content
Choice Planning and Structure, Not Prose

- Choices inform prose, but...
- Choices themselves present problems
- Choice is the *reason* for branching
Borges confronts us with the “pullulating” moment, when we become aware of all the possible choices we might make, all the ways in which we might intersect one another for good or evil.

His imagined Garden of Forking Paths is both a book and a landscape, a book that has the shape of a labyrinth that folds back upon itself in infinite regression.

Janet H. Murray, "Inventing the Medium" The New Media Reader (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 3
When I Cared About It
But Also...
Dialogue Trees in CRPGs

*Fallout*

*Planescape: Torment*
Dialogue Trees in CRPGs  Today

Changes have been primarily aesthetic, not structural. Persistent structural flaws suggest a lack of analysis.
Ahhh... Crap. We did it, too.
The Problem: Choice Conflict

Doing (Saying) the “Right Thing” conflicts with being the “Right Character”

Deus Ex: Human Revolution
Social Boss Battles

Fallout: New Vegas
Skill, SPECIAL, and Perk Checks
Doing (Saying) the “Right Thing” conflicts with being the “Right Character”

“What’s the right character?”

Any character that falls within our supported range of expression.
We are making a...

GAME!

Not a puzzle... Not a movie... Not a book...
The Assertion: Planning Avoids Choice Conflict

When all ways are “validated ways” and a clear response / reactivity spectrum are consistently reinforced in the narrative, player benefits and character roles align.

Types of Choices

Player / Character Expression

Narrative Goals
A Systemic Approach

1) Consider Types of Choices
2) Define Player / Character Expression
3) Establish Your Narrative Goals
4) Get Some Perspective
5) Write Prose
Step 1: Consider Types of Choices

- Provide Tactical Choices
- Provide Strategic Choices
- Forecast Consequences
- Validate All Options to Avoid “Win” / “Loss”
Choice Architecture

“Choice architects must choose something. You have to meddle. For example, you can't design a neutral building. There is no such thing. A building must have doors, elevators, restrooms. All of these details influence choices people make.”

Tactical – Node by Node

Making decisions to affect short-term outcomes. Immediate, scripted responses.
Strategic – Long-Term Outcome

Alpha Protocol – Reputation

Fallout: New Vegas - Reputation

Small or Non-Scripted Responses - Indirect Reaction Systems
Forecasting Consequences

- Intrigue the player, but inform them
- Surprise the player, but don’t anger them
- Differentiate consequences
- Lace consequences with sacrifices
- Push / pull conflict = agony = good
Validating Options with Choice and Consequence

Alpha Protocol - Grigori
As leader of the Grey Wardens in Ferelden, I would like to formally invite you to join our order.

1. I would be honored.
2. I accept.
3. Well, I can't see as I have much choice.
4. If it gets me out of the Deep Roads, I'm yours.
... vs. Win and Loss

[Speech 64] I'm carrying Jet, Psycho, and other favors. And I don't deliver to the help.

Let's see how tough you are.

Isn't this Vault 3, home of the Fiends?
Choice X-TREEEEEEEEEEMES

Sophie’s Choice

Jesus / Hitler
Choice Agony

Orestes

Antigone
Not Spice Agony
Step 2: Define Player / Character Expression

- Define Response / Reactivity Scope
- Establish Character Prototypes
- Create a Range of Impacts
Scope of Responses and Reactivity

- Good and Evil? Shades of Grey? “Stance”-oriented? Other?
- Direct (Scripted) and Indirect Reactivity Mechanics (e.g. Influence, Reputation, etc.)
Fallout: New Vegas Scope and Range

- Large Scope of Responses
- Anything Goes, at any Scale (Kill Everyone)
- Reverse-Triple-Cross Capable!
- Lots of scripted reactivity
- Reputation as Indirect Reactivity System
Prototypes: Character Templates

• Starting Point for Players’ Character Concept
• Help Define and Reinforce Scope and Range
• Can be Used for More than Dialogue “Voice”
Fallout: New Vegas Prototypes... ?

The Man With No Name

Alice

Mad Max

That Beard Guy?

Doomsday Tattoo Lady
Create a Range of Impacts

- Choices should have impact
- Indirect reaction systems count, too
- Narrative / emotional impact is the important scale
Fallout: New Vegas Impacts

**Fallout: New Vegas**
Archimedes II

**Fallout: New Vegas - Honest Hearts**
Salt-Upon-Wounds

*Whoa. This isn't what I signed up for. Let me talk to Joshua about this.*

*You're right. We're going to kill you, but not like this. Defend yourself!*

*([Sneering Imperialist] Whatever. Joshua, put a cap in General Gobbledigook here.)*
Alpha Protocol Scope & Prototypes

Response and Reactivity Scope:
- Professional / Suave / Aggressive +
- Heavily Scripted Reactivity
- Reputation – Indirect Reaction System

Prototypes:
- Jason Bourne
- James Bond
- Jack Bauer
Step 3: Establish Narrative Goals

- Fuse Information and Emotional Content
- Separate Critical and Optional Information
- Outline Your Narrative Branching
Information and Emotional Content

(don’t separate these two things)
Critical vs. Optional Information

- Few players want information dumps in dialogue
- Most players like understanding what’s going on
- Hints and hanging references are exposition, too

(Bioshock owns)
Narrative Branching

● Guarantee Critical Information
● Isolate Reactivity
● Generally, More Branching is Better Than Bigger Branches

- Steps are informational, independent
- Localized reactivity
- Critical information is the next step
- Supplemental info seasoning
- Player freedom = huge (kill everyone)
Step 4: Get Some Perspective

- Satisfactory Choices? — Well, are they?
- Role-Playing vs. Benefit — Is there a conflict? If so what kinds?
- Critical and Optional Narrative — Is the player getting everything he or she needs?
Step 5: Write Prose

- Don’t blow it.
In Conclusion...

- You are choice architects. Planning required.
- RPG players want “good” choices.
- Designer and player goals may be in conflict.
- You must resolve those conflicts or consciously accept the conflicts they present.
Questions and Comments

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The Fallout: New Vegas Team
Mikey Dowling
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E-mail: jsawyer@obsidian.net
Twitter: http://twitter.com/#!/jesawyer
Formspring: http://www.formspring.me/JESawyer