

GAMING: RECIPES FOR NEW NARRATIVES FROM FAILBETTER FOUNDER ALEXIS KENNEDY

LE 4 OCTOBRE 2010 JOSSELIN PERRUS

The more scripted a game is the less freedom of choice (FoC) it offers the player. At the other end of the spectrum are 'emergent games' whereby a set of rules governs interactions, but these are open-ended, like open worlds. The area in between scripted and emergent games is the very little explored country that Failbetter Games is aiming for.

Last week I met with **Alexis Kennedy**, founder of **Failbetter Games** and editor of *Echo Bazaar*, a text game that has received lots of appraisal. Alexis is the first person I have met who can soundly articulate narrative and games together into a unified framework. My video interview with him is embedded at the end of this article, but first let's go through his main points together.

Alexis starts off with an interesting comparison:



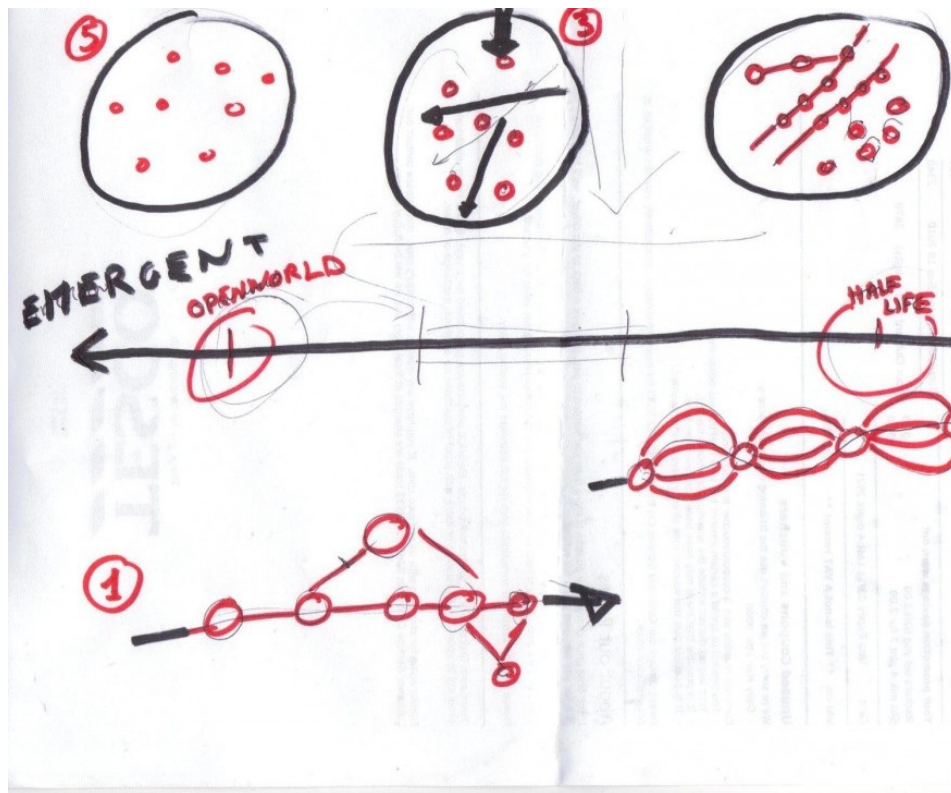
Some people call for better games by putting more narrative into the mix. But it is like saying that in order to make a better meal you just have to put more of this and more of that. The result is not only about the quantity of each ingredient. It's actually more about the process and the techniques used to cook the meal.



So how should one go about cooking such a meal according to Alexis?

Emergent vs scripted games

Games can be divided into two groups that lie at opposite ends of the spectrum. The more scripted a game is the less freedom of choice (FoC) it offers the player. A perfectly scripted game resembles a movie. At the other end of the spectrum are 'emergent games' whereby a set of rules governs interactions, but these are open-ended, like open worlds. The area in between scripted and emergent games is the very little explored country that Failbetter Games is aiming for.



State transitions

What makes a scripted narrative powerful is that the character's status is always relevant to how he handles a given event. Scripted games rely on status, and FoC introduces branching (see figure 1) : each new choice creates a new branch in the status graph. The issue is the growing complexity called 'combinatory explosion'. This process of introducing more game into the narrative is intractable, **it does not scale**.

Other courses of action have been devised, such as the introduction of *mandatory states* that form the backbone of the story with multiple branches in between (see figure 2). This way the complexity grows parallel to the branching. However such techniques **limit the depth of the game since, to some extent, one is always playing the same game**.

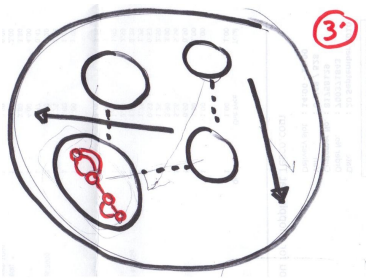
The sense of story

At the other side of spectrum, open worlds do not keep track of the state of a character. Characters wander and are subject to random encounters and events (figure 5). However **random events do not provide a sense of story** at any level. A way to reintroduce some structured narrative is to inject scripted chains of events in the world (figure 4). These chains are followed by the character upon acceptance of a mission (in WoW or GTA).

A powerful story is played at multiple levels. Consider the exemple of quality American TV series: the first level of the story spans over one episode, a deeper intrigue bridges over a couple of episodes, and third level plots traverse a whole season or the whole show. Instilling disconnected chains of scripted events in open worlds does not get you further than first level narratives.

Loosely coupled narrative structures

Scripted games have strong narratives but do not scale with FoC, whereas emergent games have strong FoC but provide a weak sense of story. Alexis devised techniques used in Echo Bazaar to combine FoC and narrative. The first is to get rid of states. Like stateless open worlds ? Not exactly: **states are replaced with qualities**, which are values on a valued axis that reflect the events the player went through, the choices he made and its evolution as a character. Depending on their nature, events and choices increase or decrease the value of specific qualities (go check Echo Bazaar to have a clear idea of such qualities).



The second technique is to **modularize the narrative** :

qualities and values give access and are modified by narrative structures called *storylets* (see figure 3', and read the Failbetter blog to know more about them). These storylets are akin to first order narrative. Playing a storylet does not produce new states like in scripted narratives, neither is it irrelevant to future events like in open worlds: it bends a trajectory designed in a higher conceptual plane whose coordinates are the qualities value.

The use of storylets has two corollaries :

Two different paths through different storylets can produce the same outcome for some of the qualities (but not all of them)

The world is not open, meaning it is not accessible freely in its whole. Some choices (that you are not aware of in the beginning) are made available under certain conditions depending on the value of the qualities.

The conclusion of these combined statements is that narrative structures are linked together through the qualities but not tightly knit together like in scripted games : **the storylets are loosely coupled**.

Furthermore, selectively unlocking parts of the game's world enables reinforcing loops: a first structure increases a specific quality, which in turn enables choices that, if made, will themselves reinforce this same quality. These **slippery slopes support higher order narrative**, like long-running plots, and participate into character formation.

Conclusion

Using techniques borrowed from the coding field (modularization, loosely coupled modules) Alexis has managed to create a game world that both scales and provides a sense of story, which cannot be achieved with either scripted or emergent games (no judgement here of one being superior to another, they just are intrinsically different).

Aw fiddlesticks!

This video can't be played with your current setup.

Please switch to a browser that provides native H.264 support or install [Adobe Flash Player](#)

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