

The Tenth Annual Game Design Think Tank

Project Horseshoe 2015



Group Report:

7 Amazing Things You Can Do With Words

Qualities of a Massively Popular, Successful Text Experience

Participants: A.K.A. "Word Crimes"

Heather Albano, Independent
Aki Järvinen, Game Futures
Jason VandenBerghe, Ubisoft
Michael Austin, Hidden Path
Thom Robertson, Incandescent Workshop
Tony Goodman, PeopleFun

Bob Bates, Independent
Jesse Scoble, Independent
Joel Gonzales, Wargaming
Tom Long, AACP.org
Dan Hurd, Playful

Facilitator: Ron Meiners, Far Flung Socks

Brief statement of the problem(s) on which the group worked:

Once text games ruled supreme - but conventional wisdom says their day has passed, and that the modern gamer needs more than text to feel satisfied with their gaming experience.

The group started with the problem statement, What can we do to bring Text Experiences to the modern gamer?

However, our initial research showed that there are many text-based games doing very well in the modern market right now. Our focus shifted to examining these games for commonalities. What user interface techniques do they employ? What, therefore, are the best user interface techniques to bring Text Experiences to the modern gamer?

A brief statement of the group's solutions to those problems:

Introduction

What is a Text Experience? (the distinction is important for us, not for consumers)

- Words are the primary imagery tool
- The user has agency
- Genres (Examples)
 - RPG (Mud / Fallen London)
 - Economy Simulator (Candy Box / A Dark Room)
 - Puzzle (Infocom Text Adventures)
 - Narrative Exploration (Choice of Games, Choose Your Own Adventure)

Best practices

- Be Clear
 - Onboard simply
 - Communicate what is interactible

- A broad audience wants it to be **clear** what their **options** are
 - Communicate consequences of interaction
 - You feel enlightened (+1 score)
 - Use dyslexic-friendly fonts, color-blind friendly colors, user controlled text speed
 - Lessons from web and newspaper layout - Go long not **wide**
 - Emphasization correlated with importance
 - Your objects are **WORDS**
 - Be concise **TL;DR**
 - Poetic Twitterization (“Poetry = short beautiful text that hits hard” - Dan Fabulich)
 - Chunk your text
 - Things that matter should always be available
 - Paned inventory in a backpack game, for instance
- Be Attractive
 - Textual level design is important
 - There are so many good examples of this in graphic design
 - Material design - <https://www.google.com/design/spec/material-design/introduction.html>
 - Material is the metaphor
 - Bold, graphic, intentional
 - Motion has meaning
 - Kinematic typography
 - Motion should be intentional and communicative
 - Don't have motion just to have motion - it's not the lens flare of the text space
 - Animate transitions - position, color, size
 - Your letters are your **Characters** - give them personality
 - Keep objects stationary for the interactable part of their lifetime
 - Real time text updating
 - Word choreography (<https://youtu.be/SpSQW65MGbw?t=53m32s>)
 - Use the canvas
 - ex: Brightness over time to reflect fire in a dark room
- Be Successful
 - Novelty is important
 - Good tools for cheap content
 - Multiplatform when appropriate to the interface

Case Study - Bob's Infocom-style Text Adventure



- Take control of the layout- how the words fall and look is part of the game
 - Fix the width of the text so the author has control over how wrapping looks
 - Break text into narrative beats
 - Bigger text, pick a clear font (maybe not Times New Roman), control layout
 - Control scrolling (More...), treat scrolling as part of the presentation
 - There is a special challenge with this and localization (block text)
- Be genre-specific
 - The interaction informs the fantasy, so changing the interaction fundamentally changes the game
 - Consider changing presentation techniques while preserving the interaction
- Accessibility
 - Use hints as a limited resource
 - “Remember xxx” or “Think on xxxxxx” keeps it on the screen
 - Can update based on context
 - Show progress (score)
 - Remind players of their goals
 - Automatic terse mode (if been there before or nothing has changed)
- Make the room feel alive
 - Even when you aren't interacting, things happen - sounds, events, etc.
- Market
 - Serial content (to get accepted by book readers)

References

Edith Finch - text in a 3d space : <https://youtu.be/bwDKrEbXm7E?t=191>
Google Material design - <https://www.google.com/design/spec/material-design/introduction.html>
Lost Oddysey - Word choreography (<https://youtu.be/SpSQW65MGbw?t=53m32s>)
Aki's pinterest for horseshoe - <https://www.pinterest.com/aquito/touch-ui-text-animation-references/>
Futures of text - <http://whoo.ps/2015/02/23/futures-of-text>
GDC talks of IF - <https://emshort.wordpress.com/2015/04/02/interactive-narrative-gdc-talks-part-1/>
Heather's GDC talk - <http://www.gdcvault.com/play/1022035/Harvesting-Interactive>

Tools

If you want to create a text game, try these!

Twine: <http://twinery.org/>

InkleWriter: <http://www.inklestudios.com/inklewriter/>

ChoiceScript: <https://www.choiceofgames.com/make-your-own-games/choicescript-intro/>

Inform: <http://inform7.com/>

TADS: www.tads.org

Examples of games doing it well:

A Dark Room

Device 6

With Those We Love Alive

Emily's Away

Herstory (more than words, obviously, but search terms are the only way the user can interact with the game, reminiscent of a parser-based text adventure)