

# Reimagining Worlds: Player Choice & Fictional Worlds

## Abstract

This paper discusses the development and testing of an interactive branching path game that re-appropriated a

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world their avatar inhabits. But what if we let players affect stories that exist outside of the in-game world?

canonical story in order to test how comfortable audience players or “fans” were with deviating from the confines of a known narrative. In an effort to best catalogue and test the degree to which fans were content with diverging from a given work, this game was augmented several times to both heighten and alter the fidelity to the original story. The final product is a short, branching path video game that allows the player to alter the story of the ending of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. The outcomes of testing this on fans resulted in various findings that help to demonstrate how players interact with fictional worlds.

## Author Keywords

Player choice; canon; worldbuilding; branching paths; nonlinear narratives; fanfiction, adaptation.

## 0.0 Introduction

Video Game players are used to making choices that affect the world in which their games exist. They can choose to act or say certain things that will change the outcome of not only their personal story, but also the

In order to test the bounds of how comfortable players were with re-writing narratives that were instilled within in them, I created an interactive version of a narrative that my test subjects would recognize from their own youth. This project featured branching decision points that would allow the player to deviate from the original story if they chose.

By incorporating the ability to diverge from the conventional plotline that the player was familiar with, I was looking to see how comfortable the fans would be with altering an existing narrative. The end results of this testing reveal the interesting and personal relationship that fans have with these worlds and how comfortable they are with deviating from pre-established canon.

## 1.0 Exploration

This project was initially conceptualized as a branching path narrative that would test the way in which players interacted with fictional worlds. Transmedia storytelling has become increasingly prevalent as media-makers look to develop worlds that more fully flesh out their vision while at the same time allowing multiple points of access to potential fans.

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Additionally, many video games such as *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* and *Spiderman: Web of Shadows* are built around player choice, giving players the freedom to choose between good and bad while at the same time games such as *The Walking Dead: Season One* and *Game of Thrones* allow players to interact directly with the characters and world that they are already familiar with.

However, while these games allow for player choice within a familiar fictional universe, they are usually limited from



either interacting directly with familiar characters or events, or the way in which they do interact usually has no impact the canonical linear events. With this in mind, I hoped to create a project that would be able to test

players pre-existing relationship with the linear, fictional works of a universe by giving the players the opportunity to

**Fig. 1**

Shows decision points within *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (top) and *Spiderman: Web of Shadows* (bottom).

reinterpret a work.

### 1.1 Project Conceptualization

After thinking through the best way in which to tackle this dilemma, I decided to create a game that would re-

interpret the events at the end of the Harry Potter series of books, giving the player agency to change the outcomes that are detailed within.

I chose Harry Potter as this is one of the most beloved fictional universes of the past generation of storytelling. Many of my peers grew up reading, watching and interacting with this universe and have a deep involvement in the characters. This level of engagement among my peers (and thus my play-testers) meant that this world would provide fertile ground for examining how players interact with a fictional universe that has been wherein the story has been instilled in them

Additionally, the end of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* presents several choices that paradigm how the main character's choices affect his friends, enemies and the larger world around him. Additionally, by setting the game in the books, rather than the world, I could rely on text from the book to help ground the player in this story

### 2.0 Initial Iteration

With the concept firmly in hand, I set out to make a version of the end of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows that would allow the player to have choice within the world of Harry Potter.

The game was developed in Twine as this platform would allow me to rapidly iterate on the story and incorporate materials including music, and images from the world of *Harry Potter* that would ground the player in the story. Additionally, the ease with which Twine allows the users to create a branching path stories and

track player progress was absolutely vital for making a successful game.

The game itself resulted in a short, several choice long series of character interactions wherein the player

assumes the role of Harry Potter from the moment the beginning of the last chapter in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* until he fights Voldemort at the end of the novel.

### 3.0 User Testing and Development

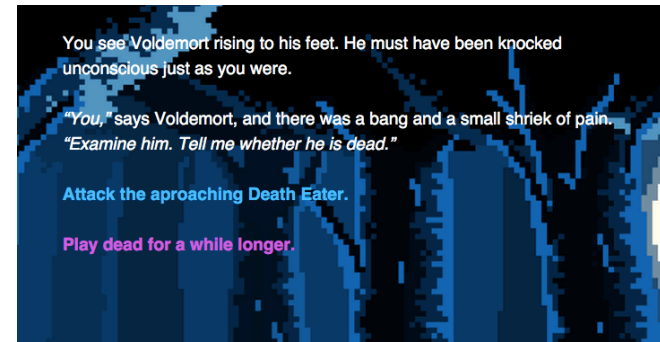
**Fig. 2**

Script read to play-testers before and after playing the game.

In order to both improve upon each iterations ability to engage fans of the Harry Potter world, and to gather feedback about how players interacted with the world I conducted player think alouds for each iteration of the game. I chose this method as I thought it would be the best way in which to gather player feedback while they directly engaged with the world. Additionally, as the script in fig. 2 identifies, I asked the players a series of questions after their play through to help better understand how they handled each individual choice. Additionally, as I was testing player engagement with the world, all of my testers had read the majority of the books in the Harry Potter world except for one tester. I

used this very basic marker of what it means to be a fan of the *Harry Potter* books as a threshold of engagement.

Feedback from the players helped me to create two additional versions of the game after my initial iteration. Much of this feedback was incredibly interesting in its own right, and will be discussed more



**Fig. 3**

A typical choice within the game

in depth in the next section but it was also very helpful for thinking through how to better structurally design the game.

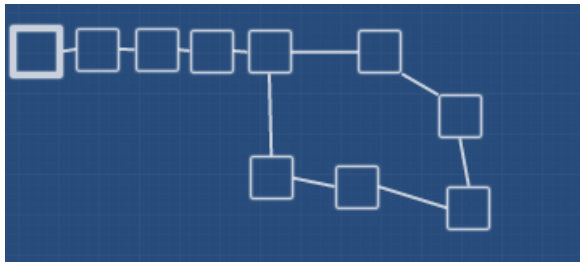
Much of the response centered around the look, feel, and sounds of the game, and as such I chose to incorporate elements such as images and music wherever possible. This was important to help immerse the player more fully in the world. Additionally, players also generally thought that there should be more choices in the game to make it more faithful to the book series itself.

#### Section I (Before Playtest)

1. Hello, thanks for agreeing to playtest my video game. This game is a prototype for one of my graduate level courses and is designed to help me better understand how people interact with fictional worlds. Your feedback will be used to help me improve later iterations of the game.
2. As you play, please think aloud your feelings and thoughts about the game. Please feel comfortable to include both negative and positive thoughts about the game. No thought is too trivial. After we are done, I'll follow up with some additional questions.
3. Do you have any questions before we begin?

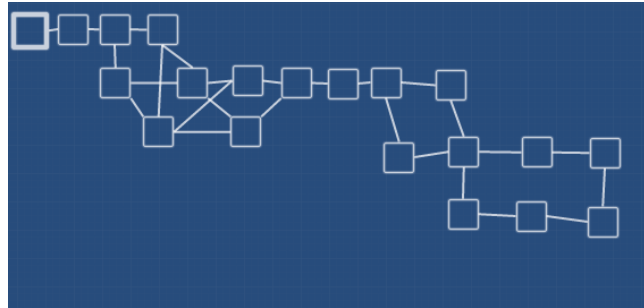
#### Section II (After Playtest)

1. Please begin by telling me about your overall experience with the game.
1. Do you have any comments about the visual or interactive elements of the game?
2. How did you find the choices within the game?
  - a. Did you struggle with your choices at all?
  - b. Why or why not did you diverge from the story?
  - c. Did the ending screen or in game text make you regret any of your choices?
3. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the game?
4. Thanks for participating.



**Fig. 4**

Shows the progression in the backend of twine from left to right as each version added additional features.



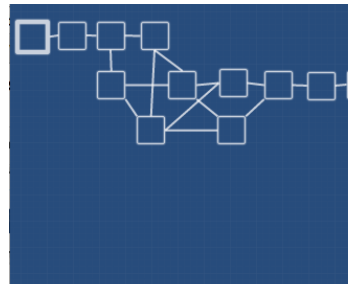
### 3.1 Continued Iterations

After working to incorporate elements of the story that would more fully ground the player in the choices of the world, I continued to make additional iterations of

the game that would serve as tests for several key components. Much of the feedback I received from players centered around whether or not they could accurately remember which choice Harry made within the game. In the last iteration of the game I included clear markers of when or not the player is making a choice that deviates from the script.

Additionally, I created a "secret ending" that would only be available to players if they had deviated completely from the script up until this point in the game. This would allow for a greater range of choices and interaction with the universe.

Finally, one of the largest changes I made to the game that carried over to the final iteration was a change from language in the game that



judged the player's choices from "bad" to non-canonical. I felt this was

small but important change to the way the player interacted with the world as this sort of language was unknowingly to myself handed down from games that I had played and had no real place in this project.

### 4.0 User Feedback and Findings

As the intent of this game was always focused on players' interaction with the artefact, much of the most interesting details of the project is rooted in their responses to the key decision points in the game.

Early on, one of the guiding points of this experience was to test how players handled ambiguity in the context of player choice. As fig. 5 denotes, one moment within the game recreated the final battle from the last scene of the the books. The vague wording combined with the complex canon at play here combined to make this a choice that many players did not understand when interacting with it. Testers reactions to this moment were often very strong as they did not quite understand if they had made the correct choice or not, one tester going as far as lying and telling me that someone had walked by and distracted her, rather than admitting that she did not accurately choose the correct choice.



Another key issue at player here was the player's desire to either harm characters that they viewed as evil or protect characters that they had a strong positive

attachment to. While asking one play-tester why her only moment of deviation from the story arose when she chose to spare Hagrid pain, she said that it was because she cared enough for this character that she did not mind going outside of the bounds of the story. Similarly, several players mentioned that they felt okay with actively trying to kill Voldemort within the story because they knew how harmful he was as a character even though Harry never actively kills Voldemort in the story. Moments like these show how player's interaction with characters can often override their belief in a single canon.

Finally, one of the key issues at play in this game was the way in which canonical choices can either be known or not to the audience. I initially thought that those who had less interaction with the world would be more willing to diverge from the story but they were at least, just as likely to feel the need to stick with the story that they viewed as canonical. This is interesting as it goes against the hypothesis that you need to be engaged with a fictional world to feel the need to adhere to canonical events.

### **5.0 Evaluation and Next Steps**

The final iteration of the game is an effective means of testing how players interact with the world. Much of its efficaciousness is derived from its ability to transport the player back to an imaginary world that they are so familiar with. Of course with this game, like any other, improvements can always be made to help further engage the player with this world.

If I had additional time, I would like to continue experimenting with how players received feedback about which pathway is canonical, incorporating

moments of ambiguity as well as moments where the canonical pathway is more clear. I'm not sure the obvious nature of the feedback I gave, clearly marking which path was canonical, was the best way in which to feature it in this project.

I would also like to incorporate additional choices that have direct easily foreseeable ramifications on characters within the world to continue to see how the players interact with these decisions that regard specific characters. Visual 8-bit versions of these characters would also serve to heighten potential engagement with these characters.

Finally, I would like to create a version of this game where the player could insert themselves within the narrative of the world. I'm interested to see how comfortable the player would be directly interacting with these characters and changing the way in which the canonical story played out.

However, for now the game is an interesting test into how comfortable fans are with engaging with these fictional worlds and the way in which they can reinterpret the events of their favorite stories.