Albert Goes Narrative Contracting

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ABSTRACT
RPG's (Role Playing Games) and improvisational theatre have some obvious similarities. Both require the participants to work together in real-time to construct dynamic narrative elements. Seeing communication in terms of ongoing narrative contracts is a well-accepted principle of improvisational theatre (Johnstone 1981). The recipient of an offered narrative element can accept the offer, block it, or make a counter-offer. This paper describes a methodology for studying subjects engaging in a controlled online role-playing 'encounter'. The encounter is titled 'Albert in Africa' and the study draws on the previously described Fun Unification Model (Newman 2004). In this study, subjects' individual responses were correlated with the number of acceptances, blocks and counter-offers they make during their encounter. Comparisons are then made with observations of the massively multiplayer game World of WarCraft. From this emerges a methodology for analyzing the complex interactions of RPG encounters.

Keywords
role-playing games, fun, online communication

INTRODUCTION
The experiment "Albert in Africa" was designed to test subjects' fun response in an activity that had elements of role-playing and narrative combined with conventional online chat. Twenty subjects drawn from volunteer staff and students at our university were tested individually, and the transcripts of the sessions were logged for later analysis. After the results had been correlated, we then examined the World of WarCraft, a real online gaming community to further explore our findings with Albert.

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The Encounter

The encounter with Albert ran along the following lines. Subjects were shown an audio-visual presentation running for about five minutes, introducing Albert the teddybear, touring on his motorbike in Northern Africa. The subjects were then told that Albert, the producer of the audio-visual presentation was online live from Africa, and they were asked to chat with him for about 20 minutes. A research assistant located in a nearby lab, following a loosely devised script, played the character of 'Albert' (see figure 1.1). The chat page was a customised text chat environment using the Flash Communication Server (see figure 1.3).

> Albert is a teddy bear, about 40cm tall, riding his motorbike across North Africa and making documentaries about his adventures. He likes olives but doesn't like sticky date pudding. He is currently in the town of Sfax in Tunisia. Romans grew olives in Sfax, and Barbarossa the pirate began his career smuggling refugees from the Spanish Inquisition to Sfax. Albert is looking for someone to act as his production assistant, and offers the subject the job. He then offers to arrange the airline ticket to Tunis and asks them for their email address so he can get the eTicket sent to them.

Figure 1.1: The script used by Albert.

The script was designed so that Albert would make a range of narrative offers requiring different levels of acceptance on the part of the subject. Acceptance of the offer 'Albert is in Tunisia' requires less suspension of disbelief than the claim that he is a teddy bear. Introducing stories about his location (Barbarossa, Romans) and his personal likes and dislikes (food, motorbikes) gives the subjects opportunities to accept and make counter offers. When Albert asks them to come to Tunisia, the role-playing becomes more personal as Albert includes them in his scenario. The final offer – when Albert suggests that the subject give him their real email address so he can send them an airline ticket, not only requires a high degree of role playing acceptance but also requires the user to exhibit trust as it extends the purely role-playing encounter into the personal world, blurring the real world – role playing boundary. Each subject spent about 20 minutes chatting with Albert and the average transcript had 111 lines (max 156 min 84).

Scott:	hello
Albert:	hey scott
Albert:	how ya doing mate?
Scott:	I am pretty good
Scott:	I just watched the documentary
Albert:	yeah? having a good day?
Albert:	oh yeah? I'm famous!
Albert:	did you like it?
Scott:	Yeah, it was pretty good, they seem to really really like sticky date pudding
Albert:	yeah and i DIDNT!

Figure 1.2: The start of an encounter transcript.

Albert's Narrative Contracts

It was expected that most people would have no problem with Albert claiming to be a teddy bear,

and that at the very least most people would be content to humour him. Those people who have a significant predisposition to finding and creating narrative were expected to find ways to further the narrative offers of the encounter by making additional references to Albert being a teddy bear, being a famous film-maker, being a motor-bike adventurer, etc. It was expected that nobody would actually believe that Albert was *really* going to send them a plane ticket to Tunis, and while they might be happy to play along with the story, they might not be so comfortable giving a fictitious teddy bear their real email address. Each of the narrative elements that Albert introduces is an offer, and the subject's response can be seen as an acceptance, a rejection or a counter-offer.

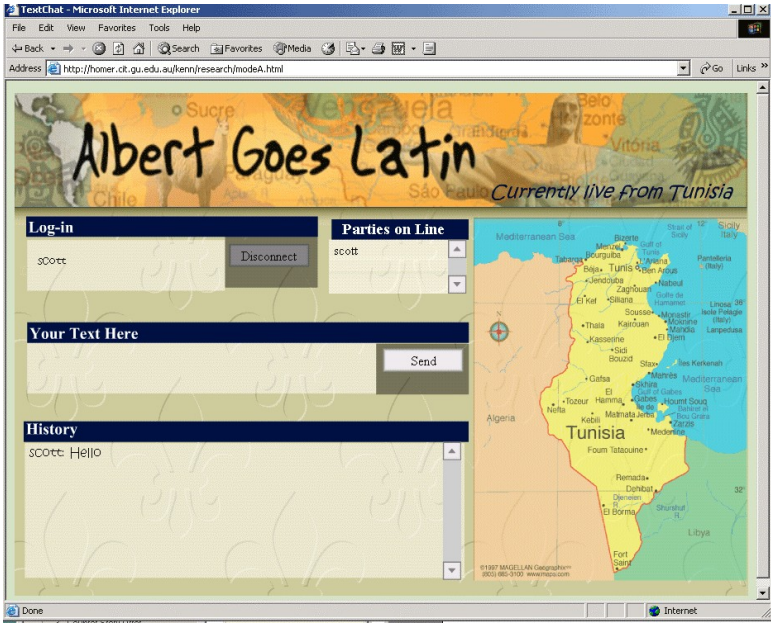

Figure 1.3: The Albert chat interface.

The Acceptance

An acceptance means that the subject has in some way accepted the central narrative element offered. An apparent protest like "but you're so little" is actually an implicit acceptance that Albert is a teddy bear and therefore only 40cm tall. Even a question like "Are you really a teddy?" while at first glance may seem to be a block, is actually a tentative acceptance of the possibility, and demonstrates a willingness to play, whereas "you're not a teddy" or "why do you think you're a teddy?" are direct blocks.

Table 1.1: Examples of acceptances.

Test Subject Acceptance
… But you are so little, Al.
… I choose to believe that.
… If I am ever in Tunisia, sure.
… Yes. I'd love to! But u should pay for my flight tickets!
… And the coast, you are lucky teddy bear.
… You are the smartest bear I know.

The Block

A block takes the form of refusing to accept the narrative element offered. In each of these examples the subject is communicating an unwillingness to suspend disbelief. The ultimate block is surely "… sorry are we still playing?" The subject's aversion may be to role-playing generally or they may have just decided that pretending to communicate with a teddy bear is pointless.

Table 1.2: Examples of blocking.

Test Subject Block
… Teddy bear's are too small to ride motorbikes.
… I'll think about it!
… You're famous? I've never heard of you.
… Sorry, are we still playing?
… No, I've never seen a bear in a film.
… Nah. I like my life :P

The Counter-offer

In a counter-offer the subject accepts the original narrative element and in return introduces new elements. Depending on the intention behind the counter-offer, it can resemble a thinly disguised block such as "sure and I'm a Japanese fisherman", or it can represent complete acceptance followed by a sincere desire to take the narrative in a new direction, e.g. "…that is so cool! I am riding my bike from Brisbane to Wollongong in a few months." Acceptance does not always mean complete agreement. In an argument about the merits of 'olives' one subject said, "You must be spending too much time in the desert, Albert!" This statement is actually an acceptance of the central narrative (i.e. Albert's location) and a counter-offer that he might be delusional from sun exposure.

Table 1.3: Examples of counter-offers.

Test Subject Counter-offers
… That doco you did on troglodytes was very interesting, brought back memories of old french foreign films etc.
… I'm a Japanese fisherman. Fancy a fisherman and a bear meeting like this!
… Great and while you are at it how would you like to sponsor a uni student?
… No I haven't. I've been to Turkey though!
… That is so cool! I am riding my bike from Brisbane to Wollongong in a few months.
… Barbarossa? No but I know of barbarella.

DISCUSSION

Correlating Responses and Narrative Contracting

The results from testing 20 subjects in 'Albert in Africa', while limited by the scope of this initial small sample, do suggest that there are underlying significant correlations between individual predisposition, narrative contracting activity and individual response - the three parts of the Fun Unification Model (Newman 2004). Also that the metrics used to reveal these correlations have validity for measuring experience in role-playing games and possibly many other situations.

Table 2.1 shows the correlations between the narrative contracting activity and the individual responses. The FUM model measures *fun* as an aggregate of temporal dislocation, focused immersion, heightened enjoyment (Agarwal and Karahanna 2000) and narrative engagement/playfulness (Newman 2004). While not part of the fun construct, we have also correlated the subjects declared intention to revisit the encounter as a response, since this is of

primary interest to developers of games and game-like communities. The testing so far indicates that the response constructs show both a strong positive correlation to acceptances, a weak negative correlation to blocks, and almost no discernable correlation to counter-offers.

The significance of acceptances to the intention to re-use is also notable.

Table 2.1: Correlation of individual responses to narrative contracting behavior.

Contract	Temporal	Focus	Enjoy	Play	Intent
Accept	0.50*	0.20	0.52**	0.55**	0.75***
Block	-0.20	-0.08	-0.54**	-0.12	-0.02
Counter	0.00	0.08	0.09	0.15	-0.05

* Pearson correlation coefficient probability: $p<0.05$.
** Pearson correlation coefficient probability: $p<0.01$.
*** Pearson correlation coefficient probability: $p<0.001$.

NARRATIVE CONTRACTS IN GAMES

World Of WarCraft And Narrative Contracts

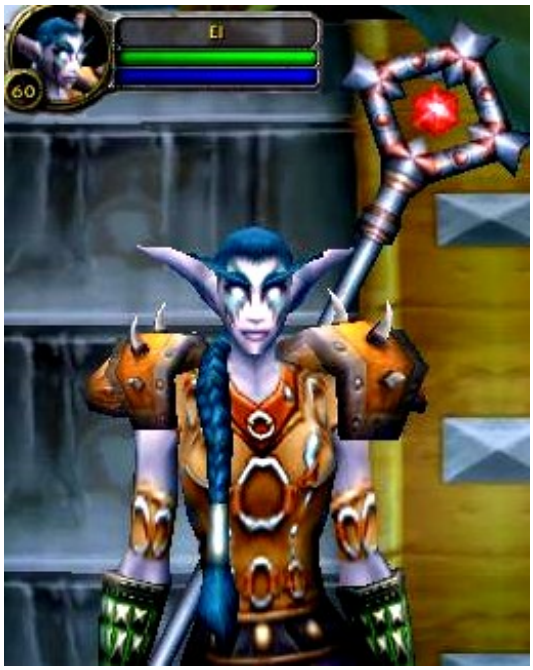

Figure 3.1: The character El from the World of WarCraft.

After Albert's experiences with narrative contracts, we then examined the World Of WarCraft (WoW), a massively multi-player online game dependent on the participants in the dynamic execution and creation of narrative elements. To investigate this gaming universe, we followed the well-seasoned level 60 Druid "El" (see figure 3.1) on her adventures. With over 580 hours (24 days) of playtime over the last three months, El provided many intriguing insights into how role-playing and narrative combine with the elements of online chat within this world.

Acceptances in the World of WarCraft

The level of acceptances was quite high throughout the game, and this level increased as the player and fellow players matured in the game. The sharing of adventures and the familiarisation of a player with other game players' gaming styles also helped to provide team harmony in how the adventures were approached and executed.

In the WoW, there is a progression from hordes of inexperienced players completing straight forward quests, to the creation of mature parties of players with distinct roles that combine in organised and functional ways to complete otherwise impossible narrative challenges. These aspects helped to aspire a high level of acceptances surrounding adventures shared by a party of game players.

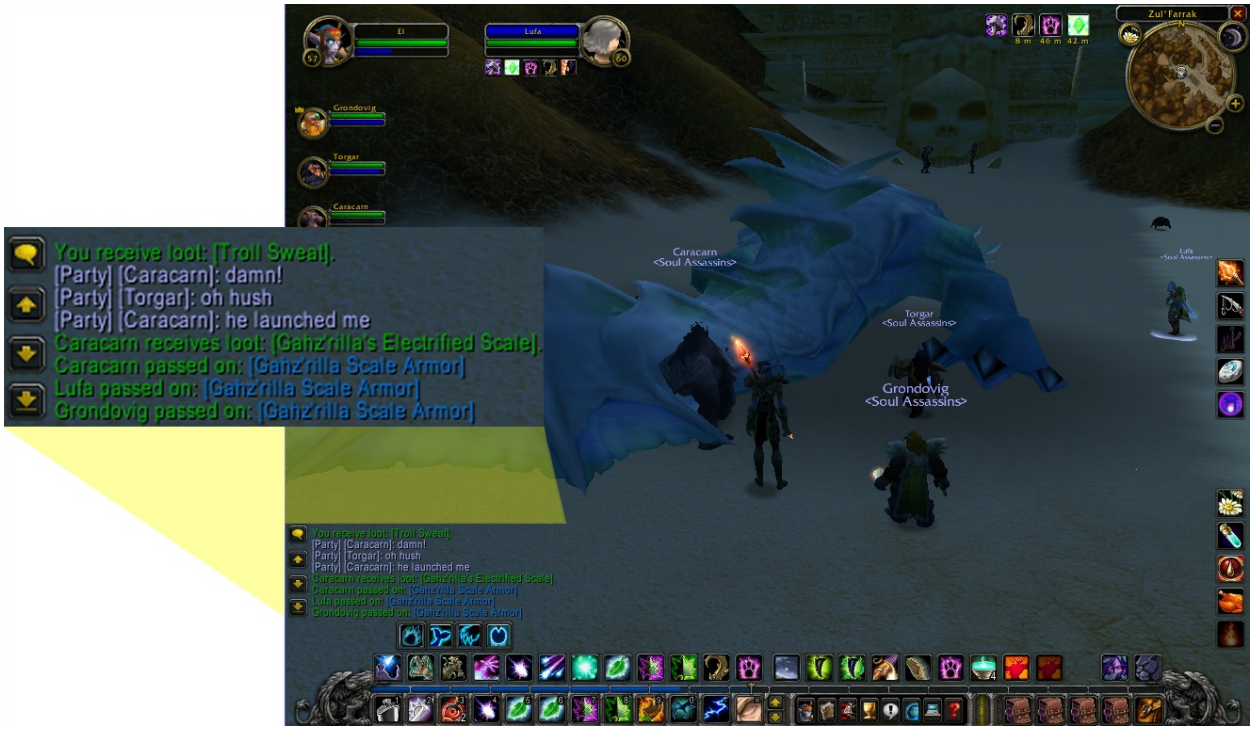

Figure 3.2: The sharing of loot after the slaying of Gahz'rilla. The Internet Relay Chat (IRC) style interface enlarged on the left.

Blocks in the World of WarCraft

Blocks came in implicit and explicit forms. An implicit block is often in the form of a cold-shoulder that can be ambiguous within the game. An example of this was when El asked for the party to focus on one enemy at a time during an attack. No response was made by any of the players, and it took El a couple of minutes to see that the actions of the party reflected a disregard for the comment made. When the cold-shoulder was not used, and an explicit block was communicated, it was often responded to with quite strong debate which could be seen to encourage the cold-shoulder approach. It was also easy for a player to miss lines of communication during times of battle.

Counter-Offers in the World of WarCraft

The counter-offer was used in times of trade, an important time for forming the ideal inventory for their individual ambitions. Elsewhere in the game, counter-offers were minimal. There are a number of game play mechanisms to help reduce counter-offers and blocking. One example of this was the dice rolling mechanism (see figure 3.3) used to distribute loot among the party. Team members interested in the item would roll a dice with the highest roll winning the item. This mechanism is quite familiar to traditional role-player experts from the board and paper based games, but in online forums (Gilbert 2005) discussing the WoW environment, it was thought to impact upon the willing suspension of disbelief for players. The discussion suggests it was a severe challenge to the players willing suspension of disbelief to imagine two well-built warriors arguing over a nice loot of chain mail armour by pulling out a set of dice to settle the dispute.

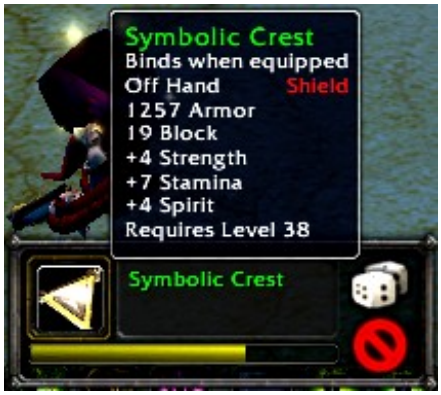

Figure 3.3: An example of dice based in-game mechanism used to distribute loot collected amongst the playing party.

World of WarCraft Discussion

The level of acceptance was high throughout the game, and supported the findings of the Albert experiment and the correlation between heightened enjoyment and high levels of acceptances. The WoW is an example of a gaming product that is highly re-used by the community, and in the case of El, 24 days of playtime in 3 months represents a very strong example of this, with other players reaching upward of 40 days of playtime in the same time span. With this level of usage El and her fellow party members could be described as mature users of WoW, and as such demonstrate a high level of offer acceptance, consistent with the expectations arising from the Albert experiment in terms of narrative engagement and role-play.

WoW also demonstrates how a game environment can be designed to minimise unnecessary disruptive blocking through the use of in game mechanisms where blocking would commonly occur, such as trading and looting. Our observations of WoW also suggest that the relationship of playfulness/narrative engagement and blocks/counter-offers was minimal, which was also found in the work with Albert.

CONCLUSION

Players of role-playing games and game-like communities will have more fun and be more likely to re-visit the activity if they are able to accept narrative offers, and where their own offers are in turn accepted by others. The Albert experiment distills down to a specific methodology where this assumption can be tested, and the results of early testing do suggest a correlation between the users' narrative contracting activity and their individual responses. The assumption has then been taken into the more loosely structured environment of WoW where evidence of narrative acceptance and blocking play out in a variety of ways, both in the dialogue between role-playing users and in the way the game environment itself controls the activity. The testing to date does little more than demonstrate a new methodology, but even with the limited sample there are potentially useful correlations emerging. The analysis of a role-playing game in terms of a narrative contracting activity, may provide a more informed method for moderators of games and game-like communities to monitor and maintain the health of their communities.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Two future study directions arising from this experiment are firstly, to refine the metrics used by reworking the questionnaires, and secondly, to conduct the 'Albert in Africa' tests within a variety of environments with varying degrees of system complexity, to gain an understanding of the significance of environmental complexity on the fun response. Planned future test environments include an avatar-based isometric environment, a first-person perspective environment, a web-cam encounter and a live interview with a puppet.

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