

Affording Playfulness in Daniel Benmergui's *Storyteller*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Daniel Benmergui's puzzle videogame *Storyteller* (2023) serves as an interesting example of what could be described as *recipient-oriented playfulness* (see Gaver 2002; Gaver et al. 2004; Sicart 2014) in that it affords significant levels of both ambiguity and agency, thus encouraging experimentation within an underspecified ludic context. *Storyteller* invites the player to create narrative comics to solve plot description-based prompts, which they do by dragging and dropping elements from toolboxes of characters and "scenes" into preset numbers of empty panel slots. As an example of what can be termed "comics games," *Storyteller's* innovative gameplay heavily relies on conventional comics sense-making principles (i.e., the inference of relationships between co-present narrative pictures) but subverts such principles through its panels' dynamically updated nature. In doing so, the work also affords an unusually high degree of "narrative agency" (Bódi 2023, 59; Bódi and Thon 2020, 164; see also Murray 1997). It does not simply allow the player to make choices among different narrative paths within various interactive "architectures" (Ryan 2006, 106) but to quite literally "play with" narrative conventions in the bottom-up construction of stories (see also Boelmann and König 2023). This extended abstract draws on the ambiguity afforded by *Storyteller's* nonstandard use of medial, generic, and narrative conventions as the background for a discussion of two features of its design likely to encourage playful experimentation: multiple solution pathways and instant reactivity.

Beginning with the former, *Storyteller's* prompts are generally openly worded, usually stating what should occur while not specifying which (additional) characters are to be involved, how something takes place, etc. For example, the prompt "The Queen Marries" does not mention who or what the Queen marries, whether it be the power-hungry Baron via an elaborate plot involving both a "disguise" and "kidnap" scene or the dragon as which the Baron disguises himself. For the prompt "Murder of Jealousy," it may quickly become apparent that the roguish, grinning Isobel will commit the crime via a "poison" scene, but the prompt does not specify the roles of the characters Edgar and Lenora regarding a "wedding" scene, if the subsequent poisoning via a "wine" scene is intentional or accidental, nor how the story may conclude (e.g., will Isobel succeed in marrying Lenora/Edgar? Will Edgar and Lenora be reunited in the afterlife?). If this suggests that *Storyteller's* levels typically allow for

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significant variation in terms of “who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion” (Herman 2002, 5), these possibilities result from the work’s “continuity engine” (InsideCreativeGaming 2021, n.p.) or “story simulator” (Eggplant 2023, n.p.), which outputs player-instigated stories even if not directly relevant to a level’s solution(s). This allows the player to “play around with each level to find what works” (Pelliccio 2023, n.p.).

Given that *Storyteller* neither lists its characters’ motivations, inclinations, or abilities nor verbally elaborates on the player’s choices, a degree of player experimentation may be unavoidable, as might be frequent mismatches between the player’s comics-related narrative understanding, expectations, and intentions and system output. For example, in the aforementioned “Envy” level with the prompt “Murder of Jealousy,” instead of solving this prompt by having Isobel dispense with her would-be romantic partner’s current spouse, the player may seek to have Isobel poison another character following her own (happy) marriage. The player might first have Isobel and Lenora marry and then have Lenora reject a proposal from Edgar. If the player then expects Isobel to not only know about this but also to be willing to poison her romantic rival (perhaps a more fitting solution for a “murder of jealousy”), this will not be the case. These potential unmet expectations speak to the notion that the same ambiguity that may facilitate the player’s playful exploration might also disrupt or limit its application.

Storyteller employs different means to minimize the disruptiveness of the potential lack of fit between player expectations and system output, including structuring its (freely accessible) levels so that new characters and scenes are introduced additively and clearly communicating “error states” (Eggplant 2023, n.p.) occurring when the player tries to do something outside of established continuity (e.g., when characters shrug as if to ask the player “why have you put me here?”). Perhaps most significant in this regard is *Storyteller*’s instant reactivity, which essentially maintains the “abstract time” (Groensteen 2013, 70) of comics. As a change in one panel can immediately lead to changes in multiple others, *Storyteller* employs brief animations and sound effects to alert the player to the more salient results of their actions. Except for certain “ambient” (Gazzard and Goodbrey 2014, n.p.) animations and sounds, the panels then become static/silent, and time is represented spatially, as is conventionally the case in comics. Thus, the player can swiftly determine the results of their choices, with alternative courses of action being only a few mouse clicks away.

By extension, this means that the player has little to lose by following their whims and deviating from each level’s goals, testing the system’s possibilities, and attempting to determine which (imagined) outcomes *Storyteller*’s system has anticipated. Much of this experimentation is even incentivized by a set of “stamps” once the game’s core set of levels has been completed, and simply via custom animations and sounds before that point. *Storyteller* thus responds to potential player questions such as “what would happen if the biblical Adam and Eve were to eat apples continuously?” (they double over with indigestion), or “what would it take for the demanding Duchess to accept the drink her butler offers her instead of ordering a different one each time?” (witness him carrying a gun). While *Storyteller* does account for much of the player’s likely experimentation, then, as each possible player motivation needed to be coded manually, system responses are ultimately limited. For example, the work will not respond to the player’s attempts to have the Queen see through the Baron’s subterfuge in the “Suitor” level with the prompt “The Queen Marries.” Still, in such cases, *Storyteller*’s prioritization of accessible gameplay would seemingly bank on the player’s willingness to take these limitations in their stride and try something new.

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