A Call for Flow Modeling in Interactive Storytelling

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Abstract

The field of interactive storytelling aims to create a narrative experience that is tailored to the player. A variety of artificial intelligence methods have been used to dynamically manage the narrative to suit the player’s preferences. Modern approaches tend to represent the domain of narrative discourse in a machine-readable form and then run automated planners to create a narrative that is consistent with the player’s choices as well as the author’s goals. The resulting planning task is frequently underconstrained and allows for many solutions. Since not every plan makes for an engaging story, the challenge lies with selecting one that will appeal to the particular player. In this paper, we conjecture that an engaging story is one that keeps the player in the psychological state of flow. Thus, an experience manager should select the narrative that is predicted to maximize the player’s flow. We propose to use a recent computational model of flow based on matching cognitive abilities of the audience with the cognitive demands of the narrative. The model will then be combined with an interactive narrative manager. This position paper is meant to solicit comments from researchers in the field to help shape the project.

1. Introduction

When a small group of men and women sat at the fire in ancient times, the stories that they told would likely have been interactive, with members of the audience interrupting the speaker and influencing the structure of the narrative. While this interaction continued with small-scale theatre productions and the bedtime stories we tell our children, the mass media has switched to non-interactive narrative forms such as books and motion pictures.

Larson (1989) argued that feeling agency in daily life is beneficial to one’s wellbeing and that some players enjoy games primarily because they give them such a feeling. Interactivity in narrative offers the audience a sense of agency and can improve the quality of entertainment. Video games have been bringing interactivity back into mass market storytelling. Modern productions such as BioWare’s Mass Effect or Dragon Age series (BioWare Corp., 2012, 2014) feature an impressive cast of actors, a branching storyline, and a number of side quests that let the player interact with and affect the narrative world around them.

Following the success of massive open-world games such as Fallout 3 (Bethesda Softworks, 2008) and Skyrim (Bethesda Softworks, 2011), players expect modern video games to give them a degree of narrative agency and let them make “their own story”. However, not every possible
sequence of events makes for an engaging narrative (VanOrd, 2014), bringing game designers back
to the age-old question of what makes a good interactive story. Complicating the problem further
is the fact that narrative appeal is not universal, with different members of the audience preferring
different types of narrative and gameplay.

2. Related Work
In the last several decades, the problem of creating individualized narrative has been tackled with art-
ificial intelligence methods (Riedl & Bulitko, 2013). A common approach is to encode the domain
of narrative discourse in a formal, computer-readable format and then use automated planning meth-
ods to derive possible stories (Young et al., 2004). Once such story plans are computed, the problem
is reduced to selecting the best one. Early systems such as ASD (Riedl et al., 2008) preferred the
stories closest to a manually preauthored exemplar, regardless of player preferences. Later research
explicitly modeled the player by observing his/her actions throughout the game. For instance, a
system called PAST (Ramirez & Bulitko, 2015) used a player model based on Laws (2002)'s player
types. It engaged an automated planner whenever the player deviated from the current story plan.
New narratives consistent with the player’s previous choices and the author’s goals were automati-
cally generated, and the narrative most closely matching the player’s type would then be presented
to the player. The most recent system in this line of work, PACE, uses the player type model to infer
the player’s desires over a certain set of goals (Hernandez et al., 2014). The desires are then used,
with an appraisal model of emotions (Bulitko et al., 2008; Marsella & Gratch, 2009), to estimate the
player’s emotions for different possible narratives. The narrative that is estimated to keep the player
on a pre-authored emotion arc is then selected. This approach can be viewed as a narrative extension
of the AI zombie modulator (Booth, 2009) within the commercial video game *Left 4 Dead* (Valve
Corporation, 2008).

These approaches have progressively distanced authors from writing the static structure of a
traditional book. Instead of specifying the entire narrative, interactive story designers can create
a world of characters, equip them with possible actions, specify a few authorial goals (e.g., the
grandmother gets eaten in “Little Red Riding Hood” (Perrault, 1697)), and let the player-controlled
character loose in the world. The difficulty with these approaches lies with the assumptions that
underlie their operation. For instance, ASD assumes that stories closer to the original exemplar
story are most fitting for any player, but how do we know if the exemplar story is fitting for a wide
range of players? PAST assumes that matching the Laws-style player type at all times makes for a
good narrative, but is it really so? Are these player types informative enough to tailor the narrative
to the player? To what extent are they applicable across various narrative genres? PACE requires
the designer to preauthor a static trajectory through the emotional space that all players will be kept
on. Is there a single emotional trajectory that fits all players? If so, how can it be identified?

3. The Proposed Approach
The approaches discussed in the previous section attempted to answer the fundamental question
“What makes a good interactive story?” by making a number of assumptions. While the resulting
implementations have frequently been positively evaluated in practice, we feel unsatisfied by their
answers and unsure how widely applicable these assumptions are. Thus, in the rest of the paper we
describe an alternative approach based on a single psychological concept: flow. We start by giving
the intuition behind our proposal and then follow with algorithmic details.

3.1 An Intuitive Overview
The psychological state of flow has been linked to optimal performance in humans (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). People in the state of flow appear not only to perform better but also to feel engaged, motivated, and happy. To achieve that state, several conditions are thought to be important, including a match between the person’s skills and the problem’s complexity, well-defined goals and rules, and timely and clear feedback. In this paper, we will focus on the first condition: a close match between the person’s cognitive skills (e.g., short term memory, vocabulary, social awareness, empathy) and the cognitive complexity or challenge of following a particular narrative (i.e., the cognitive skills required of the audience).

Our primary conjecture and the answer to the question “What makes a good interactive story?” is that good interactive narratives are the ones that maximize the player’s degree of flow while the story is underway. Given that interactive stories are often presented in a video-game-like setting, there is a connection between our conjecture and the use of flow in video game design. In fact, the concept of flow originated from psychological studies of game playing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) and connections between flow and games have been discussed extensively (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Green & Brock, 2000; Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005; Chen, 2007; Cowley et al., 2008; Baron, 2012; Koster, 2013). That being said, the innovation of our approach is twofold.

First, we propose to keep the player in the state of flow by shaping the narrative using an estimate of the player’s flow as an objective function. This stands in contrast to the common case of dynamically adjusting gameplay difficulty (e.g., by modulating zombie influx in Left 4 Dead, Booth, 2009), which does not substantially alter the story being told. Consequently, while both commercial video games (Ritual Entertainment, 2006; Pagulayan et al., 2012) and academic research in dynamic difficulty adjustment (Hunicke & Chapman, 2004; Zook & Riedl, 2015; Chen, 2007) have focused on gameplay skills, we focus on the player’s cognitive skills that are specifically related to comprehending narrative (e.g., remembering minute details of a crime scene, or suspending one’s disbelief in a forest with magic fairies). This focus is supported by findings that reading can induce flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), where the skills involved include narrative comprehension and visualization, empathizing with its characters, and anticipating plot twists (Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005; Nell, 1988). This is also supported by research on flow in games that has focused on the cognitive processing involved in playing a game (Cowley et al., 2008).

Second, we propose that an AI-based experience manager should perform flow-maximizing adjustments to the narrative automatically on-line, as the narrative is being experienced by the player. Specifically, whenever an AI-based experience manager decides among several possible narrative segments to run next, it should estimate the degree of flow that each segment will induce in the player and then select the segment with the highest estimated flow. We propose to employ an explicit computational model of flow to estimate the degree of flow of a specific player given a candidate narrative segment.

1. In this paper the degree of flow refers to the frequency and/or duration and/or the depth of flow states experienced by the audience of the narrative.
This on-line closed-loop approach is in contrast to the common practice of manually tuning a game’s difficulty curve during the development process so that ideally an average player’s gameplay skills would approximately match the game’s complexity/challenge throughout the game, known as pacing (Schreiber, 2009). For instance, many first-person shooters and role-playing games gradually ramp up the difficulty of the enemies either by introducing more difficult enemy types as the player progresses through the story (e.g., Fallout: New Vegas, Bethesda Softworks, 2010) or by increasing the difficulty of the existing enemy types (e.g., The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, Bethesda Softworks, 2006). Alas, creating a difficulty ramp to match every player’s skill ramp is generally impossible because different people have substantially different skill ramps (Koster, 2013). Similarly, narrative difficulty ramps are common in traditional novels, where the author attempts to tune the pacing of the story to avoid overwhelming the reader or making them bored. As with video games, different people may have different narrative skill ramps, which limits the appeal of a static, preauthored narrative.

3.2 Algorithmic Details

We propose to extend the narrative management framework of PACE (Hernandez et al., 2014) with a computational model of flow that is based on the balance between the player’s skills and the problem’s complexity (Bulitko, 2014).

As with PACE, our proposed AI experience manager takes the narrative space expressed as the set $S$ of narrative states, the set $A$ of narrative actions that the player may perform and the world dynamics $p$ that links the narrative state and the narrative actions. It also takes a set $S^t$ of terminal narrative states and a complexity function $\tilde{c}$. The complexity function maps any narrative state to a vector of $m$ numbers: $\tilde{c} : S \rightarrow [0, 1]^m$, where each number indicates the degree of cognitive skill that is required from the audience to engage with that narrative state. For instance, a story with many related characters may have a narrative state with the complexity of $(0.8, 0.1)$, where the values indicate that a high skill ($0.8$) in mapping people’s names and relations is required from the player, but that their ability to solve logical puzzles would not be taxed ($0.1$). The same $m$ dimensions are used to represent the player/audience’s cognitive skills $\tilde{\sigma}$ as modeled by the AI experience manager. The model is initialized to some prior in line 2 of the algorithm in Table 1. We discuss ways to define the complexity function in Section 3.3.

As long as the player has not reached a terminal state (line 3), the AI manager presents the current narrative state $s_t$ to the player (e.g., the player controlling Red encounters a wolf in the forest) and collects the player’s action $a_t$ (e.g., the player chooses to shoot the wolf). The player’s cognitive skill model is then updated (e.g., friend/foe identification skill is raised) in line 6. We discuss mappings from the player’s action to their skills in Section 3.3. In line 7, the AI manager computes candidate narrative continuations in the same way as ASD, PAST, and PACE: by invoking an automated planner with the current world dynamics given by $p$. Each of the narrative candidates $n_j$ produced by the planner is consistent with the narrative formed so far and satisfies the authorial goals. In our example, there may be two narrative alternatives computed by the planner: $n_1$ brings in a brother of the murdered wolf, while $n_2$ employs a magic fairy to resurrect the wolf. Both of them satisfy the authorial goal of Red’s grandmother being eaten and Red subsequently deceived. For each of the computed narrative candidates, line 9 estimates the degree of the player’s flow if they
Table 1. An algorithm for flow-maximizing narrative management.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>inputs: narrative space ((S, A, p)), narrative start state (s_1), narrative final states (S^\dagger \subset S), complexity function (\bar{c})</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (t \leftarrow 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 initialize player’s skill model (\bar{\sigma}_1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 while (s_t \notin S^\dagger) do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 present narrative state (s_t) to the player</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 record the player’s narrative action (a_t)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 update the player’s skills (\bar{\sigma}_{t+1}) from (a_t)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 generate narrative candidates ({n_j}) from (s_t, a_t, p)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 for each (n_j) do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 estimate the flow (f_j) resulting from (\bar{\sigma}_{t+1}, \bar{c}(n_j))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 identify the narrative with the highest flow: (j^* \leftarrow \arg\max_j f_j)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 select the next narrative state: (s_{t+1} \leftarrow n_{j^*}(1))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 update the world dynamics (p) so that (s_t \xrightarrow{a_t} s_{t+1})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 (t \leftarrow t + 1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

were to experience that continuation. We describe a way compute this estimate in Section 3.3. Once the flow is estimated for each narrative candidate, the index \(j^*\) of the flow-maximizing candidate is determined in line 10. Then the next narrative state is set to the first state of the narrative \(n_{j^*}\) in line 11. In line 12 the dynamics \(p\) of the world are updated so that the player’s action \(a_t\) indeed leads to that state (Thue & Bulitko, 2012).

For example, to select between narratives \(n_1\) and \(n_2\), the AI manager will first compute the complexity of each. Suppose that the cognitive complexity of the wolf’s brother narrative \(n_1\) is \(\bar{c}(n_1) = (0.7, 0.7, 0.1)\), where the three dimensions are friend/foe identification skill, fighting ability, and the ability to suspend disbelief. Meanwhile, suppose that the resurrecting fairy narrative \(n_2\) has a complexity of \(\bar{c}(n_2) = (0.1, 0.1, 0.7)\)(since the player might have to suspend their disbelief in the existence of fairies. Next, the AI manager will examine the model of the player’s skills that it has constructed thus far (say, \(\bar{\sigma}_{t+1} = (0.8, 0.9, 0.5)\)), and then use it to estimate the player’s flow for each candidate narrative. The flow induced by the narrative \(n_1\) will be \(f_1 \approx 1/(0.4583 + \xi)\), whereas \(f_2 \approx 1/(1.0817 + \xi)\). Thus, narrative \(n_1\) is estimated to give the player a higher degree of flow and so will be selected by the AI manager.

3.3 Defining Flow, Complexity, and Skill

Selecting narrative to maximize the player’s estimated degree of flow critically depends on the definition of flow and, more specifically, on the definitions of the skill and complexity functions related to narrative comprehension. Several models of flow have been suggested (Weber et al., 2009; Bulitko & Brown, 2012; Moneta, 2012; Klasen et al., 2012; Bulitko, 2014). As a first step, we propose to use a simple flow model based solely on the balance of the player’s skills \(\bar{\sigma}_{t+1}\) and the complexity of the narrative candidate \(\bar{c}(n_j)\). The model was previously evaluated in a synthetic
domain (Bulitko & Brown, 2012; Bulitko, 2014) and, in our context, becomes

\[ f_j = \frac{1}{||\bar{\sigma}_{t+1} - \bar{c}(n_j)|| + \xi} , \]

where \( || \) is the 2-norm distance: \( ||x - y|| = \sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^{m} (x_i - y_i)^2} \) and \( \xi \) is a small positive constant to keep \( f_j \) finite when the player’s skills exactly match the narrative complexity (i.e., \( \bar{\sigma}_{t+1} = \bar{c}(n_j) \)). Note that \( n_j \) is a sequence of narrative states computed by the automated planner. In the formula above we assume that \( \bar{c}(n_j) \) returns the complexity of the first narrative state of \( n_j \) and ignores the remainder of the sequence. More generally, the degree of flow can be computed along a multi-state narrative trajectory with a possible discounting of the flow estimated for more distant future states.

A basic approach to modeling the player’s narrative skills is to manually annotate each action available to the player with a vector of deltas to the player’s skill vector, similarly to the approach taken in our previous work on modeling player preferences (Thue et al., 2007; Thue et al., 2011; Ramirez & Bulitko, 2015; Hernandez et al., 2014). To validate such annotations, one could run a user study in which the narrative experience is occasionally interrupted and the player’s narrative comprehension skills are measured.

There are several ways to define the cognitive complexity of a narrative segment. A basic approach is to manually annotate all narrative events with a complexity vector. This is similar to manually annotating narrative encounters with player type suitability in PaSSAGE (Thue et al., 2007, 2011) and PAST (Ramirez & Bulitko, 2015). A more advanced approach would be to present possible narrative events to a variety of players whose narrative-comprehension skills had been measured ahead of time. Then, for each such player, one could measure his/her comprehension of the specific event that was presented to them. The cognitive complexity of the narrative event could then be mined from the collected measurements. For instance, adopting the unimodal assumption of Bulitko (2014), we can form a corpus of narrative-comprehension skills for all test players who sufficiently comprehended a narrative event and then take per-dimension minima. To illustrate, suppose we had three test players whose narrative skills were pre-measured as \( \bar{\sigma}_1 = (0.1, 0.2, 0.3) \), \( \bar{\sigma}_2 = (0.4, 0.5, 0.6) \), \( \bar{\sigma}_3 = (0.9, 0.2, 0.7) \), where the three dimensions are friend/foe identification skill, fighting ability, and the ability to suspend disbelief. Suppose the first player did not demonstrate a sufficient comprehension of a narrative event \( n \), whereas the other two players did. Then the complexity of \( n \) is the per-dimension minima of \( \bar{\sigma}_2 \) and \( \bar{\sigma}_3 \): \( \bar{c}(n) = (0.4, 0.2, 0.6) \).

4. Testbeds for Empirical Evaluation

Once we have implemented our approach, we will evaluate it in the context of an interactive, AI-managed narrative such as an interactive version of “Little Red Riding Hood” (Thue et al., 2007; Riedl et al., 2008; Ramirez & Bulitko, 2015). Presentation can be via a text-only format (Ramirez & Bulitko, 2015), a full 3D game world (Thue et al., 2011), or a series of still images (Hernandez et al., 2014), as shown in Figure 1. The cognitive model of the player’s skills will be updated from the player’s input in the game (e.g., dialogue choices or other actions). In authoring the narrative space and the cognitive skill/complexity annotations on player actions and narrative segments, we will use the process that we followed in creating our previous testbeds for PaSSAGE (Thue et al., 2007, 2011), PAST (Ramirez & Bulitko, 2015) and PACE (Hernandez et al., 2014).
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Figure 1. Top row: a text-based presentation of narrative in PAST and the player’s choices, reproduced from Ramirez and Bulitko (2015). Bottom row: a presentation of narrative in a 3D video game (left) or as still images (right), reproduced from Riedl and Bulitko (2013) and Hernandez et al. (2014).

The players in the experimental condition will experience an AI-managed story with our proposed flow estimate as the objective function. Their post-experience responses (e.g., enjoyment of the story) will be compared to those in the control condition (e.g., with random narrative candidate selection). This is a common approach for evaluating experience managers that we have used over the last eight years (Thue et al., 2007; Ramirez & Bulitko, 2015). We will attempt to complement questionnaire-based data about the overall experience with specific measurements of the degree of flow that is experienced by the participants directly using either questionnaires (Moneta, 2012) or fMRI readings (Klasen et al., 2012).

We will also consider evaluating this approach in intelligent training systems and on-line educational courses. For the former, we have partnered with a medical hospital and have been developing a game-based training system for neonatal resuscitation (Bulitko et al., 2015). Once the testbed is completed, we will evaluate whether keeping the trainee in a state of flow by dynamically modifying the training scenario can lead to a higher training effect. For the latter, we are partnering with researchers in on-line education to implement dynamic shaping of material in a massively open online course (MOOC) to maximize the student’s degree of flow. Again, we will attempt to run user studies to evaluate the training effect of this approach.
5. Future Work and Conclusions

We have proposed a way to use a computational model of flow within an AI experience manager to select between automatically planned narratives. The natural next step is to actually implement this approach. To do so, several aspects of the approach need to be instantiated. First, the dimensions describing the player’s skills and the narrative complexity must be defined. We expect studies of reader engagement (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009) to be informative for this step. Second, the player’s actions must be mapped to updates in the player’s skill model (line 6 in the algorithm). Third, the complexity function ¯c must be defined for all narrative states. We plan to work with reading psychologists and draw from research on transportation, absorption, immersion, and engagement (Green & Brock, 2000; Green, 2004). Finally, more complex models of flow (Moneta, 2012) can be studied in place of the simplistic model that we presented above.

In this paper, we proposed to apply the concept of flow in the context of AI-managed interactive storytelling. We conjectured that automatically shaping the player’s experience toward maximizing their sense of flow can lead to a better narrative experience. We further proposed a specific computational model of the player’s flow and a mechanism to shape the narrative towards maximizing the predicted flow. Potential applications include video games, intelligent training systems, and online education. As this is a position paper, we welcome any feedback on the hypothesis or our proposed solution approach. We hope that such feedback will shape our implementation of the approach.

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