

Nine Lives: A Game about the Player Character as an Unreliable Narrator

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The issue we set out to solve with “Nine Lives” was the conflicting nature of the player character as both a protagonist in a story and a vessel through which the player is able to experience the world of the game. Traditionally, these two views of the player character are in conflict with each other and developers often choose one or the other when designing a player character. One extreme is the stoic silent hero such as Link from the “Legend of Zelda” series who grants full control to the player but remains emotionally static throughout his entire quest. The other extreme is the deeply developed narrative character such as Cloud from “Final Fantasy VII” who goes through a lot of emotional development throughout the events of the game but who grants minimal control to the player and is often replaced by other characters whenever convenient to the story. With “Nine Lives,” we attempted to create a game where the player character experiences emotional development during the course of the game while at the same time acting as the only body through which the player is capable of interacting with the world.

The result of our efforts is a first person point-and-click adventure game centered around an emotionally unstable old woman named Tabatha Brown. As explained during the intro to the game, the player takes on the role of a therapist concerned about Tabatha's mental health. The entire “world” of the game—including visual and textual descriptions of objects and event in Tabatha's life—is then communicated to the player through the eyes of Tabatha. Because Tabatha represents the quintessential unreliable narrator, the player is unable to completely trust what she sees or says. The primary mechanic is then objecting to the things Tabatha says when she clearly contradicts herself. Successfully objecting to a contradiction causes Tabatha to revise her view of the world, a process that usually reveals new objects and information that the player can use to uncover more contradictions. The

contradictions in the game center around the nine cats that Tabatha believes she has. Each contradiction reveals information about Tabatha's past and causes one of the cats to disappear, revealing a new object. The player is able to end the game at any time by having Tabatha go to sleep at which point the therapist will give an analysis of Tabatha based on which puzzles the player was able to solve. Through this system of exploration through Tabatha's eyes followed by objections to clear contradictions, the player is able to develop the character of Tabatha while at the same time experiencing the world completely through her eyes. Because the world changes as Tabatha's character develops, our hope was that the player would gain a greater sense of her character's development as the game progresses.

Design of the game was a completely collaborative process. Twice every week, the team consisting of me, Letitia Li, and Nick Ristuccia would meet for a design meeting where we outlined the specific design of the game. These meetings included development of Tabatha's character, her past, and the puzzles/contradictions that lead to the player discovering her past. Outside of the collaborative design sessions, my main role in the project was that of the programmer. My main task was to manipulate the Wintermute Engine to implement the mechanics of the game as decided on in the design meetings. For the most part, I worked on code independently of the rest of team except for when implementation details also involved a design question, in which case I would craft a temporary solution and bring up the issue at the next design meeting. The code itself is constructed around the four different "scenes" that correspond to the four locations Tabatha is capable of traveling to. These scenes all contain scripted scene objects which the player is capable of interacting with via the "look at," "use," and "talk to" verbs. Aside from the main "objection" mechanics, the core of the code is the text responses Tabatha gives to actions on various objects. A lot of my time was spent tying text to objects and mapping individual text responses to objections that the player could then perform. During this process, I also wrote part of the story's script to fill in various holes in the story and environment that became apparent as I tied all the information together.

There were a few aspects of the game I felt worked particularly well. One was the use of

“decoy” objects in the scenes. Amongst the important scene objects, we felt it was also important to include a decent amount of decoy objects in the game. Decoy objects are objects that provide no information that leads to a contradiction. Instead, the primary purpose of the decoy objects was to provide more insight into the character of Tabatha through flavor text. For example, while the overflowing bowls of cat-food in the kitchen weren't explicitly used to solve any puzzles, they informed the player of the number of cats (and therefore puzzles) present in the game.

Another aspect of the game I felt worked well was the ultimate emotional attachment the player develops towards Tabatha. During playtests, As players uncovered more and more of Tabatha's (decidedly tragic) past, they felt greater sympathy towards her situation and wanted to help her, ultimately allowing the player to fully assume the role of the therapist.

Another aspect I felt worked well was the fact that later puzzles in the game relied on solutions to previous puzzles. This allowed Tabatha's emotional development to follow a narrative arc as she begins to reveal more information that builds on information she's revealed previously.

Of course, there were other aspects of the game that I felt were less effective, some of which were ultimately scrapped and removed from the final result. One such aspect was the initial idea that players would have a limited number of objections so they would be discouraged from objecting to everything in the game. The problem with this mechanic was the fact that some of the contradictions, especially the later ones that are reliant on previous solutions, are fairly subtle and we felt it would be unfair to players to punish them for incorrect guesses. Of course, without this mechanic players are free to object to every statement they see. Fortunately, random objections don't actually accomplish much mainly because of the many decoy objects previously mentioned.

Another aspect of the game we felt didn't work initially was the relative amount of melodrama surrounding Tabatha's past. Our original ideas for Tabatha's past featured even more farfetched and tragic scenarios which we ultimately scrapped because they bordered on the absurd. Right now, I feel the story has a reasonable balance between humor and drama though it could still benefit from being a

little more realistic.

Another aspect of the game which didn't work particularly well during play-testing was the placement of important information in obscure verb combinations. In the original design of the game, the player often had to “use” objects including signs and pictures in order to acquire information that led to a contradiction. This was counter intuitive and we ultimately decided to relocate the relevant information to more obvious actions.

In conclusion, “Nine Lives” is a brief attempt at creating a character who is both the vessel through which the player experiences the game and the central focal point of the game's story. Because the player interacts with a biased version of the world while at the same time uncovering the true world by uncovering the truth behind the player character, I would argue that “Nine Lives” accomplishes this goal.