Sea of Thieves: Understanding the narrative

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Today's mission

Research plan

Study overview: This study aims to explore how players of different gaming backgrounds understand and interpret the narrative of the campaign mission in 'Sea of Thieves.' It involves five participants who vary in their video gaming experience. The methodology consists of three main components: a pre-game questionnaire, a gameplay session and a post-gameplay interview. The data collected will be analyzed qualitatively to identify themes and patterns in narrative understanding across participants.

Objective: To explore how players of different gaming backgrounds understand and interpret the narrative of the campaign mission in 'Sea of Thieves.'

Participants:
- 5 participants, age 18 or older
- Varying levels of gaming experience (novice, intermediate, advanced)
- Each with a different amount of exposure to 'Sea of Thieves' and similar game genres

Methodology:
1.Pre-Game Questionnaire: To gather demographic data and assess each participant's gaming history and familiarity with 'Sea of Thieves.'

2.Gameplay Session: Conduct individual sessions where each participant plays a specific campaign mission in 'Sea of Thieves.' Record gameplay sessions for further analysis, noting decision points, reactions, and interactions with the game narrative.

3.Post-Gameplay Interview: To understand the participant's thoughts and feelings about the narrative experienced during gameplay.

Duration of study:
2 weeks (for recruitment and the study)

Duration of gameplay:
Limit gameplay to a maximum of 1-2 hours to focus on specific narrative elements.This duration gives players sufficient time to engage in at least one narrative story from start to finish, depending on their gaming expertise.

Running
the research

Recruitment

Method of recruitment:
- I recruited for this research piece using a **Reddit sub-community** of gamers I started in 2016

Criteria:
- I received 20 responses and selected 5 participants, considering different inclusion needs, levels of gaming experience, their experience with Sea of Thieves and their availability
- Participants were sent the pre-game questionnaire online.
- All participants had to be playing on XBOX

Consent:
- Ahead of starting any research, participants were sent a digital consent form to read through and sign
- It assured them of their right to anonymity and to withdraw at any time

Running the sessions

Location of sessions:
- 3 sessions were run remotely, with each player live-streaming their video game footage to me
- The other 2 sessions were held at the player's homes
- Discord was the platform used for the remote live-streaming sessions

Data collection:
- I collected data using Miro, taking notes categorised into different areas. At the end of each session, I organised all notes into a summative dataset structure that could be easily understood (examples, right.)
- Discord was the platform used for the remote live-streaming sessions

Player 3
8th February 2024, 18:00
Notes: Participant had heard of Sea of Thieves and seen it played before, though had not played it themself

Player 1
4th February 2024, 14:00 GMT
Notes: Player live-streamed their footage to me using Discord. They seemed at ease doing this, and we had no technological or network issues throughout the session.

1. Pre-game questionnaire:
1. **Participant ID:** P1
2. **Age:** 28
3. **Gender:** Male
4. **Gaming Experience Level:** Intermediate
5. **Prior Experience with 'Sea of Thieves':** No
6. **Favorite Game Genre:** FPS
7. **Accessibility needs:** None

2. Gameplay session:
1. **Gameplay Duration:** 1 hour 17 minutes
2. **Decisions Made:**
   a. Decided to explore a hidden cave (00:30:22)
   b. Avoided combat with rival pirate ship (00:55:10)
3. **Emotional Reactions:** Notable emotional reactions and their timestamps (e.g., frustration, excitement)
   a. Annoyed that they couldn't find the ship and map-room (00:10:15)
   b. Amusement when character fell off ship due to drunkenness (00:50:05)
   c. Confusion during map reading (01:10:30)
   d. Frustration when steering the ship as sail blocked view (00:21:15)
4. **Narrative Engagement Points:** Specific moments where the participant seemed most engaged with the narrative
   a. Wanted to solve a riddle (00:40:00)
   b. Wanted to get to the cave to meet the next character (00:63:10)

3. Post-Gameplay Interview:
1. **Overall Impression:** Enjoyed the game but felt it was complex for a beginner.
2. **Character and Event Impact:** Enjoyed dressing up their character at the start, and liked the humour of being on the ship
3. **Clarity of Objectives:** Felt lost at the beginning, couldn't locate ship or map-room which stalled the start of the mission. Once on the mission, sailing was fine but needed direction once he arrived on the island.

In-game feedback

"It feels a bit underwhelming once you have finished a mission or quest." - P4
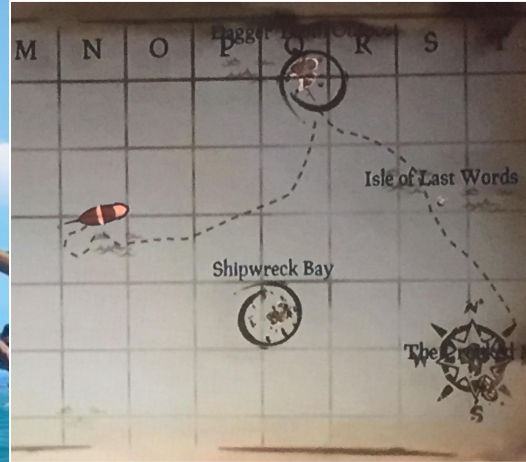
"This makes no sense to me. Can't get my head around it." - P1

"It's not intuitive - it takes the toggle some time to get through each of these." - P5

Analysing the data

Analysis process

I started by reading through all the transcripts and notes to become familiar with the depth and breadth of the content.

The next step was to generate initial codes from the data, or finding meaningful analytical units. For example, any mention of "confusion over objectives" or "enjoyment of narrative depth."

I then reviewed and refined those themes, and checked that they worked in relation to the coded extracts.

Step 5: Build recommendations

Step 4: Reviewing themes

Step 3: Affinity mapping themes

After all these steps, I weaved together the narrative of the analysis and themes, and identified recommendations.

Step 2: Coding/tagging

Step 1: Familiarisation

Then, I turned to Miro to start affinity mapping the analysis and look for patterns and emerging themes.

miro   Dovetail

Findings & recommendations

Key themes

1 Narrative engagement and comprehension

- Novice players (e.g., P5) found the game intriguing yet complex, indicating that beginners might struggle with less direct storytelling and complex game mechanics.
- Advanced players (e.g., P2 and P4) enjoyed the depth and integration of the lore, indicating a better comprehension and appreciation of complex narratives and challenges.

2 Impact of game mechanics on narrative

- Players felt that mechanics such as sailing and strategic planning either enhance or detract from the narrative experience, depending on their comfort and familiarity.
- Mechanic familiarity appeared to correlate with overall narrative satisfaction—players comfortable with game mechanics tended to enjoy the narrative more (e.g., P1 and P2).

3 Emotional and decision-making responses

- Emotional reactions varied widely, from excitement and joy to confusion and frustration, often tied to specific narrative or gameplay moments.
- Varying decision points highlight crucial narrative engagement moments, such as battles, negotiations, or exploration challenges, showing varied player strategies and narrative paths.

4 Clarity of objectives and Storyline

- There was a split in how clear objectives and storylines were perceived, with some finding it clear and engaging (e.g., P2), while others struggled with clarity, which impacted their narrative experience (e.g., P5).
- 'Sea of Thieves' might benefit from adjustable difficulty or guidance levels to cater to a broader range of player experiences.

Recommendations

1 Adaptive Narrative Complexity

- Implement adaptive narrative elements that adjust based on the player's experience level.
- For novice players, provide a more guided and explanatory narrative experience.
- For advanced players, include complex storylines with multiple layers and choices that impact the narrative outcome.

2 Enhanced Tutorials for New Players

- Design tutorial elements specifically tailored to help new players understand both game mechanics and narrative elements seamlessly.
- This can involve interactive tutorials that are part of the main narrative, offering a learning experience that feels like a natural part of the game.

3 Dynamic Difficulty Adjustments

- Introduce dynamic difficulty settings that can be adjusted according to the player's skill level, ensuring that all players can enjoy the game without feeling overwhelmed or underchallenged.
- This adjustment should also consider narrative comprehension, not just gameplay difficulty.

4 Incorporate Clearer Objectives and Feedback

- Ensure that game objectives are clearly communicated and that feedback is provided regularly to keep players informed about their progress and understanding of the narrative.
- This could include visual indicators, narrative cues, or dialogue that reinforces the storyline and player goals.

Summary

I absolutely loved this research project. I so greatly enjoyed watching and observing players as they engaged with Sea of Thieves. With their varying levels of gaming experience, I was able to observe different reactions and behaviours during the sessions which provided great and varied feedback.

Through thematic analysis of the collected data, I identified key themes such as the impact of game mechanics on narrative understanding and the clarity of the game objectives. I've also made some recommendations which offer a starting point to consider broader implications for narrative integration in video games.

Personal reflection: 🙂