

It Will Find You – Narrative Design:

Goal: To create a design a flexible reactive narrative that would help to increase levels of Intra-Diagetic immersion vs Diagetic immersion.

Initial Development and Inspiration:

With the project's heavy reliance on strong narrative guidance, it was clear that the initial focus of development had to be on creating, and developing, a story and setting for the game's foundation. After deliberating with several ideas, from a stand-alone horror piece, to something more surreal, I elected to further develop the narrative from a previous project I had worked on, Captive Audience, expanding on the pre-existing universe to create something completely new.

Released online across various digital platforms in August 2018, Captive Audience received praise for its narrative direction and immersive nature, despite the game being a purely linear experience. Over the course of a few months the title was picked up by several large media platforms which allowed for a wide net of exposure across a variety of different groups, allowing me to gather detailed feedback on what worked, what didn't and what people felt would have improved Captive Audience's ability to engage the player.

This foundation felt like a strong position to start in with regards to developing a new narrative experience, and as the story was left open-ended with regards to its finale, a sequel felt like a natural development.

With the world and characters already established from the previous game, the challenge then became to create something original and immersive, yet still connected to its narrative roots. As mentioned, Captive Audience followed a fairly linear structure, and this was themed around episodes of a TV show, something in which the foundation of the narrative world was established. This style, whilst successful in a procedural manner, would be ineffectual when paired with the goal of making the game more reactive, as the linear nature of the story would confine what the player was able to do.

To embrace the reactive nature of the system that I would be building, the player had to be provided with multiple opportunities to alter the narrative flow according to personal preference, with a simple established goal that they could aim for, but ultimately deviate from. It was at this point that I was drawn to the horror genre, particularly the "Monster Movie" and "Home Invasion" sub-genres, and began to develop the game as a narrative survival experience, rather than a strictly narrative one.

As a fan of the horror and thriller genre, I already had strong inspirational sources to draw from when it came to researching my approach to narrative development. Initially, I began by looking at horror films were stylistically similar to what I had envisioned for the project, films that focused on a gritty, realistic approach to their narratives that could connect with the viewer.

I began by looking at two films in particular, Hush and The Strangers, both home invasion movies that captured the concept of the protagonists being stalked slowly, and purposefully by a predator, be it human or otherwise. The muted tones and gritty soundtracks were a great source of inspiration when designing the script, and the characters realistic and organic behaviour served as a great case study for appropriate reactions and vocalisation in situations similar to what I had planned.

Alongside this I referred to several games developed over the recent years that began to embrace a more reactive style of narrative development, specifically Silent Hill PT and Visage, with Resident Evil

7 used as a comparison of successful, but more linear narrative. These titles were of specific interest not only due their similar tone and style to my concept, but also the method in which they immersed the player with relatively little narrative input. Featuring primarily silent protagonists they used the world which the character inhabits to tell the story rather than portraying it solely through expositional dialogue, something I felt would be important to master going forward.

Branching Narratives and Seeded Events:

Moving away from linear storytelling entailed creating an open-ended narrative where the framework bookended the core gameplay, enhancing and illustrating details without guiding or controlling the players actions. Instead of scripting the gameplay on a scene by scene basis, the narrative was broken down into key moments that could, but did not have to, occur during the players experience. These moments would be the result of specific actions taken by the player, be it phoning for police assistance, attempting to escape in their car, or using a gun to attempt to fight the monster.

Key story moments were selected to be action based, where the player could perform specific tasks to make them occur, whilst others would be rigged up to a timing system so that at specific intervals they would present themselves to the player, without forcing the player to interact. One example of this is the home phone system that would ring at specific time intervals during the game. The player did not have to answer the call and doing so would have consequences as well as put the player at risk but would also reward the player with character interaction that could provide them hints about the story, how to progress the game, or begin key events.

By seeding in these types of small narrative events in an optional manner, they evolve organically during the gameplay without feeling forced or pre-determined, allowing me to feed narrative elements to the player in a way that enforces, rather than hinders immersion.

Ensuring the player felt like every action they took had meaning became a mammoth task, as it required alternate versions of every scripted event, distinct dialogue to represent each action they had taken, and the ability to interrupt events with their behaviour should they so please.

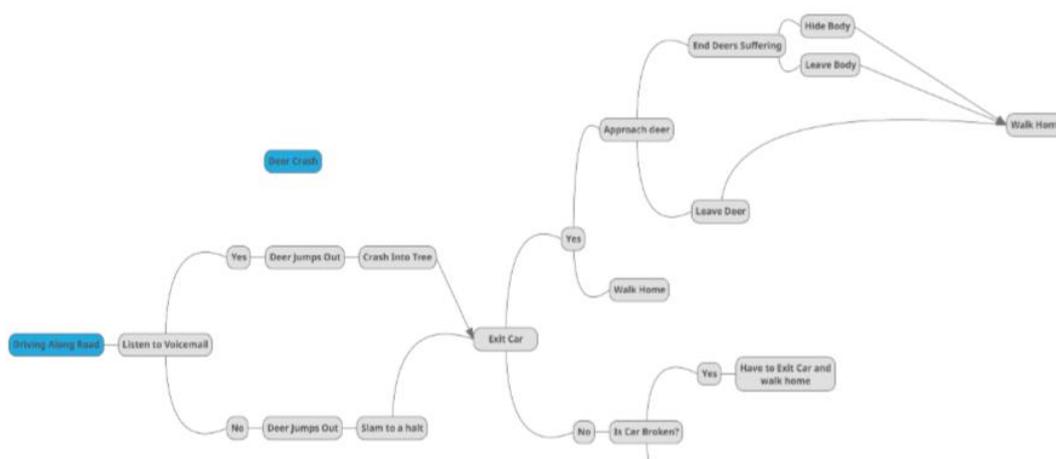


Figure 1 An early narrative flow chart

My scope for the game has involved two sections, survival against the monster, and a later segment where the character has escaped into the backstage of the show. As narrative development continued, this quickly became unfeasible given the limited time for development, and an active decision was made to restrict scope to only the first section, preserving the detail and interactivity of

the experience over pure volume. In the end I feel this improved the final prototype, as the world surrounding the survival horror of the creature became much more detailed and immersive, a key component of this project, due to resources being allocated solely to expanding upon the initial environment and experiences the player would be engaging with.

The naturally branching narrative led to the emergence of multiple endings determined by the combination of actions each player took. Early into development I had decided to conceal the fact that players were on a TV show until the last moment, choosing to instead reinforce the immersive concept of the horror survival situation they found themselves in while seeding elements that would give them hints to the true nature of events. This meant that when it came to endings, I could design them based on a tier system of how much the player knew, and what actions they'd taken towards that knowledge. Low tiers would maintain the mystery of the narrative, hinting at the involvement of external forces, whilst upper tiers involved the entire environment collapsing in a hail of fire as the player escaped the show's confines. This created a rewarding structure that could enhance the replay value of the title, with each ending giving you more information towards what your final goal should be.

Resetting the game was something I initially struggled with narratively. Having a Game Over screen or similar mechanic would immediately break immersion by enforcing the nature of the experience as a game, rather than something the player was a part of. To begin with I considered simply having the screen cut to black, and then start again at the beginning to create an almost temporal loop effect, where the day reset upon the player's demise (inspired by films such as *Groundhog Day*, *Edge of Tomorrow* and *Happy Death Day*). This felt hollow from both a narrative and gameplay perspective however, and early testing showed it being received negatively, with the consensus being it gave a sense of the game being unfinished, or that the player had accidentally skipped a cut-scene.

From these results it seemed that a more 'narrative inspired' solution was needed to maintain immersion across repeated playthroughs, something that allowed that transition to occur neatly within the story, while providing hints to the player about what was happening. Ultimately, I decided to involve the backstage component of the world earlier than intended, implying a collection and deposition of the character was occurring by unseen forces. After death the player would wake up immobilised in an unfamiliar location, and hear key characters from both *Captive Audience*, and this prototype conversing about the situation, with dialogue dependant on what route the player had taken. The dialogue would heavily imply elements of the experience being somewhat externally organised and not what it appeared, but without giving away everything that was going on behind the scenes.

Exceptions to this came in the higher tier endings, where players would have the opportunity to escape the set. Here endings were specifically tailored to the method of escape used by the player, with some leading to the backstage, and others leading to unique interactions with important characters. This led to a more immersive, and positive experience with testers during the final gameplay experience, keeping them engaged with the story by disguising gameplay elements, whilst also drawing them straight back in to uncover more of the lore.

Creating the Script:

With a general structure in place for how to best deliver an immersive narrative, the next step was to create a script for the dialogue. A key character that was mentioned but never explored in *Captive Audience* was Julia, the protagonist's wife who was also a captive of the production company, and so

I decided to use her as the focus of my story with the goal of creating a compelling and emotional link with its predecessor.

In *Captive Audience* the protagonist was aware of his surroundings and circumstances from the start, leaving the player to catch up via dialogue and events. I considered a similar approach for the prototype, but I felt this would undercut the intra-diegetic immersion I was trying to achieve, as the difference in understanding between the player and the character would create degrees of separation that may prevent the player from feeling like they are themselves the protagonist. Instead I decided to utilise memory alteration as a core concept for the narrative, allowing Julia to start with the same level of knowledge as the player with regards to their circumstances, then slowly allow them to gain more understanding as the game goes on through memories and events so that their understanding of the game matches Julia's.

The shared knowledge, or lack thereof, between character and player then allowed me to manipulate the narrative so that it was more reactive than procedural. With Julia having no idea of what was coming up, it was more natural for her to be reacting in real-time to the situations as opposed to planning ahead, or around her circumstances. This approach was designed to help synchronise the player and the character in their experiences, the narrative aiming to predict what the player would feel during each event and express it within the framework of Julia's character. As time progressed this would hopefully blur the lines between the player and the character further, with the goal being to have the player experience the game as Julia, rather than as someone controlling her.

As Julia's character began to emerge based on this design, I began to create a cast to play alongside her, with the knowledge that all supporting characters would actually be elements of the show, rather than the roles they were playing. One of the core tenants from *Captive Audience* was that every star had a producer for 'Psychological Management' that would essentially act as their best friend and confidant, while secretly manipulating them. This gave birth to Sandra, the best friend, who would act as the initiator for several events, and whose emotional connection with Julia could be used to drive players into certain actions.

Another component that was key to the narrative concept was that the show had a director, or host, who could govern the way events unfolded and controlled the overall production. In *Captive Audience* the host was directly engaging with the protagonist at regular intervals, however the more subversive and secretive nature of this narrative meant he had to remain relatively hidden until key moments. This relegated the role to mostly being a core component of the endings, where his voice would be the one that governed how the game reset, what issues had arisen, and should the player escape, how they would be dealt with.

Choosing a Monster:

At this point it was time to develop the Monster further than making it a basic antagonist, so that its behavioural traits could have a large impact on how events would develop. As this was still early stages with regards to the monster's design, it was important to decide exactly how the monster would influence the reactive narrative, and what effect it would have in combination with the events as they unfolded. I decided to focus on characterising the monster, and whether it would be intelligent, or bestial.

As part of researching these options, I posted an online poll on several communities asking which people found more effective as an antagonist that evoked fear, with the majority voting towards a more humanoid creature, but a large contingent also voting for a hybrid of both styles. Having

attempted various iterations of both, I decided to move forward with the latter due to the abundance of humanoid antagonists in horror making them feel somewhat generic and predictable, a trait that could undercut the immersive tone I was aiming for.

By building upon the hybrid foundation, I aimed to create an apex predator whose sole drive was to hunt, but who would do so in an intelligent manner with an understanding of its surroundings. This led me to write the creature so that it would react to Julia's movements in a thoughtful, yet animalistic way, behaving aggressively and feral to those that encroached on its hunt, yet using tactics when pursuing its prey.

I went through several iterations of this with the script as the development process continued due to the nature of what I was able to program and utilise. The monster's behaviours shifted to accommodate the reality of the development process, and eventually became what I believe to be a grounded portrayal of an intelligent, dangerous predator. A compromise had to be sought as development continued between what was narratively effective, and what was possible within the scope of the project, and so events were designed with this in mind.

Additional Characters and Item Dialogue:

Other characters naturally developed from the story as it progressed, the narrative branching based on the needs of the player as if the show were reacting to Julia's actions over the course of the broadcast. With each event I tried to encapsulate what the response would be for a character like Julia, and script dialogue that could comply with this. The police event is a good example of this, where the player has the option of trying to phone the police for help. Here the characters were written to be as organic and stereotypical as possible to prevent the player from suspecting anything was amiss, with small elements of unnatural dialogue thrown in to maintain a pervading sense of wrongness through each interaction.

The concept of Uncanny Valley dialogue and that sense of something being not quite right was important to me throughout all the sub-characters dialogue. This took the form of offhand remarks that didn't quite fit, or deviations into Julia's Psyche, as they were a useful tool to feed the player more information about the games world without making them break immersion. The intention is for them to act as a hook, drawing the players attention in, making them question what they've heard, and adding to a sense of discomfort that slowly begins to dawn on the player and Julia as the game progresses.

The final step of the scripting process was to create item specific dialogue for objects that Julia would interact with. These created some issues, as they may be considered to technically break the rules of immersive dialogue in being expositional and unnatural, but they also provide a much needed opportunity to enhance the narrative and build more detail into the world around Julia, as well as provide an outlet for some of her inner monologue and feelings. A lot of focus had to be paid to exactly what is being said during these short narrative snippets, to ensure that they enhanced the story, and that if they hindered immersion it was for an important reason, rather than just for the sake of hearing Julia talk.