

Is it always necessary to have an end to a story? Is the infinite story possible?

The structure of Mindwheel is only "branched" when the player takes excursions from what is purely necessary to solve the puzzles and progress towards the endgame.

It's not necessary to have an end to a game story, especially when you consider genres that don't have any strict storyline in place. Many endless score games don't necessarily have a storyline, but as players we are free to come up with our own stories and theories for what takes place at any time. Another aspect of this idea is that player "stories" take place whether an intentional storyline has been made or not for a game.

Let's look at the **rogue-like** genre for example of this. They are made to be played endlessly, as each run restarts the gameplay. Many of these games have little to no storyline in place, or when they do, they present it in bits and pieces between each run of the game. Even when the entire "storyline" has been presented, there is still technically no end to the game.

One of my favorite **rogue-like** titles is Supergiant Games' *Hades* (2019). You play as Zagreus, son of Hades, and the entire goal of the storyline is to escape from hell and your father's cruel reign and find your mother, Persephone. By the "end" of the game, after potentially 100s of attempts, the player beats Hades in combat as the last thing standing between you and freedom. Eventually, Persephone returns to meet with Hades, and the two come to terms and make an agreement for you to keep an eye on the underworld, making the gameplay loop still pertain to the story. This format allows for the story never to technically end, and even keep the gameplay relevant to the main narrative that's over.

For a pure story-less example, we can look at score attack, high-score-based **arcade** games. Take something as simple as Pacman. There's no inherent storyline presented to any players. However, each run of the game can generate different "stories" for each person. Someone might have a quick death when brand new to the game, their story is about learning ghosts kill you. An intermediate player might learn a new trick in the game, such as looping from side to side of the screen. An experienced player's story would usually be about having a wild chase, and come with moments of close getaways and exciting comebacks. Obviously there are modern titles that follow this pattern, creating stories countless different times for every player.

Pinsky made the point that all art imitates life. How does Mindwheel imitate life and vice versa?

The concept that all art imitates, or is iterative in some way, isn't a new one. However, it is of course an important topic to discuss in every medium, in any genre. Given that Mindwheel is a text-based game, it obviously has no way of imitating any visual style, whether from another artist or just reality/realism. So what does Mindwheel imitate in its interactions? What Mindwheel attempts to accomplish, in its own limited way, is freedom of interaction and choice for the player. Assuming that we all have free will, (a discussion for those in fields far above me) in real life we have the option to choose from an infinite amount of potentials. At this very moment, I *could* choose to finish answering these questions, or I *could* choose to throw myself out the window! The possibilities are truly endless. Of course, in the digital world, the palette of options must be curated for inputs to a computer, limiting players to a fixed amount of potentials. Even today this is true, but in the dated design of Mindwheel this is more apparent, even painfully so when accustomed to modern experiences. While attempting to solve puzzles, the game tries to let the player imitate reality by walking where they choose, talking to whom they please, and interacting with items as they see fit. As I experienced though, the preset conditions for us to play with was more limiting than it was liberating.

How can games be a joyful way for game designers to play with their audience?

Games are one of few entertainment mediums that involves direct input from its audience. What strikes a chord with me is that games are essentially art that reacts to you. There will always be some variance between players' approaches to any game, so the piece changes depending on each person playing. Even though each game requires different inputs that must be learned in order to interact, the medium still has an advantage when it comes to meeting the player where they're at. Being something that can be interacted with, the meaning can change depending on how any one person wants to interact with a piece.

The best example I know of for a game that displays the unique opportunities the medium has is *The Stanley Parable*. This game mirrors the rhizomatic storytelling experience, with numerous,

radically different timelines to follow each playthrough, and goes the extra mile to play with player expectations at any given chance. The player plays as Stanley, a normal office employee on a normal day, except suddenly The Narrator starts describing everything they're doing. You could say this video-game is *The Truman Show* of its medium, as The Narrator is more than just a storytelling mechanic. He becomes the driving force behind player actions, whether that's listening to what he says, or always attempting to do the opposite. When you play *The Stanley Parable*, the object of the game quickly becomes 'How can I find things that The Narrator doesn't expect?' even though all possible outcomes had to be expected for them to be possible in the first place. With a copious amount of irony and meta-humor, *The Stanley Parable* teaches us that all games are systems of interactions and expectations between us as players and the developers.

Although we have been discussing the inherent differences, the line between a dendritic and a rhizomatic structure is not necessarily a clear one. Some structures allow the player both the freedom to explore alternative routes and paths while retaining an overall structure and storyline that stays the same or relatively similar. The genre that highlights this cross between styles well would be the **immersive-sim**. Two immersive-sims that showcase this flexibility well are *Half Life* and *Dishonored*. Each of these titles presents the player with a set of tools and levels that allow for experimentation every time, while also telling a story and world-building that remains interconnected throughout the entire experience. In each game, the player will gradually add tools to their arsenal, new firearms in *Half Life*, and new spells that can be upgraded to suit a player's preferred approach in *Dishonored*. Allowing the player to pick and choose their techniques to solve every encounter, while also building upon themselves over time, allows for the games to be in a unique position that creates a unified whole while also branching off within the individual events throughout every level. This approach really is the best of both worlds, because it allows for more variety and player choice, it feels like a more *immersive* experience overall, while still giving players a feeling of progression and not being forced into dead-ends that might otherwise be unsatisfying.

When designing games, there is a spectrum of experiences to be had by any player, regardless of its structure. However, the skeleton we use to construct an experience will always affect

player interactions, so it is important to consider carefully. From title to title, how does each games' design influence your decisions?