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Narrative and Interactive Fiction

Richmond Station
Choice Based Narrative in Twine

Introduction

"Richmond Station" is a short Twine game that tells the story about what happens when two teenage children find a baby on a bench in Richmond Park on their way back to the train station. It was designed to experiment with meaningful choices in narrative games by adhering to the idea that sometimes in life there are no good choices.

Influences

I originally chose Richmond station for this story as an opportunity to visit a famous location in London while I am here. The idea for the game itself, however, came when I spent too much time exploring the park and had to rush back to the train station to get home on time for plans I had made previously. As I was rushing back, I thought about why this was so important and what the real consequences of my tardiness would be (definitely not the end of the world), and realized that I could make something interesting with more serious consequences than irate friends.

I used a countdown mechanic that was heavily influenced by my recent experiences playing "16 Ways to Kill a Vampire at McDonalds", which helped me define a series of events that change as time progresses. And while this is much more lighthearted than the experience I wanted to deliver, the pressure of running out of time with very real consequences was really helpful as an example.

I was also inspired by the opening sequences of "Firewatch" and "Depression Quest" as ways to give players an opportunity to make choices to define their character in addition to making progress for the story. They both taught me that choices in games did not necessarily need to be actions in order to be meaningful.

Making Choices Meaningful

One of the most difficult things to develop was making the choice meaningful for the players themselves. To do so, players are given a series of choices early on that are increasing in severity, and allow the players to color the experience with their own input. The first choice is simply the player's sister's name with a cycling link. The second is to choose what they would do in a simple interaction (whether to interrupt or observe their sister). Although these have little effect on the complete path of the story, players feel empowered by adding their own input . Lastly, they are given the choice of *why* they need to get back to the station quickly. Depending on this choice, the severity of the game's main arc (finding the baby) is influenced greatly. For example, there is much less pressure to get back to the station on time if you are going to miss a connection versus missing what might be the last time you get to see your grandmother, or get the shots that your sister needs to stay healthy.

By making this choice, when players run into their first major decision point, they will make choices based on how *they* feel, and the choices become much more personal.

Branches

Time is the main constraint that players have when playing Richmond Station. Their actions after finding the baby on the bench determine one of thirteen possible endings that the game has. The main choice is whether or not they decide to pick up the baby and take it with them, or to leave it on it's own. Players can also wait to see if the parents return (they don't) or call the police for help. I wanted to make sure the option to call the police was available, because I find that cell phone problems are a cheap way to instill pressure for players in games like this. I did however make it so that the players would have to wait for the police to arrive in order to save the baby, with no guarantees that they would get to the station on time to keep that tension.

Final Revision

Based on feedback from players, I returned to update the story with some grammatical and stylistic changes and some code-based changes that could make further updates to the game much easier.

I adjusted the main choice to allow players to pick up and put down the baby at the bench (previously, if you changed your mind you would immediately leave the baby and walk away). I tested allowing players to call emergency services from this screen, but I felt that it directed too many people to a particular choice. Emergency services can be called at any point so long as you have not left the baby behind for the train station.

Some minor grammatical changes to the dialogue to make it feel more natural were also added. For example, there is a line where you ask your sister "Do you remember the time…" that I had been using to add backstory to the players in one of the branches that I really liked that was changed because nobody actually starts a conversation by saying "Do you remember [blank]?" Adding context by having the player respond with "What about that time …" felt much better.

Additionally, the way text is displayed is also significantly changed in the final version. The font weight for the various characters has been changed to make things more evenly sized and I updated the conversation for the emergency services call (which is lengthy and requires the player to click a lot) to automatically display text with animation. I added similar functionality to your first encounter with the baby and an passionate speech by your sister if you leave the baby behind because the animated dialogue was fun in an extended scene like the emergency call. Other dialogue sequences didn't seem to fit as well, so I decided to keep the clicking elsewhere to allow players to control the speed of movement in the story in shorter sequences.

I also modified the times that certain tasks took (like moving between areas, and the amount of time it takes to wait for the police to arrive) in order to make it more difficult to achieve some of the happier endings and encourage replayability. I also rewrote the passage that displays the endings to make it a single passage containing all the endings (with the exception of the emergency services special ending) with a conditional sequence that displays text based on the choices players made in game.

Conclusion

"Richmond Park" works best because it is a short distillation of a very specific encounter. There is opportunity for growth in further rewrites by expanding the level of choice in

backstory for the players, completely rewriting the dialogue so the game is less quote heavy, and by increasing the complexity of the environments that the players navigate further. Overall, I'm quite happy with how "Richmond Park" came together, and I'd love to take the lessons that I've learned while building it to work with meaningful choices on a grander scale in the future.