Creating replayability while avoiding player frustration utilizing level dependencies in dialog systems

Abstract:
Adding progression systems to dialog systems that limit the choices players have, can make a game more interesting throughout multiple playthroughs since new plotlines can be revealed constantly. This paper showcases problems of these systems and suggests possible ways of how these problems can be adjusted.

Subject descriptions:
General – Games; Game Design; Narrative Design; System Design;

General Terms:
Game; Design; Narrative; Theory;

Keywords:
Game Design; Dialog Systems; Narrative for replayability;

1. The problems and advantages of limiting the dialog options in video games:
Many games limit the options the player has during dialogue, based on the way he or she has acted before and what the player has already achieved. This adds replayability value to the game since if the player makes other choices during his or her next playthrough he or she will get new options later on. But this comes at a price since the players preferred choices may vary depending on the ideals of the NPC he or she is talking to. In addition to that, the ideals of the player can change as the result of a story plot. This paper focuses on how to keep the elements of replayability while avoiding player frustration.

2. Level dependencies in dialog systems:
A large number of games feature a restriction to certain dialog options based on the player level or a dedicated stat that focuses on dialog options which can manually be upgraded or automatically improves while proceeding in the game.

A good example of this would be the Mass Effect renegade and paragon attributes that symbolize selfish behavior in the form of renegade and selfless behavior in the form of paragon (Image1). These attributes increase depending on the decisions the player makes during the game and enable the player to get new interaction or dialogue possibilities depending on how much of the necessary stat the player has (Image2).

A different approach to level dependencies in dialog systems is a pre-requirement for certain dialog options to have success. In Divinity: Original Sin 2 it is possible to avoid fights or achieve certain tasks by convincing an NPC that your opinion is the right one. To convince an NPC the player gets a selection of different answer possibilities that scale with one of the attributes relevant for fighting enemies (Image4). Depending on how much that answer corresponds with the ideals of that NPC and how high the relevant stat of the player is, checks the game checks if the players' persuasions stat is higher than the required

persuasion value necessary (Image5). If the player succeeds in convincing an NPC that NPC will, most of the time, act like the player would want him or her to. If the player is unable to convince the NPC he or she will do the opposite.

3. Pros and cons of the mentioned dialog limitations:
The dialog imitations featured in Mass Effect 1/2 essentially allow the player to play the whole game two times without making it feel like the exact same experience. But the problem with this system is that, because of the requirement of a high value in on of both attributes to achieve certain objectives, the player is forced to make decisions that follow one of the paths throughout the game, so he or she is able to collect more points for the dominant stat. Because of this, the game limits the player's options based on a decision he or she has made at the beginning of the game.

The limitations in Divinity: Original Sin 2's dialog system allows in theory for interesting choices while talking to NPCs. The player can gain advantages by getting information's about certain NPCs before talking to them, in addition to that the player gets rewarded for paying attention the conversation he or she is in because it gives him or her more insight about the ideals of the NPC. The combination of the knowledge of those ideals with the attributes the player has makes the conversations more believable since a character that has invested its points in WITS to outsmart his opponents will probably not be very convincing in threatening someone with force. This could allow for a dynamic system that gives the player multiple different story experiences every time he or she plays through the game. These new experiences would also affect the ways the player decides to fight (Mage; Rouge; Warrior), allowing the player to try to achieve the same goals while rethinking his or her approach to reach them. But as great as this system seems it has a huge flaw mainly based on the second part of it. Since the player has to level a second persuasion skill to convince NPCs and this stat is far more important than the combat levels of the player. This usually makes it impossible to convince an NPC if the player has no points in persuasion while also making the answer choices meaningless if the player has "maxed" this skill. In addition to that, the game features a number of situations in which it is necessary to have this skill at its maximum. So one of the players in the group is forced to do so and will in return always be the player that talks to the NPCs just to be safe. This results in boring conversations in which the player is always able to convince the NPC no matter what choice he or she makes. But this also features another problem since not every player is able to skill in the necessary stat to convince NPCs, because there are also other things that are necessary for the team to have (like lockpicking) and some NPC start talking to the players upon entering a room, can only the player that can convince NPCs go into new rooms without risking to remove an interesting part of the storyline. This forces all other players to wait.

4. Changes to improve mentioned dialog limitations:
In Mass Effect 3 the two attributes renegade and paragon have been combined to one Reputation stat (Image3) that unlocks both the renegade and paragon dialogue options. The results of the players' decisions are shown via radio or TV reports. This results in a way that the player can still choose one of both paths while not being forced to obey it with every decision in addition to that it allows the player to change the path he or she wants to follow at every time, which would slowly change the radio and TV reports.

Divinity: Original Sin 2 would easily be improved by removing the persuasion stat and instead replace it with a fixed value of how much of a combat skill a player needs in order to convince an NPC. This could be impossible, depending on the ideals of the NPCs, for example, a large troll can't be convinced by threatening him with STRENGTH. Regardless of that, there should often be a way that makes it possible to solve a problem peacefully, or at least to leave a conversation without changing anything allowing another player to talk to the NPC. Another possibility would be to allow other players to join in the conversation allowing both players to talk to the NPC while still permitting the players to leave the conversation.

5. References:

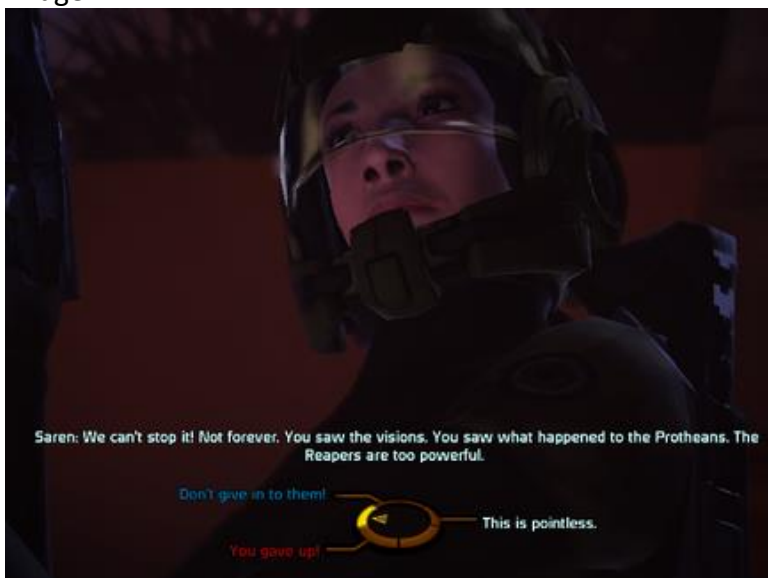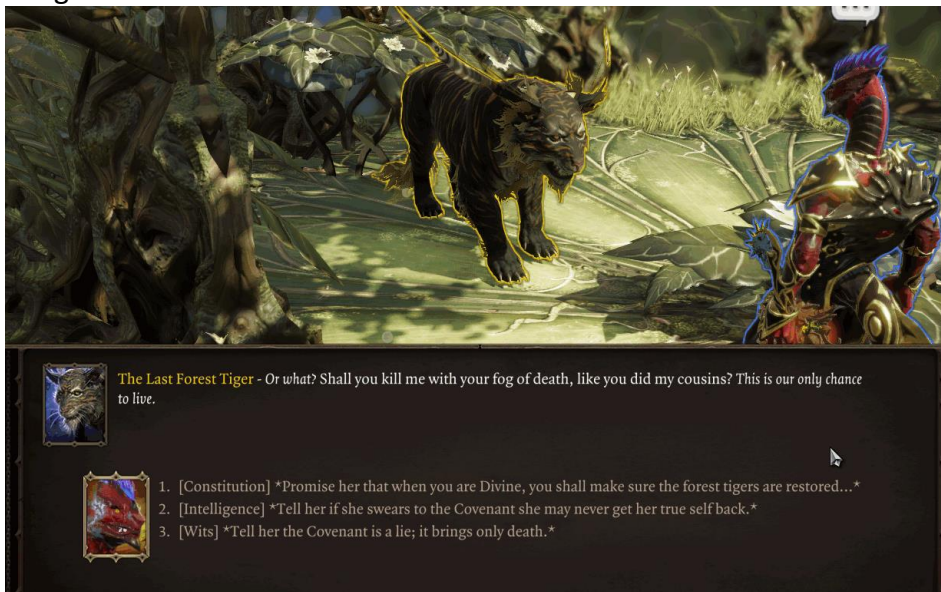Image1: https://i.ytimg.com/vi/KrSdUk-NPHs/maxresdefault.jpg

Image2:

Image3:

Image4:

The Last Forest Tiger - *Or what? Shall you kill me with your fog of death, like you did my cousins? This is our only chance to live.*

1. [Constitution] *Promise her that when you are Divine, you shall make sure the forest tigers are restored...*
2. [Intelligence] *Tell her if she swears to the Covenant she may never get her true self back.*
3. [Wits] *Tell her the Covenant is a lie; it brings only death.*

Image5:

Narrator - Persuasion Failure! Your Persuasion: 6, Needed: 99

1. (continue)