

# Examples of System Work

*These are excerpts from multiple projects involving various types of narrative consultation, systems development, and internal tool research.*

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## Narrative Tool Design (September 2022)

*This was to help a AAA studio attempting a more narratively complex project in what requirements existed for the title and what a tool would need to have in order to make the concept work.*

### Text Tool

#### Overview

This tool would be the most critical to crafting all instances of text in the game, from branching conversations to item titles and descriptions. This would serve as a kind of “one-stop shop” that would smoothly export any written content to the string database, and allow for content to be created, checked out, and edited.

This tool would have multiple functions, including:

- *Conversations*
  - This would cover all *interactive* dialogues.
  - Even if dialogue branching isn't used - or is used sparingly - it should be a necessary consideration for this toolset.
  - Additionally, there should be a way to distinguish which lines should have VO attached and which do not.
  - Should allow for simple scripting (such as setting triggers on lines, or checking reactivity to player status). Cinematics
- *Dialogues*
  - *NOTE: needs a better name!*

- Linear, non-interactive dialogues.
- Should cover both *Scenes* (features the player character) and *Ambients* (don't feature the player character)
  - NOTE: this makes the assumption that the game itself is sticking 100% to the player perspective and not showing anything that the player character doesn't see
  - NOTE: cinematic elements TBD
- Can feature single lines as well as sets of lines.
  - Unlike barks, these have content-determinate triggers, instead of systemic ones.
- *Character Barks*
  - What character is speaking (specific or generic)
  - What AI prompt it is related to (ex. going for cover, hit with fire attack, etc.)
  - How many variants exist
- *Items*
  - This should cover all things that have both a static title field and static description field.
    - Audio Logs
      - will have voice component attached
    - Text Logs
      - potentially have visual component attached
    - Objects
      - i.e. Weapons, Items, Skills, etc.
- *Notebook entries*
  - These have unique workings
  - Need to add distinct updated chunks of text
  - Need to specify
    - Title of entry
    - If starter chunk of text is revealed by default
    - What triggers a chunk of text to appear
    - If the new text replaces a previous chunk (ex. "UNKNOWN" swapped with actual information") in both entry format OR title
    - If the new text is flush with old text (with a space between) or separate (on a new line)
- *System Text* [i.e. anything the game needs to provide in a non-diegetic way]
  - Interact Prompts
  - Tutorial Text
  - Menu/UI Text
  - Tooltips
- *Investigation Text*
  - Separating this from System Text because of possible specificity of trigger
  - Might be sensible to have these lines also able to be created in the Investigation Builder (more on that later) but also editable here

### Additional Thoughts / Needs / Concerns

- *Every text type should be assigned a tag.*
  - Ideally, when a new type of text is created, it is automatically given a base tag based on the method of creation (i.e. a notebook entry vs. a weapon name)
  - Additional tags should be able to be created and assigned

- these might need to be restricted or themselves have a searchable database or locked drop-down, so there aren't a jillion tags created for the same thing.
  - This is also one of those situations where something could well benefit from being as anticipatory as possible.
- *For any situation when a line is attached to VO, there need to be fields to provide better context:*
  - Comments: personal notes from creator, not to be migrated to any other format but in-toolset only
  - Parentheticals: short directive comments (ex. "Brusquely" or "a beat, then -")
  - Notes: definitely necessary to have a primary one per scene to describe the overall context, but also helpful to have per-line.
    - These aren't required to be filled out, but can be enormously helpful, especially if the writer is not able to attend the VO session for it
- *Set methodology for users to push a string table build*
  - ...Or at least easily put in a request for one!
  - In *Guild Wars 2* it was kind of an accepted fact in design that if you put in text, you'd see it appear in-game, but any robo-voice wouldn't play until a string table build had gone through
- *Export method to push multiple different text elements to a desired format*
  - Bark lines into excel spreadsheet?
  - Scenes and cinematics into screenplay format (for VO recording)
- *Easily-visible status of each line*
  - Basics:
    - (if VO) recorded?
      - ostensibly that tracks if a VO file has been attached to it?
      - Might be tricky to do it exactly this way if robo-voice is used, but maybe that's a non-issue
    - In-game?
      - I presume something like this could be tracked if a build detects that the string for the line is being referenced somewhere
    - Localized?
      - This is probably less a generality and more "WHICH languages has this line been localized to?"
      - How this might connect with localized VO vs. just text, I'm still not sure about
  - IF POSSIBLE - a way to export this to something like JIRA, or make easily visible within the tool for producers to see and chart progress
    - Magpie seems to have done this beautifully

## Tool Location

I would strongly suggest that due to its scale and utility, this tool be kept outside of Unreal, not only because of its scale of use, but to potentially make it available to other projects.

## Narrative and Game System Interaction (August 2023)

*This was from the core Game Design Document of a narrative-centric project – the aim was to make sure that the player's choice of skills (systemic) was well-reflected in their dialogue choices (narrative) in order to both be satisfying for the player and easily trackable by design/writing.*

### 3.4.4.1. Dialogue Prioritization System

This system is meant to follow a sense of player expectations - what they intended on selecting the Path they did, in their skill selections, in any previous playthroughs, and so on - and narrow selections intelligently.

Dialogues should offer up a good amount of options such that -

- Each Path is represented in some way (even though some may be more useful in particular situations than others)
- Player should have *at least* 3 choices.
- Player should have a choice to exit without making a choice (a reserved dialogue spot)
  - *This doesn't have to occur immediately with the powers, but at least be presented with a prior choice to use powers or not.*

The priority order of Skills should be as follows:

- Core Skill of chosen Path
- RANK LEVEL DEPENDENT
  - Specialty Skill in Path
  - Specialty Skill out of Path

There is a single exception to this setup - there should always be a 4th slot open for the Core skill of a *previous* path - ex. Choosing Mystic in a prior game and Vitalist in the current game should make the Mystic's core skill appear in every applicable dialogue (but again, only the game choice immediately preceding the current one).

Additionally, the Specialty skills should be ranked in importance based on how many points the player has put into them - ideally suggesting their level of intended investment in that skill.

**Example:** *Player is of the Vitalist Path, and has 5 points in the Path Specialty skill Keen Perception, and 5 in the out-of-Path skill Third Eye. A choice for them should appear as follows:*

- *Energy Work (Core Path skill)*
- *Keen Perception*
- *Third Eye*

*However, if the player later puts another point into Third Eye, raising the ranking from 5 to 6 and beating their ranks in Keen Perception, it should appear:*

- *Energy Work (Core Path skill)*
- *Third Eye*
- *Keen Perception*

*In this case it is visible that points invested in a skill prioritize its showing up higher than whether it is in the player's chosen Path, but skills with equal points will always feature the in-Path skill first.*

## Consultation Core Document

*This is from an initial game consultation document, that examined early internal documents and a basic prototype, and tried to project suggestions on how to develop the concept more fully.*

## Accessible Start

Investment in a character starts with being able to make them look how you want, and explore other options. Though you want to be able to have the player start exploring other character ideas and personalities, being able to see themselves reflected in a game right from the beginning is an important element to any game, especially one that prioritizes an emotional investment. Allowing players to more freely adjust things like body size, gender identity & pronouns, and sexual preference is key here.

Aside from character creation, there needs to be a solid centering of the player character within it, i.e. the WHY of the story. The fewer dangling questions the player is presented with at the start of the game, the better. This will also help explain goals for the flow of the story in-character instead of as in-game text, which helps with immersion.

## Approachable Currency

The term “simplified” is used here to throw a particular contrast against other games - especially mobile games and MMOs - that have a lot of different currencies, many introduced as unique part of system updates, and some meant to lock out certain content from players unless they purchase something. These can make the game increasingly more difficult to figure out for new players, which is dangerous as if players drop off from the game over time, it can drastically lower its chances of drawing in new players. Additionally, each new type of currency needs to be measured against the other ones, and balanced to make sure it does not disrupt any core functions within the game.

Though there can be a money element to this, the suggestion here is less about actual money and more about something like an “action economy.” That is, something like having only so many turns you can use in a game, or only so much time to have interactions (ex. 5 per day). This could exist in two forms:

- **In-Game:** How many actions the player can take in the game’s time cycle (within the game’s schedule)
- **Out-Game:** How many actions the player can take in a real-world time cycle (like 24 hours)

This core Action economy currency should be the fuel that the game runs on, mostly to ensure players do not burn through all of its content at once, but also to impart a kind of value on the interactions the player has within the game.

I’ll add that it is a sensible thing for any “game as a service” to have at least one Monetary economy currency that you can use to buy things in the game, and that this can be purchased through real-world money. It might be possible to allow players to buy Action currency with Monetary currency, and/or with real-world money, but the limits on that must be rigidly set to not entirely upend the restrictions of the Action currency and the benefits/limits it imparts on the game.

Though these are less recognizable as currency - though, like the “menu as map” element above, how they manifest in game is very critical to how the player approaches them - there should also be limiting factors in the things players can do while engaged in the game, a Personal Currency. To make this less pedantic: something like Health and Energy. Though the player character is not at risk in this game - and thus “Health” is likely not a good resource/currency name - elements of both their strength of personality and supernatural power are definitely things to consider. And as *Stardew Valley* has ways to

grow both these resources over time, it also renews them at the end of each play cycle, and there are consumable things to renew them (which take time to make and/or money to buy!) Allowing for these resources as “points” to be spent in certain situations is an interesting dynamic... but also allowing for the means to grow them over time is an appealing mechanic that will help guarantee players invest more thoroughly in their characters.

Finally, due to the multiplayer element of the game, there might be an interesting utility in a kind of Gift Currency - possibly just the Action currency in disguise - that is only granted on interactions with another player, and only available to give to another player and not use on themselves. This might act as an encouragement to bring in new players, as well as a systemic, out-of-storylet method for connecting existing players, and possibly bring in new ones.

### Understandable Structure

This comment applies primarily to the passage of time/turns in the game, and how the player can engage with them. This folds into the concept of the “Action Economy,” but also is meant to highlight the importance of events and progression within the game world.

World progression refers to things like the calendar, and related events: things that occur at a set time regardless of player actions. Character progression are things related to the choices that players have decided to make with their time. As an example: in *Persona 3*, you have calendar dates that trigger set events (a full moon = plot boss encounter), as well as a school schedule that is automatically kept for you (influencing your availability for other choices), and a generalized schedule that influences what characters or services are available for interaction. Aside from that, you have player-based choices in those slots in your day where you can interact with a character (if they’re available), participate in an activity, etc. Each of those choices take up the same slot of time, so players know the consequences of how they choose to budget their time - not to mention that the benefits (and/or downsides) of each choice are outlined for the player as well.

In this game, to both balance the Action economy and to give a sense of World progression, placing the time within a calendar is likely the best way to structure both elements. This can either work to obfuscate the Action economy to available times a day - Morning, Afternoon, Evening - or make it visible, with a certain amount of points available for use, and using them pushes forward the daily clock. Player skill advancement over time could allow for more growth here, such as unlocking a special slot available for Night and/or expanding the amount of action points available.