

BUILDING A BETTER DIALOGUE (SYSTEM)

By Trenton McNulty

INTRODUCTION

I like role-playing video games. When I play role-playing video games, I like talking. I want to embody a character and have the freedom to express the voice of that character within the game. The problem is that modern dialogue interfaces are often restrictive in the amount of options available, vague in telegraphing what each option really means, and unintuitive in their organization.

My goal was to design the 'ideal' dialogue system for a role-playing game. To do so, I would break down all the major dialogue systems of the past, incorporating their strengths while minimizing their weaknesses. Such a system would allow for the greatest variety of player expression possible (within reason), while also accommodating for the playstyles of those who prefer a more streamlined, cinematic experience.

THE CHALLENGES OF RESEARCH

I began by creating an index of all the different types of dialogue systems I'd seen in my own experience playing games. Given that there's no universal/established way of doing things, and that each developer incorporates some ideas while excluding others in order to meet their unique design goals, I found it difficult to create strict categories as I'd originally intended. The distinctions between different systems are often minute, and there are occasionally major outliers which are totally unique in the functionality of their underlying systems despite appearing similar to others on the surface.

The second problem I faced was in defining the scope of my selection, as the line separating the genres of RPG and Action-Adventure are similarly blurred. Both genres often include dialogue systems and accommodate for player choice, but not all of them incorporate inventory management or leveling, despite allowing players to clearly embody a role. I was ultimately forced to settle on including any title which gave players the opportunity to express their unique vision of a character through dialogue choices, whether that character is predefined (e.g. The Witcher III) or created from scratch (e.g. Fallout, Elder Scrolls, various MMORPGs).

The last problem I faced in my research was in establishing a lineage of dialogue systems. I had assumed there would be a general linear direction in the development of different systems over time, with only slight variations. However, these variations are more than slight. Some 2019 games have not deviated at all from the systems of classic isometric RPGs, while innovations created by some developers to accommodate the transition to fully animated and voice-acted protagonists have been forgotten over time.

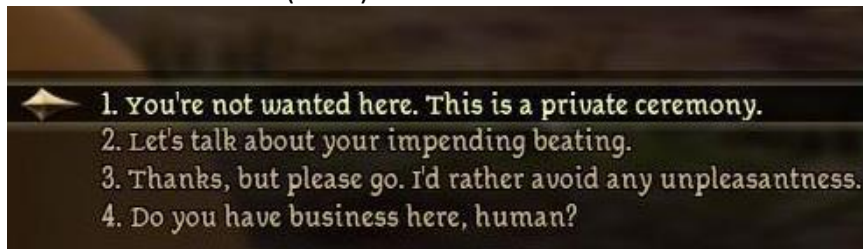
Despite all this, I *was* able to identify broad categories of systems based on their implementation of new dialogue mechanics, marking the transitions between them in terms of their respective problems and solutions (pros/cons), irrespective of year of release.

WHAT MAKES A SYSTEM?

#1: CLASSIC SYSTEMS



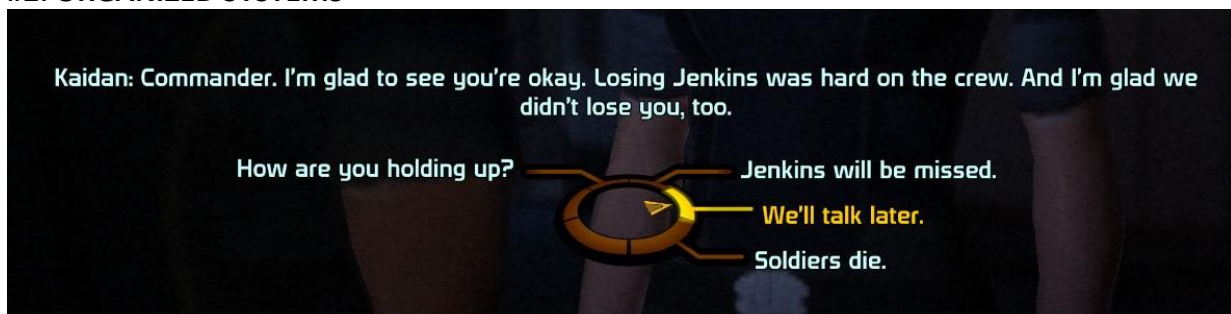
THE OUTER WORLDS (2019)



DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS (2009)

This first type of system has its origins in the classic isometric RPGs of the 1990s. Limitations of the time meant that developers often defaulted to silent protagonists and compensated for the lack of cinematic flare by granting players a **greater scope of choice**. Developers could include escalating numbers of dialogue responses (which effectively communicated the same thing) in the name of player expression. However, to accommodate for all this dialogue, **text boxes fill the screen**. The variety of options depending on the scenario also means that responses can not be neatly organized into types, so players are **forced to read every line on-screen** before deciding what their character would do. This effectively results in a giant, overwhelming list, with **no organization or ease of navigation**.

#2: ORGANIZED SYSTEMS



MASS EFFECT (2007)

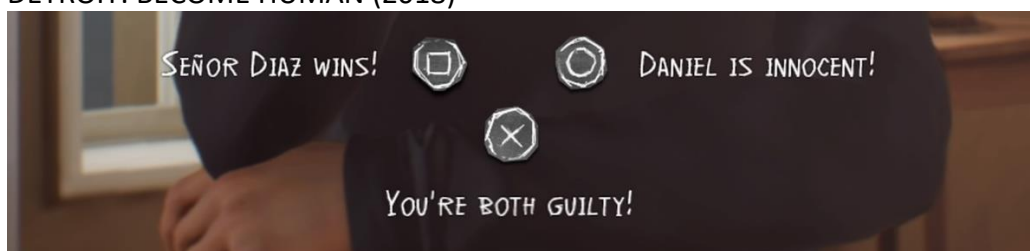
Mass Effect solved the problems of isometric RPGs by **separating dialogue options to increase ease of navigation** and accommodate for different playstyles. In this new system, options that advance the conversation to a close are located on the right; options that provide additional information are on the left; and everything is arranged on a vertical spectrum of good—bad. If my character is a non-nonsense renegade, I know I can default to the option on the bottom right. I **no longer have to waste time reading all the options** which do not accurately express the character I'm playing.

However, in the switch to fully-voiced protagonists, developers reasoned that players would not want to read their character's full line of dialogue in their head, select it, and then watch their character repeat it on-screen word-for-word. The solution was to **'summarize' each line with a brief prompt**. While this maintains the cinematic feel, it **does not accurately inform players of what they're actually going to say**. If the summary and the line do not match (which often happens) it creates dissonance between the player and their character.

#3: SIMPLISTIC SYSTEMS



DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN (2018)



LIFE IS STRANGE 2 (2018-2019)

This pursuit of a 'cinematic' feel at the expense of player-character identification has grown worse in recent years, especially among Action-Adventure games. Presumably, developers want to **make players feel as though they're watching an interactive movie**, immersed in the scene rather than stuck reading dialogue options. As a result, **options are reduced to one-word prompts** and **mapped onto controller-buttons** to be less overwhelming for a casual audience.

This is, however, a counterintuitive approach, as it exacerbates the problems of dialogue summaries even greater, **reducing the amount of information players have to make informed choices** about what they intend to say.

#3.5: A MIDDLE-GROUND (couldn't think of a better name for this one)



DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION (2011)

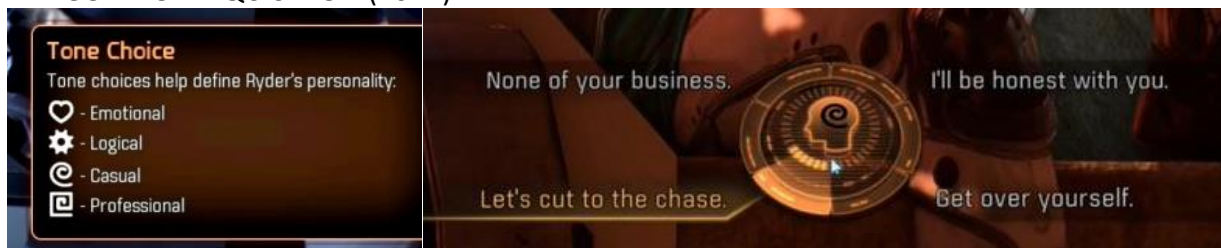
While Deus Ex is still a “simplistic” system in the sense of allowing only four options, each assigned a one-word prompt, it **allows players to expand each prompt to read what the full line says**. This allows more experienced role-players to be more fully informed as to their choices, while still allowing those players looking for a more cinematic experience to not get bogged down in menus.

While this system returns players to the clarity of choice present in Classic Systems, room for improvement remains in that written lines across *all* dialogue systems do not always adequately convey the tone of those lines, or telegraph to players how they’ll be received. While Simplistic Systems attempt to indicate this through adjectives (e.g. Realistic, Analytical), such **written tone-signifiers are not always accurate reflections of how the line truly sounds**. For example, in the case of Deus Ex: What difference is there between “cold” and “unreceptive”? Both imply a negative, detached response.

#4: VISUAL SYSTEMS



DRAGON AGE INQUISITION (2014)



MASS EFFECT ANDROMEDA (2017)

In their recent single-player RPGs, BioWare has attempted to solve the problem of tone-signifiers to *some* success through the **use of visual cues, which are more intuitive to players in the visual medium of video games**. For example, when I select “This is all bullshit” in the top example, the red-handed call-to-arms symbol indicates that my character will not be sad or dejected in their delivery of the line, but angry and rebellious.

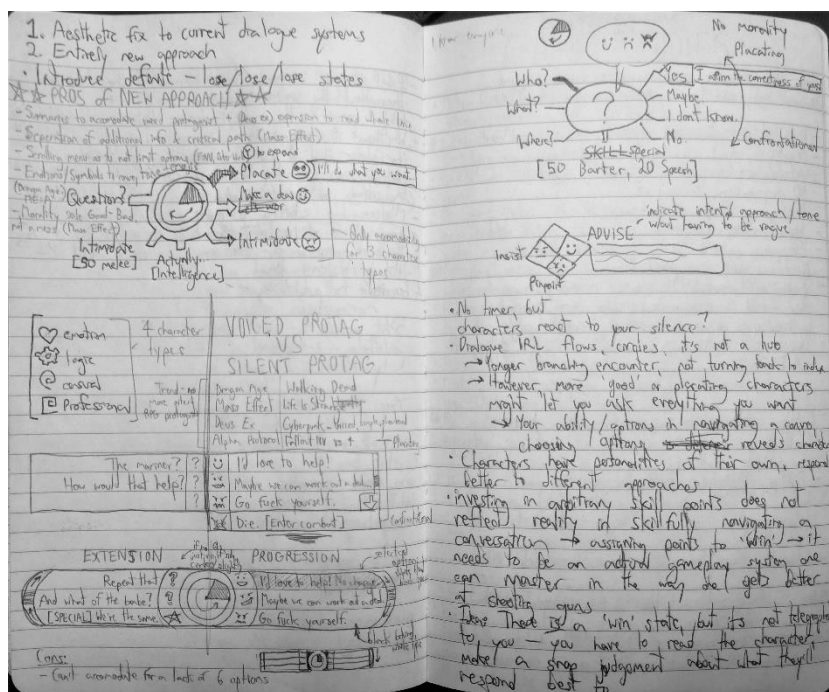
The problem, however, is that **BioWare’s signs are needlessly confusing when they should be clarifying**. The red-hand symbol is arguably overdesigned and requires me to think critically about the implications of that symbol through time (“Workers of the world, unite!”). In Mass Effect Andromeda, BioWare swerves in the other direction by making signs that are so simplified (in the case of Casual and Professional, at least) that the game needs to teach me what they mean beforehand.

MY PROCESS

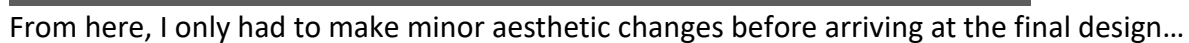
Once I completed my research, the challenge I faced was to strike a middle ground between all these systems which implemented their individual solutions, minimized their flaws, and did so in a way that was visually appealing. [Given that different games call for different solutions, I decided my system would be designed for a big-budget RPG, fully acted and animated, in which players are free to make and define their own characters.]

As the adjacent photo shows, I went about this by:

- Considering the broader flaws of dialogue systems as reflections of real-life conversations (bottom-right)
- Narrowing my ambitions by replicating the layouts of different systems (Deus Ex and Mass Effect) to see where additional options might be incorporated into them (top-right)
- Cataloguing all the ‘pros’ of my ideal approach (top-left)
- Designing two layouts of my own creation that incorporated these pros as best they could (bottom-left)



From there, I created the two mock-designs in Adobe Illustrator and, upon finding out neither were very aesthetically pleasing, fused them, resulting in the bottom two designs.



A screenshot from a video game showing a close-up of a female character with dark hair and eyes. Below her face is a dialogue menu with three options. The first option is 'What makes you say that?' with a question mark icon. The second option is 'Egads! Have you no heart, sir?' with a question mark icon. The third option is '[INT 1] LOTRO is inherently superior to WoW.' with a star icon. To the right of the options is a large blue circular button with a white 'C' inside. To the right of the circular button are three smaller icons: a skull, a sad face, and a neutral face. The skull icon is highlighted with a blue bar. To the right of the icons are three lines of text: 'Blasphemy! He is my SON! [Attack]', 'I don't think he's that bad... I liked the RPG stuff.', and 'I know! Kill me! Worst three hours of my life!'. At the bottom of the screen are three buttons: 'Select' with a blue circle icon, 'A' with a blue circle icon, and 'Y Expand' with a blue circle icon. A white arrow points down from the right side of the screen.

Overall, I'm pleased with what I came up with. Given more time, I'd try to come up with something more polished and visually dynamic (i.e. more complex colour gradients, details), but as my first attempt at user interface design, I think it's successful. I was able to create something functional and appealing while still incorporating as many 'pros' as I could from past dialogue systems. These include...

- Mass Effect's **organization of content** (separation of additional info from critical path) and morality (responses exist on an emotional spectrum)
- The **'scrolling' menu** of classic RPGs, allowing for greater player-options and developer-freedom compared to the simplified button-mapped system
- BioWare's **visual cues to communicate tone**, made more intuitive and simplified through the use of EMOJIS. While these might be considered gaudy or cheap by some people (I did my best to incorporate them naturally into my design by making them monotoned), I chose them for three very deliberate reasons:
 1. We use them in digital conversation every day to communicate tone (e.g. "I hate you," reads very differently than, "I hate you 😞")
 2. They are more visually readable than the over-designed symbols of Dragon Age: Inquisition, and convey emotion in an intuitive way everyone can understand (i.e. the audience doesn't need to be taught the system, unlike ME: Andromeda)
 3. It characterises dialogue choices not by a false morality but by emotional reaction; when confronted with a situation, people do not normally ask "What is the morally righteous/reprehensible thing to do here?" but rather "What would my character be feeling in this situation?"
- A timer to pressure players into quickly making a dialogue decision, maintaining flow and realism (as seen in games like Telltale's *The Walking Dead* and Obsidian's *Alpha Protocol*)
- Accommodating for both casual/cinematic and hardcore/character-focused RPG players by incorporating the **expanding dialogue options** of Deus Ex: Human Revolution, as seen in the image below:



EXPANDED VIEW

IN RETROSPECT

If I were to do the project over, I would go more abstract. While the system I've created addresses the problems of player interaction with dialogue trees (the standard system for structuring video game dialogue since the dawn of time), it does not address the underlying

problems of dialogue trees themselves. In real life, conversation is not always a structured back and forth of question and response—it's filled with digression and interruptions, unfolding naturally. To this end, I would look to games taking dialogue in a different direction. *Oxenfree*, for example, allows the player to talk over other characters as conversations unfold in real time; if conversation is abruptly ended by gameplay, it does not resume as if nothing happened—instead, the pause is acknowledged (“So, anyways...” “As I was saying...”). My ultimate goal would be to design a new and better system that does away with the need for structured dialogue menus entirely. *Big ask*, I know.