

A silver metal spiral binding is visible on the left side of the page, with the wire looping through a series of holes.

Two Models for Narrative Worlds

Raph Koster, Sony Online Entertainment

The Premise!

Some games are more about letting the player express themselves with the blocks we give them.



The Sims



Escape from Monkey Island

Some games are more about the designers expressing themselves to the player.

Two sorts of virtual spaces

(or rather, a spectrum)

We always control the
setting;

We may dictate the principal character's
identity;

Narrative emerges via the character's
behavior.

Impositional Space

The designers *impose* the narrative on players

- **Setting** conveys elements of plot and character
- The player's **identity** is subsumed into that of the principal character
- **Behavior** may be curtailed to only that which fits the story

Setting

A screenshot from *Riven*, the sequel to *Myst*. Both games placed a premium on the environment, which was the primary means of transmitting the narrative content to the player. In fact, the environment was so important, it was made completely static so that it could not be removed from its position of primacy.



We almost always put them in a world of our choosing.

Identity

No One Lives Forever. Your character is named Cate Archer, and is an operative in a silly, *Get Smart*/James Bond sort of spy group. In many games of this genre, your character's backstory is lightly sketched, if at all. Here the identity is hard to avoid.



The Operative

Who is The Operative?

Cate Archer is exceedingly competent, fiercely intelligent, unabashedly confrontational, and stunningly attractive. Perhaps because she has had to work so much harder for recognition and severance pay than her male colleagues, she is a sharper, more intuitive agent. Even her rivals admit that she is a dedicated, top agent who never backs off a danger. She has an uncanny gift for reading people and is so acutely attuned to her environment, often registering details or patterns that others overlook.

Born, coincidentally, in Scotland in late March, 1947, Cate arrived screaming into this world after more than 20 hours of labor. Her mother, a notorious wifely woman, never mothered Cate well, later, and alone.

Cate enjoyed a privileged childhood. She was a bright, imaginative child, well educated, and popular with other children as she got older. Her father taught her how to drink and think. However, Cate felt her father had barely used his wife to keep him sober and happy. In her absence, he gradually whittled away his health and his inheritance. By the time Cate was 14, the family was destitute.

One May evening in 1956, Cate's father pulled a knife on his boss and pulled her trigger. Cate went from orphanage to various foster homes, but she never lasted anywhere for long. She had become an angry, angry young woman and took to drinking, partly to forget her father and partly because she could get reward for it. It wasn't long before she realized that she was exceptionally good at it.

In the period of several years, she went from a poverty-stricken, underfed, and unsuccessful, prosperous young woman. Although she made a point never to steal from people of modest means, she did not pretend that her activities were without

We may also replace their sense of identity, forcing them to be someone else.

Behavior

Shenmue, for the Sega Dreamcast. In this adventure game, the setting is very detailed, and the action very free-flowing. But if you are not doing particular things at particular times, nothing happens in the game. Despite the appearance of freedom, you are playing the game on rails.



At the greatest extreme, we force them to act in particular ways to advance the plot.

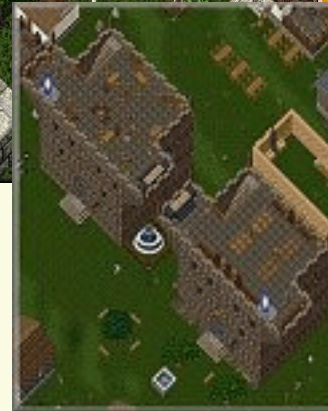
Expressive Space

The designers provide tools for players to *express* themselves.

- We still provide the **setting**, since we make the artwork
- We may not dictate the **identity** of the principal character—or there may not even be one!
- Narrative is constructed after the fact by the players because we do not dictate their **behavior**

Setting

These shots are from *Ultima Online*, an online role-playing game which permits players to modify the map by building structures. The resultant “towns” become hotbeds of player-constructed narratives.



“Worlds,” not stages or levels. Players may build the worlds, which then shapes narrative.

Identity

In this shot from *Baldur's Gate II* we can see that the player controls multiple characters, instead of just one. The 3rd person perspective aids in that. Each character is also created by the player, not predetermined by the designer. *BG2* has a strong plot to it, but you can leave it at any time and return to the narrative line later.



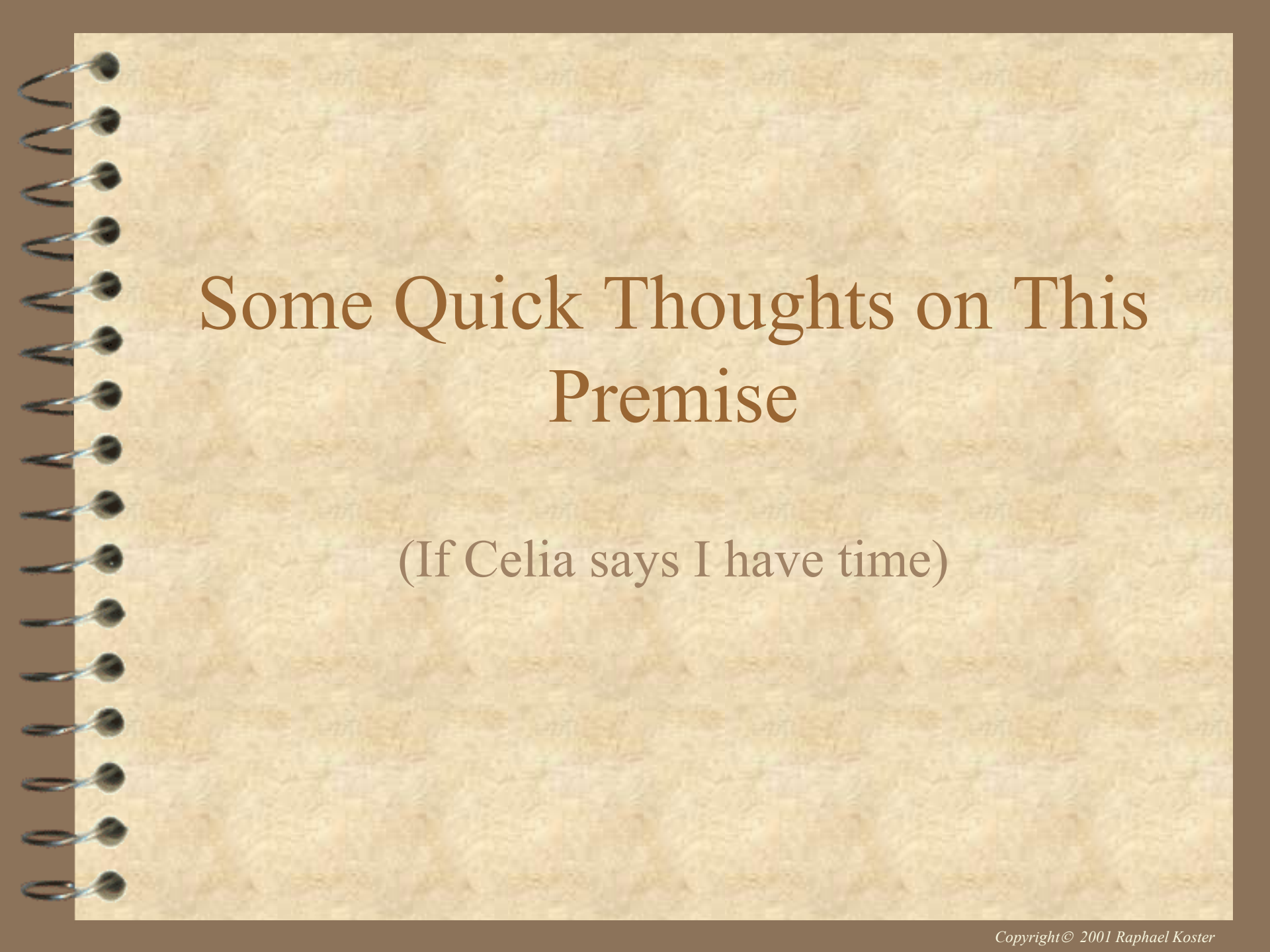
You may not control a character per se—or may create your own or control a group.

Behavior

In *Deus Ex*, the player embodies a specific character and is set in a very specific setting. But the way in which the player can progress through the plot is not as tightly determined. They can approach each situation in different ways—go in guns blazing, choose to sneak through the game, or try to hack the computers. Even though the setting and identity are imposed, the *behavior* is not.



These worlds can *still tell stories*. What we surrender is not narrative, but authorial control.

The background of the slide is a spiral-bound notebook with a light beige, textured cover. The spiral binding is visible on the left side, with the metal wire looping through a series of holes. The text is centered on the page.

Some Quick Thoughts on This Premise

(If Celia says I have time)

Impositional spaces

- The classic computer storytelling mode.
- Interactivity is almost always branching, predetermined.
- Relies on positive feedback for keeping you on the story.
- Stunning educational potential barely tapped.
- Also terrifying—this is how behavioral modification is done.

Expressive spaces

- Is this surrendering the holy grail of interactive narrative? Or is this closer to the “holodeck?”
- Is the audience up to creating these narratives themselves, or do they need guidance?
- Obviously, this is a spectrum. A fully expressive virtual space is a C++ compiler and no game. What is the ideal blending point?
- There’s some frightening expressions out there.

Looking ahead

- Online spaces currently tend to be more expressive than impositional. Do they have to be?
- What about intellectual property issues in expressive spaces? Will companies allow users to express themselves?
- There's a lot of anxiety about the nature of the impositional spaces we create. But it's been pretty tame thus far!