Chapter 5
Non-Believable Agents: Representation, Play, and AI in Ape Out

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the relationship between "simple" game AI and creative expression in game design. In the first part, it briefly outlines game AI and the concept of the believable agent in AI programming, emphasizing the contextual complexity of game AI. Then, departing from the key concepts of randomness and emergence, it argues that AI can be viewed as part of video games' evolution toward a greater capacity to incorporate player agency. The second part offers an analysis of the independent game Ape Out. After profiling the game, the behavior of non-player characters (NPCs) and procedural content generation are analyzed individually. Finally, the chapter presents an interpretation of the game through three distinct player attitudes, highlighting the dynamic interactions between the game's AI systems and other components in the process of complex meaning-making.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, there has been considerable speculation about the potential future impacts of AI-assisted game design (How AI Could Disrupt, 2024; Knight, 2024), along with the untapped possibilities such as creating "natural and lifelike" dialogues and interactions with non-player characters (Porokh, 2023; Firth, 2024). Ongoing projects, like Ubisoft's Ghostwriter, aim to develop in-house AI tools that will allegedly "alleviate" the workload of game writers (Barth, 2023). The

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same industrial obsession with realism, seen in big-budget productions striving for ever-more sophisticated graphics and bigger game worlds, is likely to extend into AI development—with both positive and negative consequences. However, when it comes to actual games, the anticipated revolution has yet to materialize. This is, therefore, a good time to focus on what already has.

For decades, video games have employed AI techniques that are generative in nature. While video game AI has evolved along its own historical trajectory, sometimes producing complex and unique examples, simpler architectures are often favored for several reasons. Straightforward implementations of finite state machines or behavior trees that operate on predefined rules to generate fixed behavior patterns are common even in large-scale productions. Naturally, it would be a mistake to assume that simplicity equates to a lack of expressive potential.

Nevertheless, the discourse around game AI increasingly leans toward a techno-utopian vision, with a focus on realism, often overlooking the diversity of games and their varied approaches to design. Game development, across its different segments, invests in a range of aesthetic strategies—whether for political or creative purposes—where AI becomes an integral part of the game's language. In the independent gaming scene, in particular, developers and artists constrained by limited resources frequently rely on simpler AI systems. At the same time, they must assert a strong sense of creative independence, showing that even basic AI can contribute significantly to a game's expressive potential.

This chapter focuses on game AI as an individual element of video game language and explores how non-complex AI architectures, through their interaction with other components of video game textuality, enable expressive possibilities. To this end, it provides an analysis of the AI system and a comprehensive AI-focused interpretation of the indie game *Ape Out* (2019). While not a standout example in terms of technical achievements in game AI, the game demonstrates the flexible use of simpler AI architectures to create a distinctly "video gamic" expressive depth that adapts dynamically to different player attitudes.

Prior to the analysis, the first part of the chapter outlines a definition of game AI and its general characteristics, and then highlights two key considerations for conducting a close reading of/with game AI. The first underlines the importance of video games' complex structures, a simple yet crucial fact. The second, through a brief exploration of the concepts of randomness and emergence—both central to breaking away from determinism—argues that a fundamental task of game AI, which must not be overlooked in any interpretative attempt, is to enhance the game's capacity to absorb the player's unpredictability.