

Hi! My name is Nina Freeman. I am a level designer at Fullbright working on Tacoma. I also was the designer and writer for Cibebe, which came out late last year.

So--a 30 year game. Of course, my first thought was "how can I tell a 30 year story?". I always want to be telling stories, so I knew I had to find a way. As I often do, I decided to look to other media for inspiration. I tried to come up with works that people had engaged with for long periods of time. Of course, my search did not take long--I immediately thought of soap operas.

I have some pretty good memories of being a tween, and sitting with my mom while she watched soaps like All My Children, Days of Our Lives, and Passions. In case you're not familiar with soap operas, here's some facts specifically related to the well-known soap, All My Children. (show clip 1)

So, basically, soap operas are daytime dramas about ordinary folks and their... drama, often focusing on two families from different classes that live in the same town.

Soap operas have always stuck out in my mind as a unique and strangely captivating form of television. So, given this sudden source of inspiration, I decided to call my mom up to ask her about soap operas. She told me, when she was young, she kept up with the soaps every once in awhile, but she'd never been the type to watch the new episodes every single day. She remembered that some of her friends did. She said she'd listen to some of her neighborhood friends gossip about the latest soap episodes, unraveling the drama between classes and after school. According to my mom, this was pretty common--lots of young women she knew were really deep into these soaps, and knew the characters intimately, almost like they were their own family and friends. I don't know about you, but I think that's a pretty powerful effect for a story to have on someone.

My mom mentioned that her favorite soap character had been played by Susan Lucci. So, that would be Erica Kane, from All My Children. On Wikipedia, a notable fact about Erica is that: "Seven of her marriages to six different men have been valid while four of her other marriages are invalid." Sounds pretty dramatic, right? But honestly, we're all familiar with divorce and marriage, so is it really all that odd? That's what strikes me about soap operas--no matter their reputation as melodramatic, these shows were essentially about real world, ordinary people and their real world, ordinary problems.

This leads me to what's so special about soaps--they're driven by real, human characters. They're about the conflicts these characters face that any one of us might face in our daily lives. Soap viewers dove into the daily drama of these people's lives for decades, exploring their vulnerabilities, their love, their strengths, their challenges... frankly, this draws viewers in and helps them feel connected to these stories. Like they're checking in with a friend about what they're up to every day. Soap operas make long time viewers feel like it's real, they make viewers feel like a part of the family.

Given all this as a starting point, I designed a long-term story game based on the soap opera form. I'm going to go into more detail momentarily, but here's the elevator pitch: A daily game where, each weekday, players learn about and interpret the relationships and drama of two New York families as they live their lives, in real time. Player interpretation of these relationships will help guide the story, as players discern how the characters feel about each other as the days go by.

Ok, so that's the elevator pitch. Now, let's get into the details.

My game will be released once a day, every week day, for thirty years. Each episode will have multiple scenes with different groups of the core characters. The player may play through the scenes in any order. The conversations are presented in text overlaid on a background with character sprites, similar to a visual novel format--but, without any of the branching dialogue choices. I'll get to the player input part later. During these conversations, the player will be able to look at things in the environment as the scene plays out--people's phones, computer.

Yeah, basically, I've been playing a lot of otome games. I was playing this one, *Amnesia: Memories*, and there are a bunch of parts where you check the protagonist's email or look at her phone. But it's very guided and happens at specific moments... I really wanted to be able to check the protagonist's phone whenever. And to look at the stuff in her room. So, for my game... it's almost like a visual novel with the ability to interact with the environment at will. So, maybe you check someone's phone or their computer and find something relevant to another conversation you went through earlier. I think that's a fun way to integrate some non-linear storytelling into this otherwise linear conversation based game.

Ok, so... now that you know the basic flow. A visual novel with interactive environments-- who are the characters! I actually wrote, like... a bunch of really detailed character bios about the two core families, but I don't have time to share those. There's literally pages of that, haha. Instead, here are the "Super" couples. I'll use them as examples when I get into the player interpretation mechanic. Also, I mean, I wouldn't be writing much of a soap opera if I wasn't focusing in on the Super couples. And, if you have no idea what I'm talking about... basically, super couples are couples that have long and tempestuous arcs and are just like... legends in the soap opera community. Couples like Luke and Laura from *General Hospital*. So, like a real soap opera writer, I created the bios and year-long character plans. These are the yearlong relationship shells that the daily scenarios will flesh out. First there's Scarlett and James: Scarlett is heartbroken from a previous short-lived relationship which ended with her feeling like she'd been used for sex. James is too busy caring about himself and his own self-deprecation to give Scarlett what she wants. They're both so distracted that their relationship goes on longer than it should. And then there's Lucia and Randall: Randall is the wealthiest guy in the group. Lucia is the poorest. She envies him, but still loves him and can't figure out how to reconcile these feelings. Randall is unable to help her. His father is an abusive alcoholic, and Randall is attached to him. He can't let go, even when it starts to encroach on his relationship with Lucia.

So like, clearly these characters aren't mega fleshed out, and their relationships are meant to end at least temporarily, which is purposeful. I don't want the game to be tied down by some permanent relationships. I want the players to be able to have some feedback, and to guide and interpret how these characters feel about each other, and how their relationships will grow and

change.

So, the player plays through a bunch of visual novel style scenes between the main characters and can learn more to contextualize their conversations by interacting with things in the background, like a cellphone, for example. I would like to emphasize that, unlike many visual novels, the player does NOT make any choices while they are watching these scenes. They are clicking through the text dialogue, and may explore the objects in the background if they so choose. However, there are no dialogue choices that affect how the characters behave. Instead, the player may express their interpretation of the characters through an interface they gain access to after having played through all the scenes.

Here's a rough version of what I'm talking about. Once the player is done with the episode for the day, they will have gone through some conversations and presumably formed some opinions about what the characters are thinking--and this is where they can take their interpretation, and express it through placing emoji, as you can see in the dark boxes above.

When I was working on this, I thought back to my mom's story about how she'd hear girls in her neighborhood gossiping about the soap characters, and talking about how they thought these characters felt about each other. This system encourages that kind of engagement with the story. Players choose from an array of emoji style indicators and use however many they want to express how they think the characters feel about each other.

I considered having the player choose only one emoji, but that doesn't really let the players express any nuanced emotion... so, I thought it'd make more sense to give them what they're used to. I'm sure many of us in this room use lots of emojis when they text. One smiley face is very different from ten smiley faces and a kissy face, for example. This allows the players to express their interpretations of the character relationships without needing to like... write paragraphs about it. I think this emoji based system is way simpler and much more fun.

So, the writers see this player interpretation. They use it to guide the relationships between these characters. They continue to write the daily scenarios, based on how the players think the characters are feeling. It's kind of inspired by reality TV, where the producers have to react to people being voted off the island in survivor, for example. In this game, the writers are relationship DMs, or drama managers.

Of course, players would also be able to see an aggregated version of relationship interpretations as well.

This is important, because the players are reacting to scenarios, not writing them. They are not making decisions for characters, or making decisions about plot points. But they can see how their personal interpretation factored into how the story is moving forward. This is fun, because players can see the trends, but can still spend some time wondering "what's going to happen next" based on the broad stroke interpretations presented en masse.

I think this leaves a healthy amount of room for the writers to still have agency over the story, so that they can introduce twists and surprising character arcs that players may not decide to pursue themselves. Players guide the emotions, writers guide the story.

So, here's all the important stuff I showed you! I also made a Twine prototype that explores how scenes would be structured, but I don't really have time to show you that, so I put it up online, along with all my notes and drafts, these slides, and the character bios! I hope you enjoyed this talk about my daily game guided by player interpretation of character relationships. Thanks!