

Bad News: A Computationally Assisted Live-Action Prototype to Guide Content Creation

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Abstract. *Bad News* is a computationally assisted live-action prototype meant to guide the creation of content for a game we are developing called *Talk of the Town*. *Talk of the Town* is an asymmetric multiplayer game underpinned by a rich simulation in which characters form and propagate knowledge about other characters [3]. We intend for dialogue with non-player characters (NPCs) to be the core gameplay interaction, but we are wary of the considerable authorial burden that this simulationist experience will command. Ideally, we would like to write as little dialogic content as possible while still producing a content pool that closely matches the dialogue players would naturally want to say and hear in the game, given its setting, story, and gameplay structure. In an effort to guide content creation for this game, we propose *Bad News*, a computationally assisted live-action prototype that is situated in the same setting and underpinned by the same simulation as *Talk of the Town*. In *Bad News*, an unidentified character has died alone in their apartment and the player is tasked with notifying the character's next of kin, which requires ascertaining (through dialogue interaction with NPCs) the identity and likely current location of that person. All NPCs in *Bad News* are played live by an experienced improvisational actor who relies on the actual knowledge of the characters he plays (fed to him live in a Wizard of Oz configuration) to produce naturalistic dialogue on the fly. Commands pertaining to city navigation and other non-dialogic concerns are imparted by the player to a game master, who also modifies NPC knowledge on the fly as the player imparts information to characters he or she interacts with. Typical *Bad News* gameplay sessions are expected to last approximately ten minutes. Crucially, we will be audio- or video-recording these sessions to build up a corpus of naturalistic dialogue interactions in the *Talk of the Town* domain. Having such a corpus, we may then proceed to author content that is informed by or is directly attested in this collection of naturalistic interactions. Earlier work, namely in the field of dialogue systems, has employed Wizard of Oz configurations to build interaction corpora [1], but we do not believe this has been done in the context of game design, and we are unaware

of any corpus-building efforts in which a virtual agent has been played live by an improvisational actor. As a standalone playable experience, *Bad News* follows Dietrich Squinkifer's *Coffee: A Misunderstanding*, in which audience members play game characters by improvising audience-selected dialogue that is fed to them by a game master [2]. We believe that *Bad News* will be a fun and memorable playable experience in its own right, but that it could also prove quite insightful as a novel endeavor in using live-action prototyping to guide videogame content creation.

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References

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