Using Screenplays as Corpus for Modeling Gossip in Game Dialogues

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Abstract

We present a dialogue model for handling gossip conversations in games. The model has been constructed by analyzing excerpts from sitcom scripts using Eggins and Slade's conversational structure schema of the gossip and opinion genre. We mean that there are several advantages in using screenplays rather than transcriptions of human dialogues for creating game dialogues: First, they have been tailored to suit the role characters. Second, they are based on fiction, just like games. Third, they reflect an "ideal" human conversation. The model is expressed using Harel statecharts and an example of an analysis of one script excerpt is given.

1   Introduction

In this paper we will argue that game dialogues have more in common with dialogues between role characters in a screenplay than dialogues between humans in a natural setting. The arguments we have found motivates using screenplays as corpora rather than transcriptions of ordinary conversations between humans. As an example, we will show how Eggins and Slade's (1997) and Horvath's and Eggins (1995) schema for analyzing gossip and opinions can be applied on a given excerpt from one famous sitcom, Desperate Housewives (2004). Eggins and Slade define gossip as a conversation in which the speakers make pejorative statements about and absent third person, so we have chosen an excerpt that fills this criterion.

The reason why we primarily have taken an interest in gossip and opinion is that we think that a game character that can engage in these types of activities will be more interesting to interact with. Gossip can then for instance be used to get informal information about other characters in the game, and furthermore, since gossip can be potentially face threatening (see e.g. Brown and Levinson, 1987), it can also be used to create characters that appear to have a social awareness and social skills.

1.1   Motivation

There are some significant similarities between dialogues in screenplays and game dialogues: They are both scripted and based on fiction, and they are tailored to fit a particular scene, which means that they have a natural beginning and end, as well as a language use that is consistent with both the role characters as well as the overall theme. One could say that they reflect "ideal" conversations, i.e. conversations in which all uninteresting and unnecessary parts have been removed; hence they are already distilled (Larsson et al, 2000).

There is however one prominent difference between the two: the level of engagement on behalf of the audience. A player of a game is actively engaged in performing actions that affect how the story progresses, whereas the story in a movie is remained unchanged independently of the audience's interferences. In this sense, interacting with a game character is similar to interacting with a traditional conversational agent (CA), also because they both serve as an interface to an underlying system. But when a CA typically is used as a substitute for a human, to which the user communicates using his *real identity* (Gee, 2003), a game character has been given a role. And when the player interacts with the game character, he too is expected to play his part, i.e. to use a *projective identity* (ibid).

Speaker	Utterance	Gossip	Opinion
Gabrielle	Can I say something? I'm glad Paul's moving	Third person focus	Opinion
Bree	Gaby!	Probe	Seek evidence
Gabrielle	I'm sorry, but he's just always given me the creeps. Haven't you guys noticed?	Substantiating behavior	Provide evidence
Gabrielle	He has this dark thing going on. There's something about him that just feels…	Pejorative evaluation	Provide evidence
Lynette	Malignant?	Pejorative evaluation	Agree
Gab	Yes	Acknowledgement	
Susan	We've all sorta felt it	Agree	Agree
Bree	That being said, I do love what He's done with the lawn	Wrap-up	Wrap-up

<div align="center">**Table 1. Analysis of excerpt from Desperate Housewives**</div>

2 A Model of Gossip

Eggins and Slade (1997) have found that gossip has a generic structure that includes the obligatory elements of *Third person focus*, *Substantiating behavior*, and *Pejorative evaluation*. In the *Substantiating behavior* stage the speaker justifies the negative evaluation, which also serves to express the appropriate way to behave.

The opinion genre shows several familiarities with gossip, where opinion is an expression of an attitude towards some person, event or thing (Horvath and Eggins, 1995; Eggins and Slade, 1997). The obligatory elements of opinion are however less than those constituting gossip, and consists solely of an *Opinion* followed by a *Reaction*. When a reaction involves a request for evidence, the structure however becomes more complex. In this case, the conversation might have elements of evidence and finally a resolution (given that the hearer accepts the evidence). An analysis of a scene from Desperate housewives (2004) based on their structure is presented in table 1, above.

From the analysis, we have created a dialogue model using statecharts (Harel, 1987), which really are extended finite state machines, see figure 1, below.
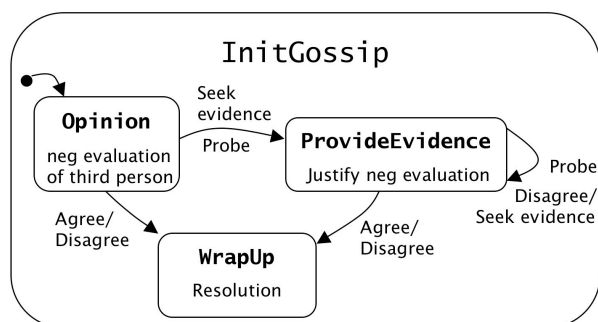

Figure 1. Dialogue model of gossip

The boxes illustrate states that in turn represent the system's (game character) actions. The labeled arcs represent transitions between states that can be triggered by user input (events) and/or conditions that have been satisfied.

To present this as a generic model for gossip, we have to think of the actual function a certain dialogue move has. For instance, when Bree says "Gaby" (line 2 of table 1), it could easily be exchange by a more typical probe, such as "why?" or "How so?". Even if its surface function is to make Gabrielle aware of the inappropriateness of her statement, it also serves to encourage her to continue. If Bree instead would have said "me too", in a dialogue between just the two of them, the gossip could be completed immediately and Gabrielle would not have to substantiate her statement (as in line 3), instead the dialogue could be wrapped up. Worth noticing is that the provide evidence stage can be iterated.

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