

# Games and Narrative: An Analytical Framework

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## Abstract

The paper considers the recent academic struggle between "narratologists" and "ludologists", and argues that it was exacerbated by two sources of confusion. The first confusion was differing concepts of immersion as an outcome of mediated experience. "Suspension of disbelief" and "flow" are both immersive states, but they grow out of fundamentally different processes of engagement. The second confusion was the conflation of "story" with the concept of a narrative arc. Interaction necessarily interferes with authorial control over the timing and the details of the narrative arc, and makes it a misleading focus for analysis or understanding of game narrative.

The paper maintains that if we ignore the concept of a grand narrative arc, we are free to examine other parameters of story within the game, which may be more limited, but are also more relevant. These narrative components - character, storyworld, emotion, narrative interface, and micro-narrative - are useful channels for focusing a more accurate analysis of the role of narrative within the design of the game and the experience of gameplay.

## Introduction

One of the more puzzling moments in recent academic history was the fierce, and often seemingly pointless, debate between ludologists and narratologists. As we look back at it, it is tempting to take the position that surely this was a non-issue (Pearce, 2005). We now all seem to agree on a few salient positions: first, that games do not necessarily involve story; second, there are core differences at the centre of these two phenomena, and third, that story can add to the pleasure of gameplay, sometimes significantly. So why then all the fuss?

I think it is useful to review this moment for a variety of reasons. First, the intensity of the debate - even when it seemed misguided - was a testament to the zeal and commitment that our community has to its scholarship. At the same time, even a false debate can be indicative of deeper truths - in this case the hold that both narrative and games have on our individual and collective imaginations.

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Further, it is not surprising that in an emerging and dynamic field, the nature and ownership of the intellectual turf comes under dispute. Thirty years ago, the same thing happened in academic circles around the question of cinema studies. Academics in previously established disciplines feel the need to understand in ways to which they are accustomed, while those drawn deeply to a new discipline see this process as condescension, appropriation, or just plain missing the point.

In any case, it is important to remember what lies underneath the surface of this dispute. These are fundamentally different phenomena. Games and story can certainly combine in an active dialectic, that in turn can result in a stronger user experience, but they are not the same things.

I believe there are two areas where a lack of conceptual clarity has added to the problem. My hope is that by clearly identifying these sources of confusion, we can not only better understand what happened in the debate, but more importantly, approach a deeper understanding of the fundamentals of the complex relationship between game and story.

### **Immersion**

The first is the realization that the holy grail in much of our description of mediated experience - the concept of immersion - has at least two distinct forms. The older form was best expressed by Coleridge, the newer by Csikszentmihalyi. Coleridge's version is the immersion of "suspension of disbelief" and the *willing* surrender to the pleasure of story (Coleridge, 1906, Ch. XIV). Csikszentmihalyi's is the immersion of active engagement with dynamic process - the immersion of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Cinema - the dominant cultural medium of the 20<sup>th</sup> century - is the benchmark for Coleridge's immersion. Games are the current benchmark for Csikszentmihalyi's immersion, and may well develop into the dominant cultural medium of the early part of this century. Unfortunately, Janet Murray's striking evocation of the holodeck metaphor (Murray, 1997, pp. 13-17) was amplified by our then-current fascination with the possibilities of virtual reality environments. In the process what was a clarion call for immersion as a higher order outcome of designed human experience became a source of confusion that obscured critical distinctions between games and story. The discourse now recognizes this critical distinction. Ermi and Mayra (2005, pp. 14-27) parse immersion into distinct types. They include the two immersions described above. One they call "challenge-based immersion", which corresponds to Csikszentmihalyi's "flow". The second they term "imaginative immersion", which corresponds to Coleridge's "suspension of disbelief". They go beyond the simple dualistic model, adding a third immersion, "sensory immersion," related to the sensory outputs of the game system. This immersion may correspond to certain aspects of Gunning's "cinema of attractions", which he saw as one pole of an early and persistent cinematic dialectic between spectacle and narrative (Gunning, 1990, pp. 56-67).

### **The Narrative Arc**

The second problem has to do with the slippery nature of the use of the word "narrative" in much of the discourse. The term often functions as a short hand for the more specific term "narrative arc". The narrative arc is the framework for the sequence of events that make up the plot we see, and the story we imagine. A typical version of the narrative arc sequence is the

following formulation: setup, complication, development, resolution, and denouement (Thompson, 1999, pp. 28-29). In the classic narrative construction practiced in traditional media such as films or novels, the careful design of this arc is a powerful tool for channeling and guiding the reader's experience of story.

Each stage has a distinct function, and the authors of the work agonize over the order, timing, and exact details of each step:

- the setup introduces the characters and the storyworld they inhabit
- the complication introduces a challenge to be overcome
- the development is the long phase that dominates the bulk of the storytelling, as the protagonist works towards her goal
- the resolution or climax is the culmination of the struggles of the development phase, often resulting in some form of victory or defeat
- the denouement or falling action ties up the story's loose ends, and allows the narrative experience to gracefully end

This has proven to be an efficient engine for the creation of satisfying narrative works. However, the difficulty with this model is that its power depends in large part on tight control over the design and implementation of details. A playwright once described the script for a play as "a clock that sings". Each part works in careful conjunction with every other part, and because of that, the expressive synergy of the whole far exceeds the individual contributions. Yet, tight control over details is precisely what the interactive process does not afford. In an interactive experience a share of control is ceded to the interactor, and a critical degree of fine authorial control is lost.

The fact of interaction denies detailed control over the narrative arc, and in the process interferes with a carefully designed framework for Coleridge's suspension of disbelief.

However, if we ignore the siren song of the "narrative arc", we are free to examine other parameters of story that may be more limited conceptually, but at the same time more useful in reaching our goal. This approach avoids an area of enquiry that, although intriguing, has confounded our understanding of the relationship of narrative and interactivity, and in particular our understanding of the role that narrative can play in the pleasure of game experience.

### **A Narrative Framework**

A more modest framework of limited narrative parameters can include the examination of the following areas:

- storyworld - what is the environment within which the game unfolds
- character - who are the beings that populate this game world
- emotion - both the emotions shown by the game's characters and those elicited in the player

- narrative interface - how are narrative sensibilities instantiated in the appearance and the functionality of the interface design
- micro-narrative - smaller moments of narrative flow and coherence that occur within a broader context of game play

I have discussed these parameters with my mentors in my own understanding of games - my undergraduate students who grew up in the practice of electronic game play in a way that I did not. This was an exercise where, to use Marc Prensky's terminology, a "digital immigrant" (Prensky, 2001, pp. 46-47) - myself - turned to "digital natives" for guidance. I have been asking my 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year students in both my narrative class and my gaming class to do close readings of video games from various perspectives, including attending to the role that story plays in the experience of the game. I will report some of their findings as an integral part of this paper.

## Storyworld

We stand on firm theoretical ground in our consideration of storyworld as a critical narrative parameter in game experience. Jesper Juul develops a four-level hierarchy of abstraction and representationalism in the construction of game worlds (Juul, 2005, pp. 130-132). He identifies the levels as "Abstract" as in Tetris, "Iconic" as in face cards in a standard deck, "Incoherent" which he sees as an incomplete (or even self-contradictory) storyworld such as chess or *Donkey Kong*, and "Coherent" as we find in a more complete and well-articulated storyworld. He argues that current adventure games, for example, typically fall into the final category of coherent and complete storyworlds. (Juul also includes a fifth level of sophistication that is marked by the nesting of game worlds within each other.)

Henry Jenkins connects storyworlds to a concept of spatial storytelling that has roots in the histories of both narrative and pre-electronic games. (Jenkins, 2004, pp. 121-124) "Environmental storytelling", to use his term not only provides a stage where story and game can play together, but can also evoke pre-existing narrative associations, embed narrative information within the *mise-en-scene*, and provide necessary resources for the gameplay itself.

My students easily found examples of the role that a narrative storyworld can play in the experience of a game. In *Fable:Lost Chapters*, they noted the different graphics and visual treatments that the various storyworlds received: a sleepy and peaceful Oakvale, a dim and beast-ridden Darkwood, Grey Manor full of death and decay. Another group connected the world of *Max Payne* to the broader media storyworld tradition of *noir* novels and films. Others commented on the details of environmentally embedded narrative elements such as the use of the radio in both *Grand Theft Auto* and *Metal Gear Solid* - in each case reinforcing the coherence of the storyworld and connecting it directly to the gameplay experience.

## Character

Within the worlds of gameplay, the characters (heroes, villains, player-avatars, and non-player characters) live the enactment of the game and the story. In the broader world of narrative construction, character is seen as the key to reader identification, and beginning writers are strongly urged to construct "character-driven" drama. Salen and Zimmerman rely on the narrative theory of J. Hillis Miller in their take on the role of narrative in games. (Salen &

Zimmerman, 2004, pp. 380.) Miller identifies "personification" as a key component of the definition of narrative, and Salen and Zimmerman favor this formulation as consistent with the active construction of character and meaning that occurs in the process of gameplay.

My students would agree with them. In *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, one student team noted that "As leader, Aragorn is the strongest character in the fellowship, reflected in his stronger health as compared to Legolas." Two teams cited the interaction between user agency and game AI in the formation of character and consequences as central to the enjoyment of *The Sims*. Several teams referred to the role of dialogue and cut-scenes in the definition and filling-out of character. Others noted the use of existing or constructed stereotyping of racial and national characteristics in *Call of Duty* and *World of Warcraft*.

## Emotion

Emotion in games is a complicated phenomenon. The oft-used benchmark is a lament that we haven't seen "a video game that can make you cry". To which Hal Barwood, a LucasArts game designer, once replied, "I have - tears of boredom". Barwood's cynical interjection at the 1999 MIT "Video Games Come of Age" conference (MIT, 2000) was contested by several other conference participants who cited moments of deep sadness in games such as *Zelda*, *Fantasmagoria*, and *Planetfall*. Perron examines this subject closely, initially separating our identification with the emotion expressed by the characters within the game, which he calls "fiction/witness" emotions from the emotions generated by the process of play (Perron, 2004, pp. 132-141). He later cites Philip Tan to include a third type: artefact emotion, or the "aesthetics of astonishment" (Perron, 2005). It is significant that this three-fold schema of game emotion ("fiction emotion", "artefact emotion", and "gameplay emotion") maps directly onto Ermi and Myra's three immersions (imaginative, sensory, and challenge-based).

My students did not report tears or deep sadness, but they did report player emotions such as pride of accomplishment in *Grand Theft Auto*, humor and laughter in *Thief: Deadly Shadows*, and fear in *Max Payne*. It is interesting to note that the emotions they listed can be seen as connected to some degree with the emotions of gameplay. Elicitation of deeper emotions based on a classic narrative identification with character may be a more difficult game-design challenge.

## Narrative Interface

Several of my students cited examples of the incorporation of narrative into the design of the interface itself. In an earlier series of papers, (Bizzocchi, 2001, 2003; Bizzocchi & Woodbury, 2003, pp. 550-568) I also examined this question. In these papers I address the potential disconnection between the pleasure of story and the experience of interaction. I use as my example a lost masterpiece of interactive design and experience, the interactive CD-Rom *Ceremony of Innocence*. This piece is an interesting case study because it combines a deep experience of story with the playing of a series of 60 puzzle-games. *Ceremony* is based on the *Griffin and Sabine* trilogy by Nick Bantock, a love story told in 60 post-cards and letters. In *Ceremony*, each post-card and letter is transformed into a puzzle-game which must be solved for the narrative to proceed. In the process, the interactive work incorporates ALL of the narrative

elements of the books: characters, storyworld, emotions, text, graphics - all in complete detail, right down to the layout and calligraphy of the cards and letters.

I argue that in this work one can identify two design strategies that help to suture potential disruptions between the pleasure of story and the experience of game-play. The first design strategy is a kind of narrative infusion, that utilizes the expressive capabilities of all of the craft of the books (words, graphics, font, layout) plus all of the additional electronic crafts supported by the CD-Rom (animation, music, sound effects, voice quality) to express and reinforce narrative concerns such as emotion, character, storyworld and story progression.

The second design strategy is the incorporation of narrative into the design of the interface itself. The analysis here concentrates on two purposeful remediations of the cursor within the overall interactive design. The first remediation is a purely visual one. I argue that the look of the cursors associated with Sabine's puzzle-games reinforce certain of her character traits, and that the look of the cursors associated with Griffin's puzzle-games reinforce his character traits. The second cursor remediation is a more interesting one. In several of the puzzle-games, the standard operational functionality of the mouse-cursor has been changed or "subverted". I claim that the specific transformations of cursor functionality can be seen to correspond to the protagonist's personality. In the process of struggling with the cursor to solve the puzzles, the player is forced to physically enact the protagonist's struggles and ultimately embody the personality traits.

My graduate student, Ben Lin, is extending this analysis of narrative interface (Lin, Bizzocchi, & Budd, 2006). He has developed a model of interface design with four quadrants that examine player input and game-state output in both hardware and software forms. Using this model as a reference scheme, he has begun to identify specific strategies for the incorporation of narrative into the design of the interface functionality. Lin's initial list includes interface as metaphor, interface as spatialization, and interface as point-of-view (Lin, 2007).

I'd like to add two examples from my own gameplay experience. I have to confess to an uneasy relationship with the mechanics of many game interfaces. I didn't grow up with these devices, and my effective operational gameplay is often somewhat pathetic. However, I can report immediate pleasure from two interfaces which combine a whole-body experience with interface actions that successfully incorporate the narrative frame of the game's storyworld. The first is the game *Anti-grav* as played on the Eye-toy video input for the PS2. With this interface the camera effectively translates my bodily ducks, jumps, reaches and grabs into a performative flying navigation of a game world within which I become completely immersed. For the second example, I was lucky to visit another of my graduate students who was testing the Wii gestural interface at EA Canada. Again, I was struck by the gratifying nature of an interface performance that closely mimics the world it represents - in this case the Wii version of *Madden 07* - and its use of a forward flick of the wrist to toss the electronic football.

### **Micro-narrative**

I'd like to complicate my argument slightly, and edge back towards the original point of departure for this paper, the consideration of the narrative arc. Despite my earlier dismissal of this perspective, it may be useful to review it in a modified, or even truncated form. Let's

consider again the simple and classic description of the narrative arc: setup, challenge, development, resolution/climax.

We can identify a rough progression of the player and the characters working through an overall arc of gameplay leading to the resolution of success or failure. The difficulty of gameplay with respect to the traditional narrative concept of the dramatic arc lies in the loss of authorial control over the details of the progression. However, there are game design metrics that support and instantiate a limited level of authorial intention in the arc of the experience. Often this arc is expressed as Jenkins said earlier - a progress across a carefully designed storyworld and game space. This progress can be further articulated and segmented through the use of game levels, which function as guidelines for the player experience of subsidiary arcs, each level with its own version of setup, complications, development and resolution. However, the exercise of authorial control over an interactive narrative arc is problematic at best. Crawford refers to various narrative arc control strategies in rather derogatory terms: "foldback", "obstructionist", and "kill 'em if they stray" (Crawford, 2003, pp. 79-81).

However, as we go deeper into the game, and examine smaller individual moments of play, the concept of a localized arc takes on considerable force. The changing context for play is constantly set up with fresh complications and challenges, the gameplay itself is an instantiation of the narrative development phase, and intermediate successes and failures act as interim resolutions and localized climaxes. Jenkins connects this phenomenon to a concept he calls "micro-narrative" in more traditional contexts (Jenkins, 2004, pp. 125). By this, he refers to moments of brief yet self-contained narrative arc embedded within a longer narrative development, such as the fate of the mother and the baby carriage in *The Battleship Potemkin*.

My students enjoyed the identification of specific gameplay-driven micro-narratives, including the raising of the flag in *Call of Duty*, a series of side tasks in *Guild Wars*, and the individual missions in *Starcraft*. It is interesting that in all cases they found a relationship between the successful completion of the micro-narrative moment and related pleasures of the overall game experience. In *Starcraft* and *Call of Duty* it was the advancement of the gameplay towards a successful conclusion, and in *Guild Wars* it was experience in game mechanics as well as the fleshing-out of the narrative storyworld.

It is possible to see the process of micro-narrative at work throughout the experience of gameplay. In this perspective, one can frame game design as a process that sets the stage and the conditions for a series of micro-narrative events that are triggered and completed (or not) by the player's success or failure in the moment of play. In this framing, we no longer draw a distinction between game and narrative, but we see the two conjoined in an ongoing process of engagement. Insofar as this view is accurate, we have added to the two classic narrative modes of diegesis - the story as told, and mimesis - the story as shown. In moments of micro-narrative engagement within an immersive gameplay experience, we are engaged in praxis - the story as enacted.

### **Other Narrative Domains**

I wish to close with the observation that games are not the only medium that resists the conflation of a grand narrative arc with a deep understanding of the pleasures of story. The emergent video short forms of the past thirty years - commercials, music videos, and series

openers - are rich exercises in the craft and experience of narrative. However, they are not particularly informed by the rhythms of the narrative arc, they are too short for the process of the arc to grind out the work of story. Some forms, such as comics or songs are also relatively brief, and profit from creative ellipsis of arc and narrative progression. Scott McCloud argues that narratives in the comic are driven as much by what is left out of the plot as by what is included (McCloud, 1994, pp. 74-85). Still other forms such as still photography, either as commercial art or as fine art, truncate the presentation even more radically. However, all of these forms are driven by narrative concerns, and all are capable of yielding narrative pleasure. As in the study of games, the analysis of narrative in these forms may yield more profitable results through the focused examination of specific factors such as character, storyworlds, emotion and micro-narratives.

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