# Narratology

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**Abstract**

This essay provides an overview of the different types of study that can be conducted when considering the narrative aspects of video game play. It contextualizes this research among the larger movements of narratology, particularly concerning the structuralist roots of the discipline and the parallels between gameplay and narrative structures. A brief overview of the key points of the ludology/narratology debate is made, followed by an introduction to the three domains of narrative in video game studies: story content, story structures, and narration as the discursive mode that games use to relay the game-state.

While the study of storytelling techniques in the Western world dates back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, the term "narratology" itself appeared in the 1960s, as an important part of French structuralism. This movement was a paradigm shift, more than a single and precise theory and centered on the belief that the structuring elements and relationships that bind semantic units together form a superstructure of meaning, which must be studied if we are to really understand the events and objects that are spawned through this structure. Given how games remain a process that unfolds from a core structure of rules, structuralism made the connection between game and narrative all the more visible. In the 1966 issue of *Communications*--which Marie-Laure Ryan refers to as the "birthday of narratology" (Ryan, 2006, p. 3)--Roland Barthes made a quite explicit statement in this regard:

> a great many narratives set up two opponents at odds with each other over the possession of a stake . . . This "dual" is all the more interesting because it points out the affinity

between narrative and the structure of certain (quite modern) games in which two equal

opponents set out to conquer an object placed in circulation by a referee. This scheme

recalls the actantial matrix proposed by Greimas, an analogy that is not surprising if one

pauses to realize that play, considered as a language, possesses the same symbolic

structure as that found in language and narrative (Barthes, [1966] 1975, p. 259).

This duel (as the original French reads, rather than *dual*) of equal opponents harkens back to

Roger Caillois' *agôn* category identified in *Man, Play and Games* (Caillois, [1957] 1961), and

highlights the importance of conflict as a component of narrative. As H. Porter Abbott wrote in

the *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*: "in almost every narrative of any interest, there is a

conflict in which power is at stake. You might say that conflict structures narrative. The ancient

Greek word for conflict (actually "contest" is closer) is *agon*, and how the *agon* played out

formed the spine of any Greek tragedy" (Abbott, 1993, p. 55). Thus, understanding how conflict

structures the agonistic forces at work throughout a narrative brings something of a game-like

quality to it.

**The Boiling Point: Ludology and Narratology**

The structuralist connection between narrative and games has been one of the entry points

in the formation of ludology (in the broadest sense of a "discipline that studies game and play

activities", as put forth by Frasca, 1999). In 1997, Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext* and Janet Murray's

*Hamlet on the Holodeck* offered two opposed viewpoints on the issue of narrative and textuality.

For Aarseth, the fundamental differences between narratives and games required that researchers

develop novel frameworks and methods for studying the latter; for Murray, the computer as a

medium and the principles of interactivity (including video games) were hinting at new narrative

forms and modes, with a potential yet to be charted out. The table was set for the first debate of

the nascent field of game studies, opposing narratology and ludology. While narratology was singled out as an example, the debate more broadly concerned the appropriateness of studying games by applying pre-existing theories and approaches, or by devising novel, specific conceptual tools. The debate did not last long, and was in fact repudiated by both "parties" as a non-event. Janet Murray remarked that "The ludology vs narratology argument can never be resolved because one group of people is defining both sides of it. The "ludologists" are debating a phantom of their own creation" (Murray, 2005, p. 3), echoing Gonzalo Frasca's previous interrogation: "Who are the narrativists?" (Frasca, 2003a).

It appears the whole ludology vs narratology "debate" may have been overblown by Markku Eskelinen's oft-cited hyperbolic (and provocative) claim: "Outside academic theory people are usually excellent at making distinctions between narrative, drama and games. If I throw a ball at you I don't expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories" (Eskelinen, 2001). Rune Klevjer extrapolated a position of "radical ludology" from this statement, to the effect that "everything other than the pure game mechanics of a computer game is essentially alien to its true aesthetic form" (Klevjer, 2002, p. 191-192). While Eskelinen's particular phrasing indeed appears excessive, most writings from both camps (the self-identified ludologists, and researchers vaguely defined by others as narratologists or narrativists) were a lot less polemical. Consider Celia Pearce's call for a reworking of the definitions and tools of narrative theories so that they can account for the specificity of games:

> It is very important to understand that narrative has a profoundly different function in games than it does in other narrative-based media. . . . although there is much to be learned from traditional narratives, and a great value in drawing comparisons between the two, without understanding the fundamental differences, the discourse becomes

ultimately irrelevant because it entirely misses the fundamental point of what games are about (Pearce, 2004, p. 144).

Though Frasca (2003a) implicitly includes Pearce among the "narrativists", in the end, her position does not appear too far away from Frasca's own call for identifying the specificities of games. The difference resides in whether narrative constitutes a worthwhile analytical frame, or if some other approach should be privileged:

> the real issue here is not if games are narratives or not, but if we can really expand our knowledge on games by taking whichever route we follow. So far, I am convinced that we should privilege other forms of representing reality, such as simulation, which are more coherent with the characteristics of games (Frasca, 2003a).

The contrast between these positions is much more reasonable than an all-out "theory wars", to echo Pearce's 2005 follow-up.

**Making Sense of the Overlap**

Both narrativists and ludologists agree with Aarseth's initial contention that "To claim that there is no difference between games and narratives is to ignore essential qualities of both categories." (Aarseth, 1997, p. 5) All in all, it appears the second part of this quote is needed as much as the first: "the difference [between games and narratives] is not clear-cut, and there is significant overlap between the two" (Aarseth, 1997, p. 5).

It is worth keeping the structuralist roots of narratology in mind when considering the utility and history of this discipline for video game studies. The focus on unearthing underlying structural principles of regularity is common to both structuralist narratology and the video game

player's experience: after all, one of the primary tasks which the gamer faces when engaging in gameplay is to build a mental image of the procedural computing process that is working to make the video game manifest (Arsenault and Perron, 2009). This fascination for underlying structural elements also characterized the study of narrative in game studies. Early theoretical inquiries aimed at uncovering game-like properties to narrative in the vein of Barthes' initial structuralist claim. Arguing that "game designers are much less interested in telling a story than in creating a compelling framework for play", Celia Pearce opted to "look at narrative in a play-centric context" (Pearce, 2004, p. 144) and remarked that "certain story genres are more innately gamelike to begin with", citing examples such as "mysteries, mission or goal-based adventures, or combat scenarios" and "the world-based narrative" (Pearce, 2004, p. 153). Marie-Laure Ryan, arguably the person to have written the most on narrative and fiction in games to this day, has also used the video game as a new stepping stone or vantage point from which the central notions of story, plot, narrative, character, temporality, and fictional world can all be re-examined and redefined (see Ryan, 2001, 2004, and 2006, among others).

These studies reflect the shift that happened in the study of narrative as well, as the structuralist roots of narratology gave way to post-structuralist narratology in the 1980s. Rather than reducing the apparent divergences among narratives in quest for a single, unitary structure, post-structuralist narratology embraced the complexity of narrative across modes, media, and genres. Ultimately, narratology branched out to a plurality of other fields in what David Herman called "post-classical narratology": "No longer designating just a subfield of structuralist literary theory, narratology can now be used to refer to any principled approach to the study of narratively organized discourse, literary, historiographical, conversational, filmic, or other" (Herman, 1999, p. 27). Through this change of perspective, games can be studied from a narrative standpoint by examining how they renew, complicate, or transform our understanding

of what a narrative is, and of how narration can operate. For example, in many Japanese role-playing games from the 1980s and 1990s such as *Final Fantasy* (Square, 1987) *or Dragon Warrior* (Chunsoft, 1986), the player moves his party through towns and dungeons, but also on an "overworld map". While the characters are represented identically in both instances, the scale of the game-world is very different: Brecconary Town and Tantagel Castle may be only 7 steps apart on the overworld map, but those steps do not, in fact, represent the same kind of space-time travel than taking 7 steps in the town square, or in the castle, do. Every step the player-character takes on the overworld map consists in the game effectively employing the visual channel of communication to narrate a summary of a journey through the lands, through manipulation of that fictional world's space-time continuum. Hence, Jesper Juul can reconcile the storytelling aspects of video game play through recourse to fiction instead of narrative, which allows a modular conceptualization of the video game playing activity depending on a given player's particular interest:

> That many fictional game worlds are incoherent does not mean that video games are dysfunctional providers of fiction, but that they project fictional worlds in their own flickering, provisional, and optional way. Of all cultural forms that project fictional worlds, the video game is a special form in which players can meaningfully engage with the game even while refusing to imagine the world that the game projects--the rules of a game are often sufficient to keep the player's interest. Perhaps this places games on par with songs, opera, and ballet (Juul, 2005, p. 200).

This accounting for the player's desire is a cornerstone of Roger Odin's semio-pragmatic model of fiction (Odin, 2000), in which one produces an imaginary text from a string of signifiers provided by an object, and that depends on the mode of reading that is privileged by a given subject, one of these modes being, naturally, that of fictionalization. Some players may like

narratively-heavy games like *Metal Gear Solid (Konami, 1998), Heavy rain (Quantic Dream, 2010) or Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare, 2011) *because* of their strong emphasis on storytelling; other players may not like them for the very same reason; and yet some other players may still like them *despite* these storytelling ambitions.

### *Extrinsic Narrativity: Story Contents*

The optional nature of the video game narrative legitimizes from the outset a certain type of study: narrative semiotics (which film narratologist André Gaudreault dubbed the "narratology of content") that "privileges the study of narrative content (the story told), *entirely independently* of the medium through which it is recounted (Gaudreault, 2009, p. 30). The other "school" of narratology, distinct from the first (though the two are always intertwined), is the "narratology of expression", characterized by the fact that "narrative expression (the discourse of telling), for this school, is more important than the content (. . .) The principal concern here is the means of expression (. . .) by which a piece of information is communicated to the auditor" (Gaudreault, 2009, p. 30). Out of this double helix of narratology, Gaudreault infers two types of narrativity: "We might call one kind of narrative *extrinsic*: it deals solely with *narrative content*, independent of its means of expression. The other kind could be called *intrinsic* narrativity in that its narrative quality derives directly from the means of expression" (Gaudreault, 2009, p. 31).

These two types of narrativity have wildly different implications and importance in the field of game studies. As Henry Jenkins (2004) and I (2008, p. 29-33) pointed out, it is a fact that some video games include a story and expend great effort to make it the most important point of the experience they offer, while others feature a very limited story (or even better, no story at all). While it is certainly feasible to study select stories or some narrative figures and tropes, in and of

themselves, rather than the means by which they are put into play by the unique properties of the video game, doing so tells us nothing about games themselves, as Herman and Vervaeck's statement illustrates: "it is the way in which a story is narrated that turns it into what it is. Those who insist on denying the importance of the method of narration by reducing a story to content might just as well go to the movies or watch television because both of them can offer similar content" (2005, p. 7). Incidentally, not much academic work has followed this path: by and large, it is rather video game criticism that addresses the narrative contents of games, such as plot twists, narrative inconsistencies, rhythm, script and writing quality of games, and which sometimes offers insights of a theoretical nature.

That video games can serve as a host media for extrinsic narrativity (by way of adapting already-existing narratives for the medium, for instance) does not say much of the video game's narrative potential in itself; if some games feature extensive storytelling while others none at all, then the relationship between games and narratives can be seen as contingent and arbitrary, and the presence of a narrative is wholly incidental to whether something can be called a game or not, as Jesper Juul remarked (2005, p. 13). This is why in many game genres, narrative plays second fiddle to gameplay. Many shooters, fighting and action games, for instance, feature stories whose sole purpose is to justify a diverse array of levels, enemies and obstacles to be tackled. And yet, to have narrative not be the main focus of the play experience is not a reason to either discredit the study of narrative, or to discredit the narratives found in games themselves. The ludological line of thought rightly stated that narrative *need* not be the central, privileged subject of game studies. A constructive reply would be that gameplay *need* not be the *only* subject of game studies, and that perhaps this "gameplay" word is, in itself, a handy construct that conflates a myriad of different features (point of view, physical interaction, spatial exploration, constant

cognitive reframings, etc.) that can in reality only be understood by cross-disciplinary examination from related fields.

That being said, a number of useful studies can be undertaken to examine how the extrinsic narrative elements brought into games can contribute to the game system, or to the player's gameplay activity. Rune Klevjer's short paper "In Defense of Cut Scenes" (2002), for example, argues that while no relationship of necessity binds narrative to games, the framing narrative still plays an important role in the game experience; this also includes the cut-scene, a moment of non-interactive narrative development that performs a number of gameplay functions such as establishing rhythm, building tension and suspense, and acting as a reward for player progression.

### *Story Structures*

By and large, the most common research conducted on narrative content in games so far has focused on the narrative structures or topologies of games, in an attempt to identify the recurrent ways in which interactivity can gate or deploy narrativity and vice-versa. These studies forego the semantic contents of game narratives to examine the syntactic structuring of these narrative entities and events. Structures of interactive narrative could easily fill entire books, but it is possible to provide a brief overview of the key recurring figures identified across multiple sources (Phelps, 1996; Samsel and Wimberley, 1998; Ryan, 2001, p. 246-258; DeMarle, 2006; Chandler, 2007, p. 101-115). All structures of interactive narrative provide ways to balance the usual conflicting demands of story and game. These structures may be placed at any point on an axis between two poles, which Chandler identifies as logocentric and mythocentric design: "Logocentric design is linear and controlled and has been plotted out and documented by the designer" (Chandler, 2007, p. 102), while "mythocentric design is wide-open and free-ranging

and consists of arenas for player action that have been created by the developers. The player, as author of the core experience, gets to choose the goals and means of the game experience. Unlike logocentric design, the developers are facilitators, not creators, of the events that transpire" (Chandler, 2007, p. 108). The two approaches could be contrasted by comparing *Heavy Rain*'s heavily pre-scripted (even if it has branching storylines) narrative with *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000) and its emergent narrative that arises out of the interactions of rules, objects and player decisions. In their most basic dimension, the structures allow different ranges of player freedom while maintaining narrative coherence, and the importance given to one or the other will determine their position on the *logos*/*mythos* axis.

It is important to realize that structures of interactive narrative should always be taken as approximate types and general schemata, rather than exact transcriptions of actual game narratives; while many researchers, game designers, and writers may elaborate theoretical story structures out of general principles or typical cases, and even offer some limited examples to demonstrate their models, almost any game examined in its entirety will feature multiple narrative structures over the course of its ergodic traversal (Aarseth, 1997). "Sandbox" games like *Grand Theft Auto III* (Rockstar North, 2001) typically combine moments of logocentric design, expressed through their linear story missions, with mythocentric design, present in the free-roaming nature of their game environments in-between missions. This relativistic stance is also made necessary by practical realities: the game's structures can rarely be empirically verified for consistency, as this would require access to production documents, source code analysis, and extensive testing to confirm that no unintended behaviors can emerge out of the game system; moreover, even short and relatively straightforward narratives can seldom be charted out in their entirety without arriving at unusable (and often undecipherable) packs of nodes and links crisscrossing wildly.

The baseline, unmarked structure out of which alternatives can be envisioned is the *linear* narrative (Phelps, 1996), which progresses from one textual unit to the next with no variation between different experiences. Mary DeMarle introduces the idea of the *gated story* (equivalent to Phelps' *interactive* structure) to illustrate how some games integrate interactivity into an otherwise linear narrative: the player is free to play around and experience a range of different minor game-events in-between the sequential, important story-events. In practice, very few games can be said to be entirely linear. Even *Dragon's Lair* (Advanced Microcomputer Systems, 1983), the quintessential full-motion video game in which the player must perform quick-time events (as they would come to be called much later) to simply keep the film rolling, places challenges randomly from a select pool of possibilities. Any game in which the player can freely explore his surroundings is bound to contain some minor events that can take place between story points.

Marie-Laure Ryan's *vector with side branches* features a linear "main plot", out of which the player can venture into a side-quest a couple of nodes deep before returning to the same point in the main quest. Slightly moving away from the *logos* pole, we find Ryan's *tree* structure, in which the player makes decisions at key choice points that spin the narrative in a different direction. By itself, this principle is not sustainable: if the player can make a choice between two possibilities only 8 times through his experience, 256 theoretical possibilities have to be planned for. This is why such narratives will quickly collapse and fold back some of the choices into a common path, a structure christened by Phelps as the *braided multi-linear story*. In *Fahrenheit/Indigo Prophecy* (Quantic Dream, 2005), detective Carla must retrieve a tape from the dark and densely packed archive room, even though she suffers from claustrophobia. The player must control her breathing to keep calm and carry on the task. If he fails, then the story

continues and it is her partner Tyler who will retrieve the tape instead in the next chapter, so that by that time both possibilities fold back together.

The narrative structures more closely associated with mythocentric design proceed from the figure of the network rather than that of the tree; in a network, the player is free to go back and forth through the game's topological structure in order to explore previously unexplored nodes and links, as is typically the case in adventure and role-playing games. As can be gleaned from this short sampling of structures, the study of extrinsic narrative is largely associated with game design and criticism.

### *Intrinsic Narrativity: Actions Speak Louder Than Words*

Turning to intrinsic narrativity brings about a change in both scope and focus. Now the idea is not to examine how clearly identified narrative strategies, deployed in some delimitated subset of video games, are used or contribute to the total sum of its parts, but rather to unearth some deep-running connection making narrative an essential part of the gameplay activity. This question ties into the video game's specificity amongst ludic practices, for how could we consider a form of intrinsic narrativity for video games and not for other traditional, classical games or sports, without positing that they present some unique properties that are more narrative-prone? As such, it has consisted so far, and still remains, at the core of game studies, from Juul's exposition of a "classic game model" (Juul, 2005) which video games move away from on a number of counts, including a stronger focus on fictional elements, to Jenkins' resort to "environmental storytelling" (2004) as a way of accounting for the alternative means of providing narrative contents through spatial exploration and enactment of actions during gameplay.

For now, we can only envision a general direction that further research could take. The video game narrative was alluded to by Rune Klevjer when he stated that the actions which players perform when playing games are symbolic, holding meanings pre-configured by another entity (the game's authorial instance), so that "my own actions speak to me in a voice which is not mine" (Klevjer, 2002). The player-characters we guide through the fictional worlds of video games, and who we routinely identify with to the point of referring to the actions they perform as *our* actions, never cease to surprise us, whether it is Duke Nukem expressing a sudden burst of machismo or Ezio Auditore using an unexpectedly brutal assassination move against his target. A narratological conception of the video game can be erected if the video game play activity is envisioned as a refinement, through real-time image processing, of the same interactive process that governs the playing of text adventures or interactive fiction, and more largely, of tabletop role-playing games in general.Video game narration occurs when the algorithm, acting as a Game Master in role-playing games, orders the events and relays the effects of actions and current state of the fictional world through visual semiotics. While video games are perfectly capable of upholding extrinsic, embedded narrativesby emulating cinematographic or literary techniques, the player's actions can be intrinsically narrativized by a fictionalizing player, given that they hinge on the same elements that are central to action theory. By situating themselves at the confluence of games and visual media, video games draw on both of these traditions and lend themselves to the discursive organization of elements which narrative excels at.

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