Are Games Bad for Stories?
Seeing Interactive Narrative as its own Genre

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A Milestone Moment

**ARDIN**, founded 2017
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Critical mass of objects to study
Critical mass of scholarship
Distinct framework
  - Overlaps with other disciplines
  - Self-validating
Some Clarifications: Game, Story, Play
Computation as a new medium for storytelling (not narratology, not about games)
Game Studies have positioned narrative in opposition to games, and seen it as unisequential and non-participatory


**Narrative**

In a traditional sense, a narrative is the presentation of a *story* (a fixed sequence of events) by way of a discourse (Chatman 1978). In contemporary theory, narrative is often used in a much broader sense.

- Murray asserts that computers are "A new medium for storytelling" (1997, p.11).
- Eskelinen writes that "Luckily, outside theory, people are usually excellent at distinguishing between narrative situations and gaming situations: if I throw a ball at you, I don't expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories." (2004, p.36)

*Half-Real*, chapter 4 discusses the relation between games and narratives and compares different definitions of narrative.

**Narratology**

- The study of storytelling. Also: The study of games as story systems (for example, Murray 1997). See Chatman 1978.

from dictionary http://www.half-real.net/dictionary/#narrative
Game Studies have misunderstood *interactive* narrative


“The duality in video games of a real set of rules governing how the game is played and a fictional world that the player imagines.”

Chapter 5 – from dictionary http://www.half-real.net/dictionary/#half-real
Computation as a new medium for storytelling
(not narratology, not about games)
Where is the story-making?
Classic Narratology: events filtered through discourse

Chronological Events

Expressive Telling
Storytelling starts with experience and creates a coherent world
Games and Narrative are Cognitive and Cultural Forms, related to Play

B. Sutton-Smith: Play is exploration that expands our repertoire of adaptive behaviors
M. Tomasello: The Joint Attentional Scene is the cognitive and cultural basis of symbolic communication (language)
M. Donald: Cognition and culture co-evolve through our media of representation
J. Huizinga: Games are the basis of culture
N.D. Schüll, Addiction to the Zone (Addiction by Design)
D. Winnicott: Imaginative play is emotionally adaptive, promoting growth
V. Turner: Play and art share liminality
K. Oatley: Fiction is social simulation running on minds
L. Zunshine: Fiction is exercise for our mind-reading muscle
D. Herman: Narrative is the creation of a storyworld
On Joint Attention as the basis of representational systems


Shared meaning-making starts with the Joint Attentional Scene
Shared attention is pleasurable, fueling our cognitive growth, through the cultural elaboration of symbol systems.
Games grow out of our innate pleasure in shared attention...

- With opponent
- With teammates
- With composer of a puzzle
Games grow out of our innate pleasure in shared attention, as expressed through synchronized ritualized behaviors ...

- Simultaneous (Ring-a-round-a-rosy)
- Mimicking (Follow the Leader, Simon Says)
- Turn-taking (Dice)
- Complementary roles (Hide and Seek)
Games grow out of our innate pleasure in shared attention, as expressed through synchronized ritualized behaviors, and the manipulation of symbolic representations:

- Dice
- Tokens
- Letters and words
Games grow out of our innate pleasure in shared attention, expressed through synchronized ritualized behaviors and the manipulation of symbolic representations codified in artificial rules.

The rules of games are not “real”: they are a shared cultural representation that creates a magic circle of mutual expectations, a playful space with clear cause and effect but no immediate real world consequences.

The experience of coordinating (social behavior), winning (a contest), solving (a puzzle), mastering (a skill), are the most real things about games, emotionally experienced and adaptive for survival.
The pleasure of interactive narrative is not synchronization but dramatic agency

Interactive narrative creates the experience of **dramatic agency**
- requires scripting of interactor and of digital storyworld
- transparent actions motivated by plot events
- coherent dramatic response by digital storyworld
- actions not necessarily in first person
- actions not necessarily changing events: could be revealing events or character
Game: Ring-around-a-Rosy
pleasure in synchronized ritualized behaviors
socialization and body control
Game: The Royal Game of Ur
abstract journey and numeracy skills
through symbolic tokens & space and rules of play
Play

WORK
Play
(Free exploration, detached from real consequences)

Work
(Adaptive behaviors with real consequences)
Both GAMES and STORIES are Magic Circles
Immersive
Value-laden
Both GAMES and STORIES can be Insightful / Formulaic, Pro-social / Anti-social, Entertainment / Art.
Aesthetics of Games and Fictional Narratives

Pleasure in Games
Synchronization (ritualized behaviors and roles)
Shared symbol systems (tokens)

Predictable but surprising, abstracted world (rules, luck, strategy, opponent)
Enacting luck
Performing mastery
Performing community

Winning/solving

Flow / “the Zone”

Pleasure in Stories
Synchronization (with vicarious thoughts actions of characters)
Shared media formats (e.g. text adventure)

Predictable but surprising abstracted world (genres)
Social simulation w moral physics
Recognition of known patterns of lived experience
New Insight into patterns of lived experience

Narrative Closure

Catharis / ”Hollow Pursuits”

Player enters the “machine zone”

Hyperfocus on game events

No social contact

Gambling to “extinction” is the casino’s design goal
Longing for empty representation, without social context In a perpetual now, the opposite of narrative
Collapsing story content into culturally/emotionally “neutral” token
Opposing Goals: Emotional engagement leading to Catharsis versus Dissociation of the never-ending Zone

Purgation of vicarious emotion, recognition of reality

Sustained tokenized ritual, detachment from reality
Some Examples from the Game/Story Borderlands
"Bandersnatch" *Black Mirror*
Charlie Brooker, Netflix, December 28 2018

One of us is going over...
One of us is going over.
Fictional characters as game tokens

- Interiority not consistent
- Empathy violated by random behaviors and fates
- Killed off at random
- Suicide casually treated

One of us is going over.
Events are arbitrary
- Choices are unsatisfying
- Unearned sensationalized endings
- Interaction design unsatisfying because poor dramatic agency
One minute 2 variations

Hey, Dad. I need a favor.

Hey, Mom, I need a favor.
Hey, Dad. I need a favor.

Hey, Mom, I need a favor.

are going in together on an old car,

Get back in there!
That's ridiculous.

Okay. Just thought I'd ask.

Oh, honey, I'm sorry.

knowing that you kept my life a living hell!
Russian Doll (2018) official trailer
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YHcKoAMGGvY
Replay

Used for mastery in game design with respawnning lives
Used for exploring rule-based parameterized model in simulations
Can be used for progressive development in interactive narrative
    repetition emblematic of emotional paralysis
    emotional growth leads to release from repetition
Can be used for exploring multiple points of view in interactive narrative
Can be used for exploring multiple possibilities of coherent story world
Building blocks from videogame-like interactions: Exploring a space for backstory and clues to mystery

Mystery House 1980

Gone Home, 2013
Building blocks from videogame-like interactions: Shaving as expressive narrative convention

Anna Anthropy, *Dys4ia*, 2012

Jim Munroe, *Unmanned* (MolleIndustria, 2012)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTsP0SpWdCk
Reigns (2016)

Good strategy game conventions (balancing 4 readable state variables) with strong potential for IDN

Simple swipe left/right mechanic

But immersion in the story is undermined by lack of dramatic agency:
• Little payoff on player choices
• Generic actions with no parameterized variation
• No moral physics beyond survival
• Repetitive without progression
Dramatic Agency in futile actions
The young heir cannot be saved by your advice (not a strategy game)
Fits the moral physics of the storyworld

Game of Thrones: Ice from Fire Telltale Season 1
Florence (2018) Dramatic agency through expressive enactment
Jigsaw puzzle as metaphor for shattered relationship
Complexity: Computer-based simulation games using narrative as tokenized elements

The Sims: Bildungsroman

- Structure of bildungsroman with protestant work ethic makes for coherence of game
- Backrub is a step forward in expressive conventions in gaming
- Toileting, eating meals are too real and repetitive, no dramatic compression
- Dollhouse for open-ended play
- No replay but multiple variants

Complexity: Computer-based simulation games using narrative as tokenized elements

Prom Week (2013)
- Virtuoso programming the goal
- Abstractions taken from formulaic films but lack dramatic effect because tokenized
- Problems with readable cause and effect
- Multiple characters and possibilities reduced involvement
Complexity through Immersive detail: Simulation games create unfulfilled expectations of vicarious identification and dramatic action

“Early in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, a captured rival, bound to a post, begs me for food. I pick up food, but I see no option to feed him. I can eat, which upsets him. But when I toss the food on the ground, he doesn’t react.”

“A crowd watches a public hanging. After the execution, the crowd disperses, and I find the victim’s mother weeping in the mud. I want to console her, but for whatever reason, the game won’t let me “greet” or “antagonize” the distraught mother. The only option it gives me is to pull a gun on her.”

“But ultimately, the story is too sentimental, and the game too loyal to the video game story trajectory, in which missions become bigger and more explosive, rather than more critical and introspective.”

Complexity: *80 days*: post-colonial moral physics and “unfair” gameplay (Meg Jayanth)
Even better would be a game that let us switch POVs.
Even better would be an IDN – not a game – that let us switch POVs
Complexity in multiform AI-assisted text-based storyworld

Complex storyworld with consistent characters who have multiple possible fates

Adapting achievement badges game convention to keep track of multiple versions in a well-segmented, multiform story, with compelling dramatic variants
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Critical mass of scholarship
Distinct framework
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  - Self-validating (not a kind of game)
Games, INTERACTIVE NARRATIVE, and System Simulations

Abstract scenario w tacit or explicit values
(tokens, rules, luck, strategy, opponent)

Social sim w moral physics

Recognition/insight into patterns of lived experience
Vicarious pleasures

Dramatic contrasts within common scenario

Pleasure in tokenized representation

Performance pleasures

FLOW – “the Zone”

Abstracted model w rules
Tacit & explicit values

Parameterized construct with constants and variables

Understanding through replay

CLOSURE - Catharsis

Insight into processes → PREDICTION, CONTROL
Games

INTERACTIVE NARRATIVE

System Simulations

AVOID COLLAPSE INTO TOKEN MANIPULATION

Expressive game mechanics

FLOW – “the Zone”

Social sim w moral physics that interprets the world

Recognition/insight into patterns of lived experience

Vicarious pleasures

Dramatic contrasts within common scenario

Closure - Catharsis

AVOID TEMPTATION to REPRODUCE REALITY

Parameterized construct with constants and variables

Understanding through replay

Insight into processes → PREDICTION, CONTROL
Advantage of seeing Interactive Digital Narrative as its own form

Enhance its potential an expressive framework for engaging with the most pressing themes of human culture of the 21st century, and as a cognitive scaffold for increasing our individual and collective understanding of complex systems.
Thank you!

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