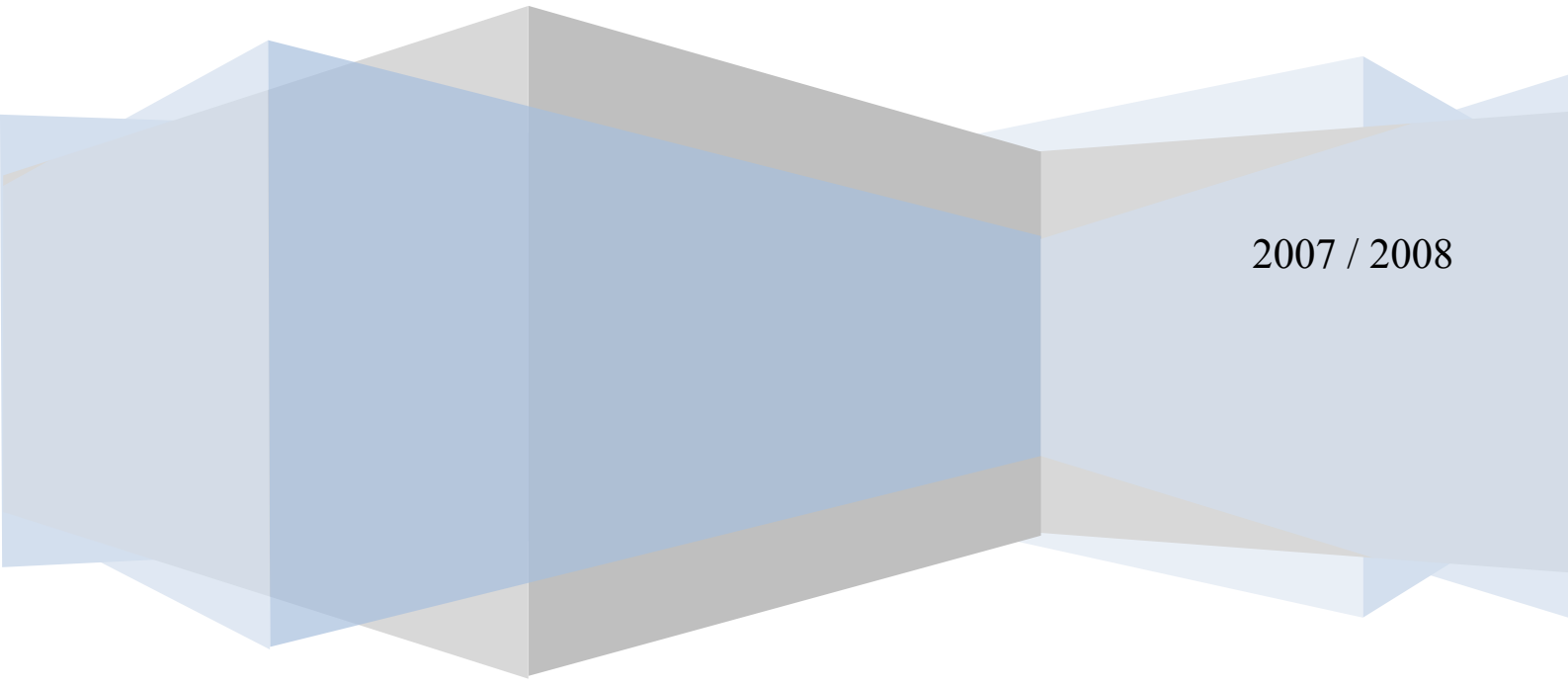
The nature of narrative in digital games

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Information Systems Dissertation

UFIE8Y-20-3



2007 / 2008

Abstract

This dissertation discusses the nature of storytelling in games. The aim is to contribute to the growing body of literature already available on the subject by considering a wide range of perspectives, and offering a mature take on an emerging art form.

This study is based on an assortment of popular games carefully selected from three decades of play. From Pong to Assassin's Creed, this work asks why we experience emotion from games at all, and explores how plumbers, hedgehogs, and tomb raiders have become an important part of popular culture.

The fantastic growth of video games makes this a multi-facetted and dynamic area of study, and it is introduced here in an easy to read and considered fashion.

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The nature of narrative in digital games

1. Introduction

This dissertation discusses the forms of narrative found in some kinds of popular games. The objective is to develop an understanding of why gamers ‘game’ at all. The compulsion to explore this question emerges from an underlying scepticism of two broadly held assumptions about games playing that have dogged the medium for over thirty years. They are: the desire to compete on a highscore table, and the desire to experience the next incredible spectacle – graphical; visual; sensory overload. It is my view that onlookers to the game’s emergence developed these views from the late seventies onward, as home consoles muscled their way into the front rooms of middleclass western suburbia. In the early days of this phenomenon, it was the young people who were enraptured. Those outside of the circle did not recognise the appeal. This included parents, teachers, and those otherwise bemused by the computer’s role in providing entertainment.

Without scraping beneath the veneer, it is apparent that these assumptions are largely unjustified. Many, if not most games, do not contain highscore tables or feature any form of competitive interaction with other humans. Indeed many people will only relay their experiences of playing games in passing, reminiscent of someone reading novels for self fulfilment, naturally uninterested in establishing one-upmanship on a member of their local book club.

The hypnosis of the spectacle is more difficult to dismiss. Some form of visual expression has accompanied the game all of its life, even when – as with many of the first embryonic mainframe computer games – it was only to display blocky text on a computer monitor. Yet as we see in the first chapter, the role of the spectacle may be an artificially enforced constraint, proprietary

to the game itself. And in taking the ‘video’ out of ‘video games’, an exciting opportunity arises to wipe the slate clean and re-explore the cultural worth of a medium that has brought great joy to so many.

With the myths dispelled, we are left with a blank canvas upon which to pencil out a new likeness of the game. But where do we start? The studies of Poole (2000), Atkins (2003), Carr et al (2006), and a handful of other scholars have leant a sympathetic ear to a maturing community yearning for a better understanding of the games they play. Each author offers a different perspective on the subject – from popular culture; narrative studies; and the entertainment industry – and their interest makes it clear that the worth of the game is high in both the capitalist and academic arenas.

The combined findings of these authors present a melting pot of narrative ingredients: characters, drama, emotion, environments, events, tragedy, frustration, and hero. Narrative streams from the tiniest computer programme, borrowing ideas from across the spectrum of our rich culture – inspired by everything. Every story is different, every avatar a reflection of the reader. If the interaction of the game is the *how*, and the play’s the thing, then perhaps the *why* is the narrative itself.

It does not seem sufficient to pigeonhole games as being defined solely by their interactivity. This only accounts for one of the ways in which the reader interfaces with the text. Operating under the assumption that the player is an intelligent and sensitive being – who will play some games not for status, but for enrichment – investigating the narrative stuff of games seems as good a place as any to start understanding their appeal.

It is hoped that this dissertation will contribute to the growing awareness of the fledgling study of games narrative, and act as a favourable addition to the small pool of sources already available. Outside of these aspirations, it is hoped that the mere existence of this work will demonstrate that games players are prepared to look outside of their area of interest; that they might better understand what it is they enjoy.

Ludology is the term used for the study of games (not just video games), and is an apt introductory chapter for this area of discussion. To fully understand the nature of the game, we strip away the superfluous elements that have been considered vital by association for so long – such as the reliance on a visual display – and reveal the unfettered product. Other technological dependencies of the game are scrutinised and some are embraced, and sociological concepts such as recreational value are recognised as being defining. The intention is to close the chapter with an agreed, high level definition of the digital game.

With an understanding of the game and its inherent interactivity, a deeper exploration of narrative is undertaken in the second chapter. A definition is volunteered for the purposes of this discussion, following an appraisal of narrative's characteristics across other art forms. We investigate how the traditional narrative devices of cinema and the written word have become embedded in today's games, and synonymous with the experience of reading the game itself.

The second chapter develops to consider how humans interface with the game; how the reader subconsciously projects their own narrative rudiments on the games they interact with. Over thirty years of technological and cultural impositions have obscured gaming's availability to secondary stakeholders – such as psychologists, usability experts, and of course narratologists. Yet as gaming becomes more ubiquitous, and the barriers of entry are lowered, enough academic focus may now be on the game for a mature discussion to take place on the subject of its narrative.

Having established the foundation of these two key terms – narrative and game – this paper will go on to explore whether games currently demonstrate defining narrative traits of their own, and how those original elements balance with borrowed characteristics from film, literature, and music in the chapter 4. Game narrative sophistication. We gauge the current perception on how

successfully narrative operates in games by extracting popularly shared views amongst scholars of this field, and subsequently cross-examining them.

The final chapter ahead of the conclusion considers the ambiguity of authorship – where both the game player and designer contribute to the narrative of the game. We consider how the interactivity of the game can clash with the expression of the plot. In the conclusion, the findings across all chapters are summarised.

One scholar of game narrative – readily cited in this paper – announces his reservation for conjecture from the outset of his publication: “it is far too tempting to consider the future possibility of what the computer game might become” (Atkins, 2003, p.10). While this study aspires to maintain the same discipline, it is recognised that the requirements of interactivity and linear narrative are potentially paradoxical, and a grand redesign sometime in the future is plausible, if not inevitable. Atkins (2003) later alludes to this. “One day, perhaps, the computer game will even produce its ... Ulysses, its Casablanca or its Citizen Kane.” (Atkins, 2003, p.10). Perhaps one such catalyst, or “cyberbard” (Murray, 1997) will prove the turning point in bringing game narrative to the fore.

2. Ludology

Ludology – the study of games – is an analytical framework for understanding how and why we play. In recent years the increasing popularity of video games has seen this term become almost synonymous with the digital form of play, and this will be the implied context through the remainder of the dissertation.

Identifying the defining characteristics of a digital game is a difficult task. While it is important to agree on the subject explored in this paper, adequate research into its identity demands more consideration than can be afforded here. Superficially, the digital game can be separated from its technologically close cousins such as e-learning, online virtual conferences, and NASA simulator programs on the basis that their primary reason for existing is not to entertain. Under different constraints, this paper would re-qualify the need to 'entertain' with a term more focused on facilitating interpersonal growth. The game is – if you will – and end in itself, rather than a tool for other purposes (like the calculator).

The video game brazenly lifts its name from the activities carried out on the playground, sports field, and playing board, inheriting the same marriage of rules and objectives. Carr et al (2006) recognise the board game as being particularly inspirational for many types of digital game. They observe the similarities of the *Dungeons & Dragons* series (TSR, 1974) as ancestral to adventure-oriented digital titles like *Baldur's Gate* (BioWare, 1998) and the popular Final Fantasy series (each comprehensively case studied by Carr et al, 2006).

For this discussion, we move forward on the broad assumption that the main difference between the digital game and its analogue brethren (the board game, poker game, etc.) is in the nature of how rules are obeyed. Digital games can obey thousands of rules every second and faultlessly exercise the charge of upholding them. Though more rules can allow for more complex games, this is not the primary differentiation between the digital game and its

analogue counterparts. Instead, it is the utopian consistency – removing the fate of the human from his or her own unreliable hands – that allows the reader to interact in a completely unbiased universe. The die are never fixed, and with a world created on an infinitely complex series of rules without risk of interference or miscalculation, all manner of new possibilities open up.

The digital game is a product of both divine logic, and the human desire to explore.

The spectacle

To understand the opposing interests of interactivity and non-linear narrative in games, it is necessary to explain the inessential nature of the spectacle in its company. This is the dramatic special effect; the finishing move; the supernova explosion that both attracts and awards the player.

An introduction to the player's lexicography may help to serve this purpose. The terms 'video game', 'computer game', and 'digital game' are used interchangeably through this text, and refer to the same underlying concept of a recreational interactive computer program that usually incorporates a display as the primary form of interface with a human (typically referred to as 'the reader' in this dissertation) (Carr et al, 2006, p.4-5).

For the purposes of further reading outside of this text, please note that each of the main sources cited prefer their own combination of terms, and meanings can be slightly different. On the whole, there is little noteworthy variation in the delivery of narrative across different platforms such as computers, mobile phones, consoles, and arcade machines. All of these devices facilitate recreational interactive programs, and can be considered equal in their capacity to relay narrative. The reader need not divert attention trying to appreciate the nuances of game projection for the purposes of this discussion, nor the technological differences.

To illustrate the hold of graphical output on the game, I will briefly elaborate on some of the commonly used terms amongst gaming enthusiasts. The computer game will be played via a desktop computer with the aid of a monitor, while a video game is played using a home console (such as a Sony Playstation) connected to a television. Video games are also associated with handheld gaming devices – portable consoles with in-built liquid crystal displays.

None of these terms are particularly satisfactory for those seeking to reverse the crude stereotypes associated with games: "[The term] 'video game' over-stresses sight with no reference to cognitive understanding" (Atkins, 2003, p.20). There are also sound technical reasons for revising the usage of these terms. *Real Sound: Kaze no Regret* (Sega, 1999) is an example of an audio game that was commercially released and designed for visually impaired Japanese gaming enthusiasts. It features no graphical output whatsoever, and narrative is conveyed via audio instruction in the game. The reader listens to the instruction and then enters the desired response with their controller. Such games – which feature no visual cues – are extremely rare, though they boast both the interactive and recreational requirements that constitute a digital game.

Disassociating the spectacle with the very *being* of the game is difficult, but it is essential for us to continue exposing the barest bones of the subject material. When we discuss the many ways in which narrative are expressed in the next chapter, this multi-modality can divert attention from the game's core characteristics.

Ludologists

Despite the immaturity of games studies, there is one semi-formal movement that endeavours to bring the interactivity of game design to a focal position. In

the specific context of digital games studies, 'ludologists' refers to a group of people who probably established their ideals during the era of non-digital board games (when the imaginations of Tolkien and other fiction writers bled into the humble board game) and believe that the purpose of any game is to completely and believably immerse the player in a virtual world. This immersion could hypothetically reach the stage of the reader being unable to distinguish the manufactured environment from reality (Frasca, 1999). Perhaps the most famous portrayal of this concept is the Holodeck in Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* (1966). This empty room can be programmed to reproduce any environment and contain characters and physics indistinguishable from the real world (Jenkins, 1998).

The approach of ludologists differs to that of the narrativist (as we will see in the next chapter) because they would prefer to see this immersion brought about not through tangible audience interaction, but through passive receipt of narrative. The general consensus is that many of today's games marry linear storytelling with audience interaction, as Majewski (2003) recognises: "most commercially available games of today do have some form of narrative" (Majewski, 2003, p.16).

Though the integration of linear narrative elements is commonplace in today's game, and has been for as long as technology has permitted their inclusion, it is not the sole source of satisfaction for the reader. This extract from a reader's letter published in a major UK video game industry magazine demonstrates the conflict between interactivity and narrative:

"I couldn't help but feel taken aback by Hironobou Sakaguchi's claim in [Edge issue] 182 that 'we don't see enough emotion in video games yet'. Now, I've always enjoyed Final Fantasy and the works of Sakaguchi, but given his talk of Lost Odyssey's 'graphical realism' and its backstory being penned by an acclaimed novelist, it stung me to think that such an experienced game designer could only put the emotional strength of a game down to its graphical and narrative prowess." (Kelly, 2008).

Kelly (2008) – in the role of ludologist – presents a familiar disaffection between reader and author. They are battling one another on the very essence of the game, locked in conflict about methodology while sharing a common goal – emotional response in the reader. While not all players feel like Kelly – many share Sakaguchi's view – he does legitimately question whether non-interactive forms of storytelling have a place in the decidedly interactive medium of digital games at all.

Just as this chapter presents a case for not automatically associating the spectacle with the game, or underestimating the importance of hands-on readerly participation with the text, so the next chapter challenges our understanding of how we perceive narrative in games.

3. Narrative

Because narrative is a substantial area of study, further assumptions have to be made to keep within the word limit for this dissertation. At the core of any narrative in a novel, film, game, theatre play, or other such ‘container’, is the presence of conflict (Levi-Strauss cited by Campsall, 2005). This conflict can ensue between any number of entities or within a single being. Regardless of how abstractly the conflict is presented, at least two opposing forces must encounter each other in some form.

Despite the narrative concept’s infinite complexity, it is absolutely right for us to consider it in the simplest possible terms given the broad spectrum of art forms we want to apply our definition to here. A fittingly succinct candidate sees the narrative as “a chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space” (Bordwell and Thompson, 2001).

If we establish the nature of our universe as suggested by Bordwell and Thompson (2001), then we must next turn our attention to occupying it with interesting objects. The significance of these objects to the universe, their neighbouring objects, and the reader is what becomes defined by the narrative. It is the literary equivalent of dark matter – allowing context to exist for the reader (see the discussion on social semiotics in the next chapter). “Each narrative has two parts: a story (histoire)... and a discourse (discours), that is... the means by which the content is communicated” (Chatman, 1980).

As a final consideration to this abridged introduction to narrative, we should remember that despite the writer’s strong authorial control over pacing and structure of the story, the final interpretation of narrative lies with the reader; invariably biased by his external conditioning to the universe before him. “Non-linguistic cues... combine to construct a narrative that will be unique to each reader” (Atkins, 2003, p. 72).

The existence of narrative in at least some games is irrefutable. Many feature advanced plots involving complex characters, while others – such as *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1977) – feature only an essential narrative to accompany its essential game play. Ironically, the more basic the game becomes, the more difficult it can be to distinguish ludic qualities (goals, rules) from narrative ones. Before exemplifying this, let us consider a more easily classifiable text. The cliché characters and environments of a Mario game – such as the princess, dragon, and castles – telegraph the narrative immediately, and (if the game is completed) culminates in a Cinderella story where the expression of how good triumphs over evil is done in a predictable, linear format. This is a reasonably easy narrative to categorise and map to our experiences in other art forms.

Along with its minimalistic narrative, *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1977) does not have a happy ending. Using Majewski's (2003) approach to deciding the narrative of the Monopoly board game, we can try to express the narrative of *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1977). "Monopoly can be considered as a narrative of an individual person's rise to wealth within the capitalist system" (Majewski, 2003, p.3). *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1977) – with no ending in the obvious sense – can be considered a narrative of a resistance to an alien invasion which ultimately ends in defeat for the resisting sentry. It may not be a Shakespearean tragedy, but this is a form of pathos, and a more advanced concept than Mario's adventure because of its anti-structure.

Pong (Atari Inc, 1972) – one of the first games released to the mainstream public, and simpler than *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1977) in almost every way – further demonstrates this increase in narrative ambiguity as the game concept is deconstructed. In relaying the narrative of a recently completed game of *Pong* (Atari Inc, 1972), one tends to inadvertently romanticise the events as a sports commentator might recap a game of Tennis. The white rectangles on the screen, for example, often adopt the names of the people who operate the control devices. While this mapping is almost instantaneous, if not automatic, the absence of gravity, racquets, umpires, and a clear victory message show

how important the reader is in dictating at least some of the narrative components.

Whether the phenomenon of the reader spawning narrative is due to an as-yet unappreciated quality of these simple games, or if it is testament to the human's optimism when presented with a poor reading, is largely irrelevant. The fact is that however simple the game's narrative may appear to be, the process of its creation is anything but, and each reader will invariably have a unique interpretation of the same text.

Borrowed narrative devices

The word 'borrowed' is meant in the academic sense to describe the act of one author taking inspiration from another author. Historically this has been done with varying degrees of acknowledgement to the original source, and this uncertainty between paying tribute and stealing has been the source of much controversy through the ages. The spirit in which the game draws its inspiration is not discussed here, but as we will see, the amount of borrowing is considerable.

Atkins (2003) and Majewski (2003) talk at length about the significance of cinematic cutscenes in some games. These brief interludes – also known as full motion videos (Atkins, 2003, p.34-36) – typically sandwich interactive experiences. Their existence is justified by designers as a respite or reward for completing an interactive sequence in a game. Such linear interludes are more consistent with a scene in a movie, and have been argued to counteract the very purpose of a game's existence (see chapter: 1. Ludology).

The cutscenes fully inhibit the reader from being able to interact in the game, and control of their avatar (the protagonist in the story) will oftentimes be assumed by the game itself as the linear narrative unfolds. The average duration is about one minute. Carr et al (2006) comprehensively reviews the

narrative of *Final Fantasy VII* (Square, 1997), a game laden with dozens of cutscenes that are experienced by the reader across the thirty plus hours required to complete the game. As their review unfolds it becomes clear how important the game's cutscenes are in forming their judgement.

One particular cutscene midway through the game sees a major character – Aeris – unexpectedly killed by the game's nemesis. While the details of the cutscene's events are unimportant for this discussion, the traumatic effect this untimely death has on the avatar proves a major force in his emotional development through the rest of the game, and ultimately has a substantial effect on the greater narrative. Furthermore, it is a poignant moment for the reader who is made to endure this amiable character's untimely demise.

This example poses a myriad of questions about the cutscene phenomenon in game narrative, not the least of which being: 'why remove interactivity from a key event in a game at all?' It is also pertinent that one of the apparent ironies is that Aeris can be killed and resurrected by the player an infinite number of times ahead of this scene without any significant emotional response from the reader (or the avatar). Yet when Aeris dies during the cutscene it is terminal – she cannot be revived later in the game – and the reader somehow knows it.

While Carr et al (2006) fall short of estimating how much character and plot development transpires because of these cutscenes, and how much transpires because of the medium's 'native' narrative vehicles (see below: Original and evolved narrative devices) we can assume that the former figures substantially. The same assumption can be made from Majewski's (2003) study of the "complex" diegetic narration that unfolds in Max Payne (Remedy Entertainment, 2001). He is seemingly unaware that virtually all of the narrative he dissects and hails as inspirational to the game emerges exclusively from the intermittent cutscenes (Majewski, 2003, p.36).

But if non-interactive narrative development plays at least some part in games – and *Final Fantasy VII's* (Square, 1997) patchwork structure of gameplay plus cutscenes is now the de facto standard – then it is surprising that they have failed to gain favour with the critics. Far from being acknowledged as

integral, Atkins (2003) refers to the phenomenon of cutscenes as “peripheral” (Atkins, 2003, p.57), while Majewski (2003) likens playing games with cutscenes to “being forced to read a chapter of a book between games of ping pong” (Majewski, 2003, p.11). Majewski (2003) is unapologetic in questioning their right to be there at all. Despite each author’s uneasiness with the cutscene, they tellingly devote sections of their respective critiques to the subject, further demonstrating that (for the time being at least) the cutscene is here to stay.

As the cutscene sequence might be considered an example of borrowing from cinematic media to help drive narrative through the game, so the presentation of fictional literature in games is equally derivative. Many types of game have evolved to contain a large volume of scripted conversation (see, as a conservative example, the 480 page script of *Wing Commander IV* (Origin Systems, 1995) in Majewski, 2003, p.29). As these games are played out, and the reader bears witness to the discourse shared between the inhabitants of the game world and the avatar, so pages of text are imparted on the screen via subtitles or dialogue boxes. They are presented in similar fashion to dialogue in a script for a play. The character’s name is displayed; followed by a colon; followed by the content.

The reader offers control the speed with which the characters of text stream across the dialogue box, tailoring the delivery to the reader’s convenience (see Appendix a1). Once the dialogue box is full, that text will remain until the reader presses a button to tell the game that they are ready to read more. This highly customisable and interactive narrative delivery system is less intrusive than the cutscene because the reader is involved in its presentation.

Yet it has not made the leap from paper to pixels without having to adapt. Along with the control of display speed, a subtle sound effect will often accompany each letter as it appears on the screen. One of numerous games to exploit this is *Zelda: Twilight Princess* (Nintendo, 2006). When the user presses a button down, the text appears on the screen more quickly, and the sound effect is played at the same tempo to satisfy the reader that their action is having the desired effect. Though this textual method of communicating is

still closely linked in origin to the theatrical script, its porting to the game environment has certainly been helped by some (for want of a better term) ludic tinkering. The next section of this chapter looks more closely at how imported narrative methods are being evolved to accommodate interactivity, as well as considering narrative traits wholly native to the game.

Original and evolved narrative devices

The game borrows its share of narrative devices from other places, some to better effect than others. The integration of the cutscene is an example that has not fared so well, and looks to ludologists as though a movie reel was cut up and the remnants unceremonious spliced into the game. Other attempts to communicate events – such as the dialogue box – not only complement the interactivity of the game (by, for example, clarifying rules or assisting the reader in finding something important), but have contributed to interactivity in their own right.

While the game's embracing of scripted dialogue has seen a surprising amount of change from its static paper-based origin, it is arguably not distinct enough in its new form to be considered a native trait. After all, the reader can only change the speed with which the text is relayed, and does not have the resources to effect an impromptu conversation. Nonetheless, this is subjective, and it may eventually become recognised as indigenous. The addition of emoticons and custom anime glyphs (tiny graphics) in particular, has already outlived its stay as a fad (see Appendix a2).

There are two other compelling 'evolutions' of traditional narrative vehicles that have challenged the perceived narrative deficiencies of games in recent years. One is the emergence of dynamic sound. At the end of the last century, Poole (2000) recognised an increased interest in the games industry to accommodate music that could adapt to the player's actions (Poole, 2000, p.

83). In the decade since that book's release, we see games like *Super Mario Galaxy* (Nintendo, 2007) utilise an array of on-the-fly music editing to add atmosphere, telegraph danger, and otherwise offer instruction. If the player enters a precarious area, for example, the bass riff subtly changes and becomes more foreboding. In other areas, collecting a special item plays a single note, and the subsequent collection of other items in the right order causes more musical notes to be played in turn. This eventually culminates in a familiar tune, its tempo dictated by the speed in which your avatar collects the items.

Having a personalised musical experience to accompany a game may not prompt the emotional response of having *your* favourite band perform *your* set list, but – like those dialogue boxes – it is beginning to feel like a well polished addition to the game's narrative arsenal. Could this continued development one day result in a tailored musical accompaniment reminiscent of the moment Lennon and McCartney (1967) first combined two of their songs to create the seminal: *A day in the life* (Lennon and McCartney, 1967)?

A second development of a recycled narrative device exists in "Pseudo-interactive" cutscenes (Majewski, 2003, p.37), such as those seen in *Resident Evil IV* (Capcom, 2005). These blur the boundaries between game and cinema, usually adhering to the following formula: a cutscene commences, and at prescripted points in the playback a series of simple instructions briefly appear on the screen. The reader hastily realises that they are required to enter the corresponding button combinations on their controller in accordance with the instructions (see Appendix a3). Importantly, they have only a second or so to do it. Successfully punching in the right keys quickly results in a positive outcome for the reader. If, for example, the enemy is about lunge at the avatar, this prompts the character to jump out of harm's way. Failure to enter the button presses in the right order (or in time) typically results in death. Extending the previous example, this might mean that the avatar fails to move at all and is killed.

The very simplicity of this design makes it appealing to the ludologist – probably the last person one would expect to approve of anything related to

the cutscene. Its selling point is the direct connection it has with the human reflex (a ludic holy grail), and the tension forged when the game's very survival depends on the outcome the scene. It seems the threat of death – the 'game over' screen – can shift a text from being involving to being truly immersive (Atkins, 2003, p.70). Ironically, this 'pseudo-interactive' cousin is not a radical departure from the original linear outcast, and has certainly not undergone the facelift of the scripted dialogue in its new incarnation. This may be testament to how refinement is preferable to overhaul in narrative decices in games.

If the borrowing of the movie scene can impress the purists of the game world; demonstrably enhance emotional return for all readers; and show empathy for interaction, then one might argue this is evidence of narrative sophistication by some exponents of the game. In the next chapter, we explore this possibility in detail.

It is debatable whether the borrowing of so many narrative devices indicates a perceived shortage of native narrative resources available to game designers. One thing is clear, however. Cutscenes, scripted dialogue, musical ambience, and more have become a staple part of the modern gaming experience. It is probably too early to establish whether the integration of foreign narrative devices complements the ludic flow of games, or whether history will remember them as placeholders... gradually replaced in later years by native narrative traits.

4. Game narrative sophistication

In the previous chapter, we discussed the possibility of game narrative existing in many forms, perhaps even in the earliest, most humble exponents such as *Pong* (Atari Inc, 1972). In this chapter we consider the current state of narrative sophistication in games. We might qualify sophistication in exponents of both the game and other art forms as demonstrating at least a potential to contribute to the greater world of narrative, attracting interest from other creative circles. An example of this lateral influence is seen in some book-to-film 'conversions' like Tolkien's (1954) Lord of the Rings empire, or the infallible Bond movies inspired by Fleming's (1953) novels. In these examples, the success is in transferring stories from one medium to the other, while retaining the ability to tell them in similar ways.

This discussion will not attempt to prove that games have already spawned a cross-pollination in their own right, or that they are necessarily on the verge of doing so. But we will look at three reasons why attaining this level of sophistication is a strong possibility providing the game can continue its honeymoon in popular culture.

For

The first reason for us to expect a seminal work is already being experienced by readers of modern games. The borrowing, assimilation, and development of other narrative devices offer limitless opportunity for growth. Newly emerging ways of relaying the story – like we have seen with dynamic sound (see chapter 3: Narrative: Original and evolved narrative devices) – can arguably be classed as unique to the game, helping to establish an original narrative identity for the medium. As these traits continue to develop and explore new "evolutionary alleys" (Poole, 2000, p.16), they become further

removed from their original influence, and eventually branch off entirely. There is a real possibility of these narrative devices one day combining to create a whole greater than the sum of its parts (see chapter: 5. Authorship in games: The endless work).

The second encouraging sign for narrative in games is the increasing array of structural support being designed to make narrative accessible to the reader. Defining boundaries such as the fourteen line rule of the sonnet, or the chapter structure of the novel, create a consistent environment for narrative to flourish. The reader becomes proficient at reading these kinds of text, supported by a familiar roadmap to suggest narrative flow. Some of these structures are also very portable: “The oldest and most often used structure in narrative, whether it be a film, book, or a theatre play, is the restorative three or four act structure” (Majewski, 2003, p.31).

As the decades roll on, the game is showing signs of deciding its own models for hosting narrative – primarily through natural selection. Majewski (2003) proposes four structures of game which would probably line up with the views of Carr et al (2006), Atkins (2003), and Juul (1998). Though we do not need to understand them in detail for this dissertation, a brief overview illustrates the variety of parameters that are sculpting the game’s form:

> String of Pearls. This is the most linear approach – where one event invariably follows another. The reader has no option to traverse a significantly different path in the game. The defining characteristic is that there is only one ending (excluding the ‘game over’ screen). Examples include *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985), *House of the Dead 2* (Sega, 1998), *Assassin’s Creed* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2007).
>
> Branching Storyline. This is a primarily linear structure which occasionally offers route deviations. It usually accommodates about three to six different endings. Examples: *Castlevania II* (Konami, 1987), *Chrono Trigger* (Square, 1995), *Wing Commander IV* (Origin Systems, 1995).

Amusement park. This is the category that *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo, 1986), *Final Fantasy* (Square, 1987), and other role playing games fall into. They are not defined by the number of endings available, but by the high degree of freedom afforded to the reader in their exploration of the game world.

Building block. This type has no prescribed narrative. Games like *Sim City* (Maxis, 1989), *Civilisation* (Microprose, 1991), and the upcoming *Spore* (Maxis) leave the reader to create their own worlds with few authorial guidelines suggested.

Other kinds of structures exist in various genres of game, including incremental boss battles, the level structure, and bonus rounds, and have been familiar pacers of game interaction for decades. Their positioning with the spectacle (see chapter: 2. Ludology), however, may be obscuring their true consequence to game narrative's continual remoulding.

The theory of social semiotics (or semiology) in the sociolinguistic sense deals with how meaning is conveyed. Where the story is the plot, and the narrative is the delivery of that plot, social semiotics is the specific narrative act of communicating meaning. Semiology studies two major functions of narrative, the first of which is projecting the meaning of story elements to the reader. The second function communicates the nature of those elements' relationships amongst one another to the reader. Without going into detail about how semiology impacts our reading of a text, we can consider it the force that endears us to one character; alienates us from another character; yet permits us to understand their separate interpersonal relationships. Consider the role of 'the mole' in TV dramas – even if the reader is shown the identity of the enemy at the start of the show, the protagonist does not necessarily share this knowledge at the same time, or learn of it in the same way.

A more ambitious, though possibly too literal, reading of Carr et al's (2006) analysis of social semiotics (Carr et al, 2006, p.74 -75) reveals an enticing

third possibility for championing game narrative. Their study of social semiotics cites M.A.K. Halliday's (1985) observations on interaction as conducive to narrative development. One particular Hallidayan observation emphasises the importance of communication between author and reader. In almost all other forms of narrative, this is the non-participatory process of the writer imaginatively finding ways of driving the plot forward – using alliteration, iambic pentameter, breaking temporal continuity, etc. The measures of success are the reader's understanding of the imparted plot, and achieving the desired emotional response in the reader.

The inherent problem with this model in traditional story containers (and again, this is a very literal reading of Halliday's theory) is that the author and reader have no way of knowing that they are following one another. The interactive elements of conversation such as the shrug; the nod; the frown, all show the author that the reader is following their narrative thread. The game can take obvious advantage of this by stalling the reader's progression until she successfully comprehends what needs to be done to comply with the text. Importantly – if these gestures indicate otherwise – the author can revise their delivery until the reader clicks. Because of the nature of literature, it is not uncommon for a teacher to expose a student's incorrect reading of a John Donne poem in the classroom with only the most elementary questions. The readers' barriers of entry with texts of this age are obvious, though we often take them for granted because we no longer experience them ourselves. The game's reader can use direct communication to ensure the text is accessible to them.

Spoon feeding narrative in the ways implied here takes a lot away from the craftsmanship of telling a story. Yet it is more evidence of the game being able to challenge narrative convention in a way that cannot happen in other art forms: "if conventional narratives make statements, game narratives also ask questions and give orders" (Carr et al, 2006, p.74 -75). The interactivity of the game – far from being contrary to the narrative – may in fact be vital to its development in the game.

Against

For all the reasons to feel optimistic about the future of storytelling in games, Majewski's (2003) accusation of "narrative poverty" (Majewski, 2003, p.11) remains accurate some five years after the publication of his thesis. While there is a consensus amongst the authors cited in this paper that the fictitious stories and narratives delivered through games are typically of a poor quality, it is not necessarily brought about due to negligence on the part of game designers. Acclaimed writers have been involved in scripting the underlying stories of games for over a decade (Thriller Writer Tom Clancy, for example, has been prolific through his work on *Splinter Cell* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2002), *Ghost Recon* (Ubisoft, 2001), and *Rainbow Six* (Red Storm Entertainment, 1998)) (Waters, 2002), and the 2007 / 2008 writers' strike was deemed a genuine threat to the development of some titles in the games industry (Edge, 2007). While the impact was ultimately negligible – the effects of the strikes were felt far more widely in film than games or comic books – the threat highlighted how important writing had become to some types of game.

The true reason for perennially unsuccessful script integration in games may be altogether simpler: the strict temporal controls that are employed by authors for creating contemporary fiction in literature are depreciated in games. Trying to impose a game scenario that allows a controlled flow of dialogue between characters, while at the same time giving the reader freedom to exercise their will, creates stark conflicts of interest. For example, if an emotional dialogue is underway between the avatar and a non-player character, and the game is frozen in limbo mid-point (waiting for the player to press a button to present the next page of text), the writer's delicate and omniscient control of flow is relinquished. The definition of gameplay, to interact, clashes with the writer's instinct to break from a mimetic approach (showing), and accommodate at least the occasional diegetic passage (recounting by narrating in the past tense).

Consider, for example, the moment's pause in the film *Gone with the Wind* (Warner Home Video, 1940), and the final exchange between Scarlett and

Rhett (it is bookended with the line: “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn”). If this scene were recreated in a game, and the reader controlled the avatar of Rhett, it would not be desirable for them to dictate the duration of pause between Scarlett and Rhett’s exchange, as the reader could conceivably delay the response indefinitely. Indeed, were we to accommodate the stereotypical ludologist’s view of prioritising the reader’s control above all else, we might even demand that the reader be able to decide the choice of words, variation of dialect, and tone of response. In this situation, the odds of conceiving as apt a retort in terms of emotional impact is infinitesimal. This example emphasises the difficulty scriptwriters face in trying to transfer their skills to game design.

This debilitating loss of writing control, coupled with designers’ antiquated tendencies to require overtly dramatic stories for their games, may explain the bottleneck. The result is little more considered than “moving one big bang to the next” (Atkins, 2003, p.56), and may account for the reason why generic narrative events are regurgitated; they crudely approximate the balance of interactivity and spectacle. Often one of the game’s non-player characters will relay words of the following effect to the avatar: “come back here when you are ready to continue”. In layman’s terms this permits the reader to perform non-perfunctory actions for an unlimited time, on the understanding that once they do return they must experience a passage of uninterrupted, non-interactive imparting of the next story fragment.

Atkins (2003) seems to have abandoned hope of game writers being able to facilitate a quality plot in the current climate, even before the temporal limitations arise. Regarding the in-game story, he writes: “how they are told and how they are read... concerns us... far more than the content of their stories” (Atkins, 2003, p.58). The combined effects of limited temporal control and a volatile co-dependent relationship with interactivity make traditional ways of communicating the plot difficult to realise.

No such practical issues have plagued the development of aesthetic expression in games, however, as the believability of characters, environments, animation and sound have increased as quickly as technology

has allowed. Yet despite these achievements, few interested in game narrative consider this a commitment that can assist narrative discovery: “Some species of game… turned at certain points down evolutionary blind alleys and failed to develop, concentrating instead, like the peacock, on attracting partners with ever more lurid visual displays.” (Poole, 2000, p.16). While Poole (2000) stops short of claiming the pursuit of realism is damaging to the game, Atkins (2003) is less inhibited: “Narrative consistency often becomes subservient to the demands of the promise of the spectacle”(Atkins, 2003, p.56).

This outright indifference to realism is compelling, not least because humans have always had a tendency to underestimate the effect of the spectacle in art – “The world is still deceived with ornament.” (The Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare). In games, however, the immediacy of communication with minimal noise is critical. Game controllers are ergonomic; enemies are blatant; and keys open doors... affordability is everything. There is nothing inherently threatening to narrative expression, then, in ensuring the player’s immersion in a game is not broken because the dragons look like ducks (see Appendix a5). This is an example of how a finite implementation of the spectacle can serve the interest of the ludologists; it clarifies the reader’s relationship with the universe around them.

The scapegoating of the spectacle is no defence for the poverty of the narrative. The lack of flexibility in adapting to the restraints of the game is made worse by the apparent inability to take advantage of its unique qualities, such as the open mindedness of its readers to the anti-structure (‘game over’ scenario): “A tension that exceeds that available within film or prose” (Atkins, 2003, p.44). Though the commercial success of the game has helped bring its many pleasures to a great number of people quickly, it has simultaneously neglected innovation through storytelling.

5. Authorship in digital games

Game designers create characters, weapons, buildings, heads up displays, and all of the visible elements of the universe. They also cue and dictate the behaviour of gravity, friction between the wheel and the racetrack, and the majority of other causes and effects. They are the kings of grand designs: able to build big things, beautiful things, and generally realise a world that any author in any art form would relish the opportunity to introduce a protagonist to. Yet these amazing spectacles they effortlessly craft mask the hollow fact that their designs can never be any more than ‘things’, devoid of meaning beyond their most elementary mappings. Guns need to be picked up, cars driven, and dragons slain, but the incidentals and serendipity of, say, a detective fiction, can never be authentically reproduced. In the Film the *Usual Suspects* (Universal Pictures, 1995), for example, the police officer recognises that their interviewee is lying when they map elements of his stories to things lying around the police station. Pictures, newspapers, even text on a box of matches... the culprit had been fabricating his story ad-hoc all along.

In a game environment, of course, there is no guarantee that the reader will pick up on even one of these clues, or for that matter, that they will be in the right place at the right time for this to be possible. Conversely, the reader may become wise to the deceit after the first faux pas, making for an undesirably abridged story. Whatever the reading turns out to be in this hypothetical case, the odds of the reader stumbling across the outcome in the way that the designer had envisaged are slim. The authorial controls of the designers simply do not extend to the game’s protagonist, who is – as we see in the next section – a reflection of any number of other people. Because anyone can come along and read the game, the game’s universe has to be idiot-proofed, and everything therein focused on the grandest gestures to maximise the chances of getting the message across. While the interpretation of the designer’s work is finally resolved by the game’s reader (as it is in any other

art form), we will see in the remainder of this chapter how the game's reader also has the unique opportunity of being able to talk back to the designer.

The reader

The one obvious demonstration of the reader's authorial control in games is in the temporal sense – "providing the player with some authorial abilities is the main reason for having non-linearity in games at all" (Majewski, 2003, p.42). Excluding non-interactive narrative devices like the cutscene, the role of pacing the main character's development can only lie with the reader. The designer may offer numerous sensory cues to encourage the reader to grow, but the manor of execution of their wishes does not sit with them as it does a script writer. In a game like *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo, 1986), for example, the protagonist is ill-equipped to traverse the world they occupy at the start of the game. They have no strength to move blockades; no keys to unlock doors; and no sword to defeat the enemies. Various items are acquired during the adventure to overcome these challenges, and each may evidence growth. Importantly, when the character has grown an appropriate amount, and is able to battle the final enemy of the game, many of the items gained en route no longer serve any purpose. The keys acquired, for example, serve no use in the final encounter, yet without them it would have been impossible to get to that stage. The character still carries them around, like a souvenir, as though to remind the reader how far they have come.

Even the 'game over' screen – which ostensibly appears to be the perfect example of the game designer exercising authorial control – exists precisely because the reader can contribute to the storytelling. If the appearance of the 'game over' screen represents the equivalent break in immersion of failing to follow the plot in a movie, then serious authorial control cannot lie with the reader (Atkins, 2003, p.71). Death haunts every moment of the avatar's life – especially in older games – and the reader may fail to correctly read the text hundreds of times before they finally perform the game's equivalent of turning the last page, gripped by the promise of closure (in games, this usually means a prolonged final boss battle). Such a perception could account for why many people are not interested in games. The inaccessibility of the text is

comparable to a foreign language film without subtitles, where the trial and error process of extracting meaning becomes tiresome. Markedly lowering the barrier for entry is equally undesirable as completing the game text too quickly contravenes its ludic purpose – to challenge.

There are legitimate arguments for people taking this stance. After all – the words ‘game’ and ‘over’, when put in this order, leave no room for confusing meaning, and certainly appear to be a concrete reminder that game authorship lies with the designer. Yet regular game readers will argue that ‘game over’ is more like a narrative failsafe than a call to radically revise the approach taken to the game’s reading. Like the brief montages of past events that introduce episodes of TV dramas, the result of the avatar dying presents an opportunity for the reader to step back in time and re-absorb meaning. Like the TV montage: many ‘game over’ screens do not actually return the reader to the very start of the text, but to an earlier more familiar point in the story instead.

Regardless of which of these explanations we agree with, the ‘game over’ screen appears because the reader scripted and enacted the protagonist’s behaviour immediately preceding it. They reacted to the designers’ attempts to express the environment and create conflict, and the reader decided the very textual detail of the response (Atkins, 2003, p.77). Significantly, the reader was not charged with some minor role in the furthering of narrative (like an extra at the back of the set), they were allowed to decide the finite detail of the reading’s most valuable asset: its main character. And as we know to be the case in any other text in any other form, it is the detail of the character that strengthens our bond with the reading. Even the vocabulary of the game seems to recognise the reader’s divine right to impact the story, The Sanskrit word ‘Avatar’ “refers to the embodiment of a god on earth” (Carr et al, 2006, p.72).

If we accept that the reader is also the co-author to some extent, then it is wholly unusual to experience the author of a work attempting to master the nuances of their character’s behaviour before they are able to make grander decisions about the remainder of the story. When children are asked to create

their own fictional short story they might start with a princess; a robot; killer bees; or a pony, but few will begin with the theory of the hero's inner flaw (Majewski, 2003, p.13-18) and work backwards to accommodate it. In reality, of the course, the reader cannot project anything approaching this level of personalisation on the avatar. But if game designers shift their attention to increasing the range of ways the reader can impact the rest of the game through his avatar, a style of legitimate authorship may emerge with the reader (Atkins, 2003, p.50).

The endless work

The final part of this chapter returns to the topic of the sophistication of game narrative (see chapter: 4. Game narrative sophistication), and the notion of the 'endless work' (Juul, 1998). Regardless of the authorial blurring in any art form, there comes a stage where some texts have been so exhaustively studied that their content becomes the product of neither reader nor author. In modern times, the novel *Catch 22* (Heller, 1961) has attracted this kind of obsession; the snowballing effect of different interest groups continuously devising new reasons for revisiting the book. This becomes a perpetual motion that means new slants on exhausted topics soon digress to become new interpretations of old interpretations. This rare cultural poster-boy is not elevated so illustriously because of outstanding plot and storytelling alone, it is also fuelled by hype, fads, and chinese whispers. Also conducive to the phenomenon are the flaws in the perfection which always leave room for new ideas (however abstract they may be).

Atkins' (2003) discussion on subversive text addresses some readers' compulsions to test the technological limits of the games they play. Specifically, the reader uses the toolsets (such as weapons and jumping ability) made available to them by the game designers to generate an event not anticipated by those legitimate designers. An example of this exists in the

game *Metroid II* (Nintendo, 1991). Several online communities have documented the existence of ‘secret worlds’ which can only be accessed by taking advantage of glitches (or bugs) in the game (Bob74j, 2008). With a great deal of luck and patience, some walls can be travelled through to gain access to a kind of negative space (see Appendix a4).

These realms contain glitched graphical artefacts and warped game physics. They are unknown to the game designers, and are stumbled upon by accident by what Atkins (2003) and Majewski (2003) might deem inquisitive and rebellious readers (Atkins, 2003, p.50). These tend to be readers who feel they have exhausted much of what a game has to offer, yet are afforded the opportunity to subversively read the text further due to the unique make-up of the game. Whether these subversive readings represent anything more than the metaphorical equivalent of chopping up lines of verse to create a new poem is debatable (some of David Bowie’s lyrics, it is alleged, were constructed in part by randomly selecting words from the dictionary), but they offer hope that new discussions in this traditionally disposable art form may continue to emerge for years to come.

In the design sense, the rooms in *Metroid II* (Nintendo, 1991) exist purely by accident, consisting of little more than graphical ‘artefacts’ (on-screen garbage) and probably offering no narrative progression. Yet these optional, tangential experiences seem to strengthen the bond the reader has with the main narrative thread. Lamentably, Atkins (2003) backtracks on his discovery almost immediately: “This is not Dadaist poetry or the cut up texts of William Burroughs, where the random juxtaposition of prose fragments produces the aesthetic product. One is always reminded... that the inability to read correctly... is a consequence of failing of reading” (Atkins, 2003, p.48). This final point relates to the inevitability of the reader having to abandon these distractions and conform to the main narrative thread.

Yet Atkins (2003) goes too far in disclaiming the appeal of subversive reading, perhaps under-appreciating either the depth of the game reader, or demand for broader exploration of the main narrative thread: “it is a strange individual indeed who is satisfied with endlessly walking around a level from which all

adversaries have been eliminated, and all blocks pushed" (Atkins, 2003, p.45). There are compelling examples to dispute this. The Gameboy Advance version of *Final Fantasy VI* (Square, 2006) permits the reader to wander around the game world after completing the game – talking to characters; visiting towns; with no ludic objective or time constraint. This is probably supported by Carr et al (2006) who at least recognise that diversion in the game is not necessarily a 'failing of reading'. "One player might ... be happy crossing and recrossing the same piece of map and slaughtering the respawning monsters, unconcerned about resolution" (Carr et al, 2006, p.44).

6. Conclusion

This text has endeavoured to present an overview of the nature of narrative in today's digital games. We began by considering what a video game is and how narrative is conveyed within the reading experience. To achieve the former I deconstructed the game and discussed how entertainment value and interactivity are defining characteristics. We also considered how the use of graphics and visual display is not necessarily a vital feature for reading some games, contravening some widely held assumptions. In the second chapter we proposed that narrative can exist in even the most primitive games, and discussed the human's tendency to project their own characteristics and experiences on elements of the games they read.

With a better understanding of the key subjects, and an introduction to the notion that narrative interpretation varies from one reader to the next, we looked at how the stories themselves were being told in games. The integration of cutscenes, character dialogue, and music are acknowledged as having originated from a range of other sources before finding their way to games. The second chapter concludes by showing the game to be much more than a cosmopolitan thief and considers the ways in which some borrowed storytelling methods have evolved to become quite different in game form. To demonstrate this we analysed the pseudo-interactive cutscene in some depth, and looked at exciting developments in dynamic music.

Chapter four proposed three areas of possible growth for narrative in games. The first explored how games were developing their own sets of rules for containing and relaying narrative. The second returned to the notion of borrowed narrative devices, and highlighted the changes found in textual dialogue, cutscenes, and music. The combination of these findings suggested that the game was discovering its own narrative identity. The final proposal touched on the field of signs and meanings (social semiotics) and how interactivity was a defining element in the make-up of narrative. The game is uniquely placed to nurture a high level of interactivity between reader and writer. This is an attractive prospect to narratologists.

In the discussion of authorship in games, we considered the designer's limited control of the protagonist's development through the text. This limitation was contrasted with their ability to create aesthetically pleasing worlds which promised, superficially at least, great opportunity. The authorial role of the reader was also considered, and their complicated relationship with the designers put into perspective.

Narrative's place in the game is probably a very natural one. As the evidence in these chapters mounts it becomes clearer that interactivity and narrative are not necessarily polar opposites. In fact, my brief exploration of social semiotics indicated that this relationship could develop into a co-dependence. A harmonious authorial commitment between designer and reader would only help this relationship to develop.

The sheer volume of material available on topics such as narrative, semiotics, ludology, and media studies has meant that many assumptions have been made through this work. Though I consider each of these topics important in painting an accurate picture of game narrative, the range of material covered barely fits within the constraints of this dissertation's word limit, and it is with great reluctance that such shortcuts have been taken – this has only been done where necessary.

The online gaming and *Second Life* (Linden Research Inc, 2003) style multi-user environments were topics considered for discussion in this dissertation. It was decided early on that trying to un-weave the narrative stuff of these worlds would be comparable in complexity to understanding the narratives of society itself. As such, this dissertation has reluctantly shifted focus from the multiplayer game. It is nonetheless a controversial area of omission given that games such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) are already amongst the most played games in the world, and seem likely to grow in popularity as a prominent part of the Web 2.0 phenomenon. This may be considered an inherent limitation of the scope of the overall critique.

A great deal of thought was given to including discussion on artificial intelligence (AI) in games. The possibility of the game designer's role being

re-shaped by authorial delegation to the reader and the machine is of great personal interest to me. Unfortunately, there are few resources that consider the use of AI to generate narrative, though it may one day prove to be a worthwhile extension to this text.

Of all the concepts discussed, the notion of the ‘endless work’ is the most compelling in portraying narrative as endemic to the game. It has been described as a text that provides generations of readers with ever-new and unintended topics of discussion. At risk of over generalisation, it is the phenomenon of the imperfect whole being greater than the sum of its parts – and its adoption by the human psyche is as illogical as it is beautiful.

Examples from a Shakespearean play have followed me throughout my endeavours to commit the concept to paper. With the restorative three or four act structure already so well known to the theatrical world of 16th century England, could Shakespeare have envisaged the transcendent effect that *Hamlet* (Shakespeare) would have on the world of narrative, hundreds of years after his death? Within the confines of this structure, a complex awareness of the self emerged, including the disarming depth of a prop called Yorik, and the play within the play. Ostensibly, each is an example of gimmickry, but the impact of these scenes continue to be unravelled in classrooms and school halls around the world. Expanding on the latter example, the initially subtle irony of the audience watching an audience watching a play adopts a strange uneasiness, as the reader considers his own place in relation to the text. Like a video camera placed before a mirror, forever reflecting one another’s image until the once obvious spectacle becomes so infinitely small and complex as to be unrecognisable from itself. A kind of perpetual motion materialises with the endless work, its infinite complexity defining its nature.

As is demonstrated in the disengagement of the ‘game over’ screen, or the hollowness of Shakespeare’s tragic endings, narrative has never been required to impart more than emotion onto the reader. This is to say that questioning the sophistication of narrative is infantile: we are owed no debt of satisfaction, or closure, and can only judge the narrative on the incomplete

impression it leaves. In the purest sense then, Majewski's (2003) attempts to promote the happenings in games from dramatic to narratively sophisticated are largely unnecessary. Drama is the purest form of narrative – the anarchic, raw drive to relay a plot as soon as possible, unconcerned about exploitation of the spectacle; the generic; or the kitchen sink.

It is snobbery to assume that the game is somehow fated to alienate the literary scholar forever. However generic the narrative of the game is right now, and however confining its vision, it is only a matter of time before structure, authorial craft, and ubiquity produce the first great work. On what Poole (2000) describes as a "caffeine fuelled" journey of discovery, the best of the game is yet to come. "We should not rush to declare that we occupy a new age of representation (yet)" (Atkins, 2003, p.10).

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Films

The Usual Suspects (1998) Film. Directed by Bryan Singer. UK: Universal Pictures

Gone with the wind (1940) Film. Directed by Victor Fleming, George Cukor, Sam Wood. Warner Home Video.

Bob74j, (2008) Metroid II Glitches: Ship Glitch & More [online]. Available from: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UxBWsaxV5cs [Accessed 2nd April 2008].

Games *(selected)*

Title, (Date), Developer, Publisher.

Final Fantasy VI: Gameboy Advance (2006), Square, Nintendo

Final Fantasy VII (1997), Square

Max Payne (2001), Remedy Entertainment, Gathering of Developers

Metroid II (1991), Nintendo

Pong (1972), Atari Inc

Real Sound: Kaze no Regret (1999), Warp, Sega

Space Invaders (1978), Taito Corporation, Midway

Super Mario Galaxy (2007), Nintendo

The Legend of Zelda (1986), Nintendo

The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess (2006), Nintendo

Wing Commander IV: The price of freedom (1995), Origin Systems, Electronic Arts

8. Appendices

a. Illustrations

a1)

The speed with which the below text is presented on screen is decided by the player



a2)

Emoticons like these appear alongside text in a number of role playing games



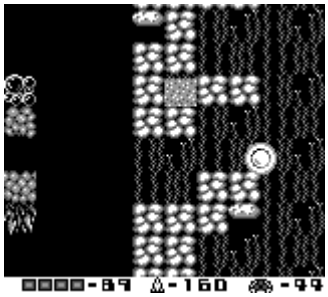
a3)

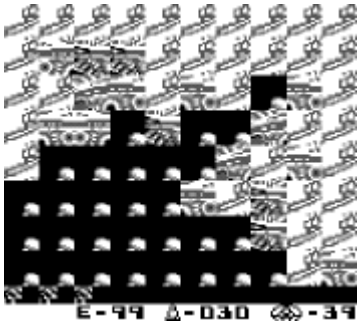
In this example, pressing 5 and 6 on the keyboard permits the character to jump out of the way of danger

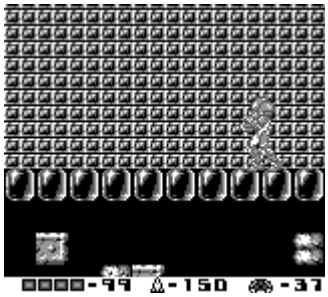


a4)

These strange worlds appear completely by accident during vigorous readings of the game

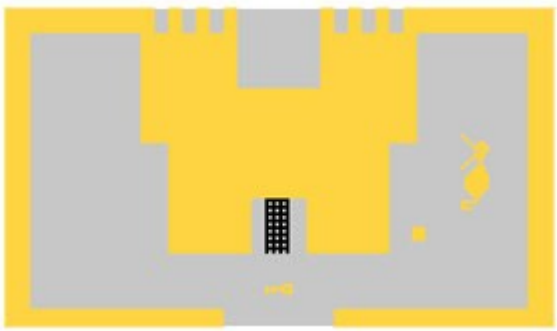






a5)

The character in the far right of this screenshot is meant to be a dragon. *Adventure* (Atari, 1977) is one of the earliest role playing games.



8. Appendices contd.

b. Critical appraisal

This dissertation has been supported by a large volume of reading material (games, books, film), and embraced areas such as narrative in literature, game design, and media studies. The serious writing did not get under way until the first week of November 2007, after several false starts and drastic revisions of the chapter structure (this is documented in the first term entries in 10. Diary). Nearly a dozen meetings with my dissertation tutor helped me to realise this work to the highest standard I could have achieved. This feel this is especially true given the prolonged research period, which I hope to carry across to future works on narrative studies. The diary logs most of these meetings, and gives a decent account of the order in which I stumbled across the various texts.

I believe that in discussing the element of social semiotics that deals with the interactivity between reader and writer, I have tackled an understudied topic. In hindsight, I believe that I took this theory slightly farther than Carr et al, by arguing that interactivity was inherent to narrative delivery in games, as all other art forms are (in the strictest sense) passive. While this is not to say games are better vessels for narrative because of it, this may be the first place that such a proposal has been made.

It is also hoped that the challenging nature of the Jenkins and Halliday texts are well received, as applying their theories to game narrative is a difficult task given the limited amount of research in the area.

Other chapters were planned for this dissertation, including:

- How authorial roles can be assumed by Artificial Intelligence.
- How game graphic designers are inspired by cubist, minimalist, and pop art movements.

It would have been interesting to compare the hypothetical role of Artificial Intelligence as a game author, with that of subversive reading. One would support the other in further demonstrating the original role of the designer in the creation of games – one that might be better considered orchestral than indicative. As it was left, I think that the subversive reading sub-chapter was a little light and unsupported. Nonetheless, I take satisfaction from the fact that this is an area that had not been discussed before outside of Atkins (2004), and that the literary comparisons drawn with the 'endless work' demonstrate some awareness of texts in other areas. Throughout this work, I do not feel I have hidden from making difficult comparisons with seemingly incomparable texts.

By appreciating how much narrative is expressed because of cutscenes in games, I think I pulled together an interesting example to demonstrate how multi-modal games are. Because this assignment was undertaken with the opinion that nothing in games is set in stone – not even the graphics and display output – I hope I expressed intent to challenge preconception from the offset, meaning there are few 'comfortable' chapters in this dissertation. Each is designed to offer pause for thought and makes no apologies for challenging the long-held opinions of other scholars. With game development moving so fast, it had to be this way, and this dissertation is equally susceptible to the passage of time.

About 2,000 words were taken out of the dissertation late on because I did not feel that there was enough evidence to support them. I was particularly keen to discuss how early game graphics were projected like the objects in a Van Gough painting: exaggeration in perspective and scale emphasising their significance in the painting. There was some support here from Poole (he talked about how cubism and minimalism may have a place in games), but I decided after writing the subversive reading section that it would be unwise to engage in another understudied topic without being able to extensively cross reference. I hope that one of the up-sides to this is that it has added weight to the original thinking I employed in the paragraphs on subversive reading, thus forgiving the lack of examples.

In discussing the increasingly consistent structures of games (such as boss battles, level by level progression) I feel I touched on a subject that was neglected by other works I researched. I would have welcomed the chance to take this further than the few paragraphs I afforded it, by making more detailed comparisons with other art forms. Does an established structure (like, say, the sonnet in poetry) help an art form to become more mature, or is it a side-effect of growth that does not necessarily matter?

The word count limitation meant that I could not discuss the diegetic and mimetic (telling and showing) limitations that exist in expressing stories in games. Majewski tackles this issue fairly comprehensively in his thesis, and in retrospect, a few more words on my part would have been helpful to the reader.

I also feel that I was a little too hasty in my conclusion in claiming that drama is synonymous with narrative. This was not changed as my findings would seem to support this. Unfortunately, I predict more research into literary narrative would likely have dissuaded me from taking this path, and I would probably have ended up being less resolute with better understanding.

A glossary would also have been included, had compiling the list of citations not demanded so much time.

Discussions of games development in this dissertation has been benefited by my participation in courses such as ‘Web Games Programming’ and ‘Multimedia Authoring’. They have offered insight into the importance of graphics, feedback, and addictive gameplay in games, and helped me focus on key ludic qualities for defining the meaning of the game in the first chapter. The course ‘Human Computer Interaction’ made me acutely aware of the importance of usability, and was equally helpful in identifying how gameplay could be enhanced with a decent user interface and responsive input. The 2nd year course ‘Content Design’ was especially valuable in providing a stepping stone for discussing how meaning is relayed through information systems, and was an excellent precursor to the basics of semiotics.

8. Appendices contd.

c. Diary *(selected entries)*

Term 1

Week 0 (starting 30.09.07)

Friday 0.1 hrs

Talked to Robert about the possibility of investigating narrative in video games. He seemed enthused and ensured me that video games fit into the category of IS.

Saturday 1 hrs

Began writing a draft proposal document; looked at some basic definitions of narrative as a concept, and how it differs from a 'story' (Wikipedia). Identified 3 main concepts of narrative in games design which discuss ownership.

1.1 hrs

Week 1 (starting 07.10.07)

Monday 1 hrs

Continued drafting outline; considered possible UWE lecturers with subject knowledge, as well as the kind of literature I'll need.

Tuesday 1 hrs

Finalised an initial outline proposal and forwarded it to Robert, CC Anne. Hope to dedicate more time to other projects now until this Friday.

Robert,
I am following up our conversation on 28/09/07 with a draft initial proposal outline. It discusses the possibility of studying narrative in video games.
I have also attached my initial diary entries for this project - I would appreciate your feedback on the structure and level of detail here.
many thanks,
sean

Had a quick chat with Robert and agreed that I'm in a good place for the discussion next Tuesday.

2 hrs

Week 2 (starting 14.10.07)

Tuesday 4 hrs

It turns out the meeting was in fact a Library session (1hr) and neither Anne nor Robert were meant to be in attendance. Wires were crossed somewhere, but I'm pleased to say that I managed to find Anne later in the day (joined by two other

colleagues) and she gives me valuable advice on acquiring references early, and that I should include them in my official outline proposal form. I spend much of the rest of the day bouncing ideas of my colleagues.

In the evening I found out a few sources on games narrative which I feel are starting to form the backbone of what I want to do (Majewski, Ronbinett). I scanned through and added a few important words to my lexicon for this project: non-planar mazes, anti-structure, and others.

Wednesday 2 hrs

Revised and reworked outline proposal into the official hand in form; I reworked what I had done into more concise questions, list of technologies, and objectives. The chapter outline is very rough at the moment and I don't know how closely I'll stick to it, but I am starting to feel I have a good project on my hands and am pleased with the hours I've put into it to-date.

Thursday 0.1 hrs

Submitted Dissertation Outline Proposal.

6.1 hrs

Week 3 (starting 21.10.07)

Tuesday 1 hrs

Consolidated notes into this diary – rest of week set aside for other projects.

1 hrs

Week 4 (starting 21.10.07)

Monday 3 hrs

Have been allocated Rob as supervisor – fire him an email to confirm. Began reading Majewski's paper: a few concepts jump out at me straight away and I consider how my own views differ:

- Definition of narrative, and how it differs from drama
- Types of games (string of pearls, branching, amusement park)
- Comparisons of player as an actor in a play, and discussion of the player as a dictator of narrative pacing.

3 hrs

Week 5 (starting 28.10.07)

Monday 3 hrs

Continued reading Majewski's paper – painstakingly taking notes and re-developing my dissertation outline.

I also got hold of some chapters of Henry Jenkins' 'Game Design as Narrative Architecture' online. It is equally interesting and seems to be 'staple reading' for games narrative. It is also continually referenced in Majewski's work. I am slightly

concerned that the fraternity studying narrative in games seems to be citing works from the same small pool of resources.

Finally - I have started looking out some journals on narrative (Kreiswirth), but these seem to be too low level; going into more depth than I need for this project. I am conscious that I am still lacking a final definition of narrative with which to build my dissertation.

Tuesday 2 hrs

I spend a good hour pulling my thoughts together and reworking my Chapter outline for the meeting with Robert. It is looking very different to the chapter outline I submitted in my initial proposal, but it is a direct reaction to the material I've read.

Met with Robert – 11.00am. I think he's pleased with the outline, but concerned it may over-reach the bounds of this assignments. He advises me to look at writing a few chapters – starting with part of the introduction – to get a feel for what I will in fact be able to flesh out in the long run.

I end the day consolidating this Diary.

* Worth noting that I am averaging just under 4 hrs a week on this dissertation.

5 hrs

--Assignments deadlines--

Week 11 (starting 09.12.07)

Tuesday 3 hrs

Started writing introduction. Having spent a great deal of time building up to putting my first words down on paper, I find it very difficult to focus my thoughts and write succinct paragraphs to get going. Nonetheless; I am pleased to be laying the ground work and touch on all the issues I want to include. Afterwards – I am more confident that previously dislocated ideas on games narrative can be brought together competently.

Wednesday 4 hrs

I meet with Rob for an hour in the morning and go through the introduction I wrote the day before. He explains that it reads more like a collection of chapter paragraphs than an introductory blurb. Though this is of course different from what I had intended, it is equally useful to have the first key paragraphs for each chapter. This is in keeping with one of our agreed objectives (Tuesday, Week 5). There is no question that these paragraphs are rather 'dense' at the moment, but I we agree I'm on the right track.

A key outcome of the meeting is to change the word 'ownership' to 'authorship' when posing such questions as: 'where does authorship lie in games narrative'. This small change is significant on two counts:

1. Legal ownership is not what I want to discuss in this topic, yet 'ownership' seems to imply that. I am of course addressing the writer / creator of narrative flow in a game.

2. When I start bouncing the word ‘authorship’ around with my colleagues in discussing the dissertation, they immediately understand the nature of my discussion where there were blank faces before.

Finally: Rob provides me with an information sheet on how I can grab an audience’s attention and write a true introduction for my paper.

In the afternoon we spend 2 hours at a formal progress meeting (progress meeting appendix). This is an opportunity to discuss our subject matter, research tools & techniques, and progress to-date with others on the course.

It is a worthwhile experience and I find a lot of interest for my chosen topic. Few of my colleagues seem to have made the same in-roads as I have, so I seem to be on tp of things. By the end of the meeting, I have a clearer objective for this paper:

‘Where does authorship lie in games narrative – who tells the story? Can interaction create narrative?’

7 hrs

Week 12 (starting 16.12.07)

Monday 1 hrs

Consolidated Diary.

Term 2

Week 2 (starting 27.01.08) 16 hrs

Started reading and making notes on Barry Atkins’ book. Interested in concepts of subversive reading, as well as similar feelings to Majewski with regards to the ambiguity of authorship between reader and game designer.

Also got a hold of Carr et al. and Trigger Happy.

Week 3

Monday 5hrs

Continued reading of Atkins – continuing to draw comparisons.

Week 4

Monday 3 hrs

Began writing chapter on how games borrow narrative structures from other arts. Also chopped out behemoth chunks of dissertation to-date, as my chapter titles continue to reinvent themselves.

Tuesday 3 hr

Met with Rob. He seems pleased that I have now done a large amount of reading. He does urge me to 'see the bigger picture' and focus my writing, though, which I agree is necessary. With 1600 words or so down, I am seemingly not in a bad place with this assignment. I am conscious that I have not got through the work I had intended for my chapters, and feel motivated to address this by the next meeting.

I continue reading Atkins.

I consolidate this diary

Term 3

Week 0 (starting 31.03.08)

Sunday 8 hrs

Reading Carr et al. - introduced to the concept of social semiotics. Restructure assignment again; influenced by the weight of material from Carr, Majewski, and Atkins. Now looking like this:

1. **Introduction**
2. **Ludology**
    a. **The spectacle**
3. **Narrative**
    a. **Borrowed narrative**
    b. **Original narrative**
4. **Game narrative sophistication**
    a. **Realism**
    b. **Subversive text**
5. **The role of authorship in games**
    a. **The designer**
    b. **The reader**
6. **Conclusion**

Monday 8 hrs

Develop Ludology chapter – none of the sources I have read necessitate the display as part of the game. And – as games borrow from so many media & art forms – I figure it's feasible that the game could exist devoid of display output entirely. This really opens up the realms of discussion for me, and makes my dissertation feel more original.

Tuesday 8 hrs

I spend the whole day writing the introduction from scratch, and shifting chapter structures. I also devote more time to ensuring my opening sentences make clear to the reader what I'm doing, and add dozens of citations.

Wednesday 4 hrs

Continue reading Carr et al.- am struck that of the 4 major sources I'm reading – these authors seem the most content with the merging of FMV sequences in games. I add their arguments to my dissertation, and further the discussion somewhat – especially for sub-chapter: borrowed narrative.

Thursday 8 hrs

Restructure & add to major chapters on authorship and sophistication.

Friday 8 hrs

Carefully go through my hand written notes ensuring everything I wanted to discuss has been brought up. Finally go through and check spelling, rewording, and try to bleed chapters into one another a little better. Continuing to streamline and make more succinct – by end of the day I have pulled out over 2, 000 words and dozens of citations.

Saturday 8 hrs

Finish assignment draft. Restructure & add to discussions of 'endless work'. Still need to add to the conclusion but Submit draft to Rob.

Week 1

Sunday 8 hrs

Consolidate diary and arrange to meet Rob – re-read draft and note further typos for revision.

Monday 8 hrs

All chapters are pulled together and formatted.

8. Appendices contd.

d. Outline proposal

UFIE8Y-20-3 Information Systems Dissertation 2007-08

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Progress Review Document

12.12.07

Name: Sean Sutton	Programme: Multimedia Computing	Tutor: Rob Stephens

Provisional title: **The Nature of Narrative in Digital Games**

Overall aim and specific objectives:

Where does authorship lie in games narrative – who tells the story? Can the metaphors of interaction create narrative?

What are the unique aspects of games narrative, and which are borrowed from other narrative media?

How have the resources for creating narrative in games changed, and how well are designers utilising them today (and what has been lost in the process)?

Planned chapter structure:

Introduction – games & narrative

- Provide definition of 'Digital Games' for the purpose of this dissertation (separate from mechanical games, simulations, etc.). Explain 'cut off' point of user driven environments (Second Life, World of Warcraft, etc.)
- Attempt to define narrative across this and other media, and identify common denominators; e.g. conflict, section of a story.
- Definition of a games designer
- Interactivity (Ludology) versus Narrative.
- The authorship of games: the role of designer as orchestrator.

The nature of narrative in games

- Separate interface from interactivity and structure.
- The ambiguity of authorship; amplified by the emergence of artificial intelligence.
- The poignancy of interactivity on emotional response– a unique narrative tool?
- Inherent mimetic limitations of game narrative.

Narrative in context (links to other media)

- Brief overview of comparable / borrowed narrative tools and structures from other media.
- Link concepts: structured narrative in games – example: compare levels & boss fight principles to restorative 3 or 4 act structure ('Hero's Journey') in classical theatre.
- Discuss the designer's awareness of and inherent presence of anti-structure in games (most notably the 'Game Over' status).

Narrative devices as they have traditionally existed in games

- Linear tendencies: string of pearls (including basic branching) and open-ended designs (and degrees there-of).
- Discuss abstract interface prevalent in early games – and compare to (for example) the artistic movements of the 20th century.
- The marriage between game narrative and cinematic drama: discussion of potential conflicts.