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Computer Games as Narrative: The Ludology versus Narrativism Controversy

By Marie-Laure Ryan

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Abstract

Is the concept of narrative applicable to computer games? Are games therefore part of literature? Or do they need their own methodological approach and institutionalisation? In chapter 8 of her book *Avatars of Story* Ryan investigates the battle between narratologists and ludologists and explains why a game may not be a story but can be a machine for generating stories, why the narrative in a game often is only an affective hook disappearing once the player is absorbed in the fire of the action, and why on the other hand some times the game is just a ludically organized system for storytelling.

Chapter 8

Computer Games as Narrative: The Ludology versus Narrativism Controversy from: Marie-Laure Ryan: Avatars of Story (Electronic Mediations Series, volume 17), University of Minnesota Press: 2006

In this chapter, I propose to revisit a question that has split, but also animated and energized the early days of the young academic discipline of video game studies: is the concept of narrative applicable to computer games, or does the status of an artifact as game preclude its status as narrative? This dilemma has come to be known as the ludology versus narrativism (or narratology) controversy. But the terms are slightly misleading, because the ludology camp enrolls the support of some influential narratologists, while the so-called narratology camp includes both straw men constructed by the ludologists to promote their position, and game designers and theorists who use the terms narrative and story rather casually. My discussion of the controversy will cover three issues:

1. The theoretical question. Can games be narratives or possess narrativity? If we answer this question positively (to kill narrative suspense, let me admit right away that I will), two more issues arise:
2. The aesthetic and functional question. What is the role of narrative within the game system?
3. The methodological or practical question. How can the concept of narrative be fruitfully invoked in game studies?

The theoretical question

The only feature that objectively and absolutely defines video games is their dependency on the computer as a material support.¹ But if there is a general tendency that distinguishes them from other formalized games (sports and board games in particular), it is their preference for organizing play as a manipulation of concrete objects in a concrete setting—in a fictional world rather than on a mere playfield. In chess, tic-tac-toe and go players move tokens in an abstract space structured by lines, points and squares, and in soccer or baseball they are themselves the tokens that move on the playfield, but in the vast majority of computer games, especially recent ones, players manipulate avatars with human or human-like properties situated in a world with features inspired by real geography and architecture, such as hallways, rivers, mountains, castles, dungeons, and especially mazes. Insofar as the actions of the player cause this world to evolve, computer games present all the basic ingredients of narrative: characters, events, setting, and trajectories leading from a beginning state to an end state. One may conclude that the unique achievement of computer games, compared to standard board games and sports, is to have integrated play within a narrative and fictional framework.²

Most game producers would agree with this pronouncement. Even in the eighties, when computing power allowed only rudimentary graphics, developers promoted their products by promising a narrative experience that rivaled in its sensory richness the offerings of action movies. The games were packaged in colorful boxes that featured

realistic action scenes, as well as text that wrapped the player's action in archetypal narrative themes. Games were presented as being about saving princesses and fighting monsters rather than merely about gathering points by hitting targets and avoiding collision with certain objects, even though the monsters and princesses were usually represented by geometric shapes that bore little resemblance to the fairy tale creatures they were supposed to stand for. Through these advertising techniques, designers asked the player's imagination to supply a narrativity that the game itself was not yet able to deliver. The investment of the game industry in narrative interest was boosted by technological developments that closed the gap between the game and its package, such as more memory, better graphics, higher speed, improved AI—all factors that contribute to more realistic settings and more believable characters, the prerequisites for a rich narrative experience. Here for instance is the story that advertises Max Payne I:

Three years back a young NYPD cop, Max Payne, came home one night to find his family senselessly slaughtered by a gang of drug-crazed junkies, high on a previously unknown synthetic drug. Now that same drug, Valkyr, has spread through the whole New York City like a nightmare plague, and Max Payne's on a crusade for revenge, out to get even. To Drug Enforcement Administration, DEA, this new drug was evil incarnate, to be stopped at any cost. Max's boss and best friend, the only one who knew his true identity, has been murdered, and Max's been framed for the slaying. Max is a man with his back against the wall, fighting a battle he cannot hope to win. Prepare for a new breed of deep action game. Prepare for pain...

The elective affinity (rather than necessary union) between computer games and narrative frequently surfaces in the talk of designers. In their seminal book Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman devote an extensive section to "Games as Narrative Play" (2003, 376-419). The word story recurs like a leitmotif in the interviews with game designers conducted by Celia Pearce for the on-line journal Game Studies.

The pronouncements of game developers and the marketing strategies of game manufacturers weigh however little in the opinion of academic scholars. Dismissing the industry's use of the term storytelling as loose, informal talk, the school of game theorists known as "ludologists," whose members include Espen Aarseth, Gonzalo Frasca, Markku Eskelinen and Jesper Juul, has rallied around the slogan "games are not narratives, they are games." Tacitly assuming that cultural artifacts and human activities can be classified into rigid, mutually exclusive categories, they insist that video games belong to a family that includes chess, football, and tic-tac-toe, rather than novels, drama, movies, and conversational storytelling. The acknowledged motivation of the ludologists in declaring games and narratives to be birds of a different feather that cannot hybridize is the ambition to emancipate the study of computer games from literary studies and to turn it into an autonomous academic discipline. As Espen Aarseth writes: "When games are analyzed as stories, both their differences from stories and their intrinsic qualities become all but impossible to understand." Or: "Computer games studies needs to be liberated from narrativism, and an alternative theory which is native to the field of study must be constructed" (2004b, 362).

The only ancestry for their new discipline that the ludologists recognize as legal is the sociological study of games, as practiced by Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois and others. The ludologists believe, with good reasons, that what makes a game a game, and what distinguishes it from other games, is its set of rules, not the themes in which it is wrapped up. Focus on narrative issues would consequently distract the analyst from the heart of the matter. The stated ambition of ludologists is to develop an approach that does justice to the ludic dimension of games by focusing on “gameplay,” this to say, on the agency of the player, which they see as a set of strategic options within a range defined by the game rules.

In their campaign against a narrative approach to games, ludologists have struck a surprising alliance with narratologists of the classical school. Narratology developed as the study of literary fiction, and the definitions of narrative proposed by its founding fathers reflect this exclusive focus. The most widely endorsed definitions among literary scholars present narrative as “the representation by a narrator of a sequence of events,” or “telling somebody that something happened.” Both of these definitions, if interpreted literally, presuppose a verbal act of storytelling, and exclude consequently the possibility of mimetic forms of narrative, such as drama and movies. Ludologists (for instance Eskelinen 2001:3) are generally partial to the definition proposed by Gerald Prince in 1987, but since modified by its author, as noted in chapter 1:

Narrative: the recounting ...of one or more real or fictitious events communicated by one, two or several (more or less overt) narrators to one, two or several (more or less overt) narratees. A dramatic performance representing many fascinating events does not constitute a narrative, since these events, rather than being recounted, occur directly on stage. (1987, 58)

No wonder ludologists regard this definition as gospel: the same criteria that exclude drama from narrative work even better against games. But the trend today is to detach narrative from language and literature, and to regard it instead as a cognitive template with transmedial and transdisciplinary applicability. Relying on the definition of narrative proposed in chapter 1 I examine below (and hope to refute) several arguments raised by ludologists against the narrativity of games.

The “games and narratives are different things because they have different features” argument

This argument consists of enumerating features of literary narrative and of film that do not occur in games. Here I will review some points that have been invoked by Eskelinen and Juul. Namely:

1. Even if games are built on stories, this does not make them narratives, because narratives involve “the presence of narrators and narratees” (Eskelinen 2001, 3). This restatement of Prince’s position tells us that only language-based texts qualify as narratives. Anybody who follows the film theorist David Bordwell (as I do) will reject this argument: for Bordwell, narration occurs when signs are arranged in such a way as to

inspire the mental construction of a story, and it does not necessarily imply a narratorial speech act. Moreover, this argument is not valid for all games. Just as film can present voiced-over narration, games can have narrators who tell through language what is currently happening. For instance, after a player in EverQuest slays a tiger, the bulletin board will say: “You killed the tiger.”

2. Games can't be narratives because they do not allow the rearrangement of events that marks the distinction between story and discourse: “Games almost never perform basic narrative operations like flashback and flash forward. Games are almost always chronological” (Juul 2001, 8; see also Eskelinen 2001, 2). Actually, scrambling of chronological order may not be a standard feature of computer games, but it is being increasingly used in cinematic cut scenes. Max Payne 1, for instances, uses flash-backs showing the character Max Payne watching the murdered bodies of his wife and children—a murder he is determined to avenge. Cut scenes allow no interaction, but I can think of some cases where flash backs would not be detrimental to gameplay. For instance, if during a game of Sims the house of your family catches fire, and you have not bought a phone before the accident, all you can do is helplessly watch the fire consume everything and kill your characters one by one. But if the game offered a flash back option, you could go back to the time before the fire, buy a phone, return to the burning house, save your Sims, and avoid having to start the game from the beginning again.

3. Narrative has fixed order of events, games have open order: “[Plot-lovers] often conceive stories as mere plots or closed sequences of events, in which case they should come to grips with games containing open series of events” (Eskelinen 2001, 4) Yet not all games have open sequences of events: in the type that Juul (2004a) calls progression games, the player has to fulfill a quest by solving problems in a rigidly prescribed order. The free-floating events (such as the missed attempts at passing the tests) are those that do not propel the game forward. The structuration of games into levels suggests, similarly, a fixed structure on the macro level. Moreover, free order is only detrimental to story when it results in incoherent sequences of states and events; but well-designed games guarantee that each new situation will logically develop out of the preceding one by limiting the choice of actions available to the player.

4. Narrative must represent events as past, but games cannot do so. “In a verbal narrative, the grammatical tense will necessarily present a temporal relation between the time of the narration (narrative time) and the events told (story time). ..While movies and theatre do not have a grammatical tense to indicate the temporal relations, they still carry a basic sense that even though the viewer is watching a movie, now, or even though the players are on stage performing, the events told are not happening now” (Juul 2001, 7). But in an interactive medium such as games “it is impossible to influence something that has already happened. This means that you cannot have interactivity and narration at the same time” (Juul 2001, 8). The narratologist H. Porter Abbott invokes a similar argument to exclude games from the narrative family (2002,13 and 31-32). For Abbott, narrative always concerns events (or imagined events) that are already “in the book” of history; it is this pastness that enables the narrator to select materials from memory and to configure them according to narrative patterns. Yet if the retrospective stance is the prototypical

narrative situation, there are many types of narrative that do not look back at past events: for instance, the counterfactual scenarios of virtual history; the promises of political candidates: “If you elect me, this and that will happen;” the Grand Narratives of religion, whose last events, the Second Coming and Last Judgment, are yet to happen, and in their best moments, when they rise above chronicle and create a sense of plot, the narrative in real time of sports broadcasts.³ Another problem with regarding narrative as necessarily retrospective is that it cannot account for the experience of film and drama. As many critics have observed, images, unlike language, create the illusion of the immediate presence of their referent. A movie can admittedly flash the titles “England, 1941,” “Los Angeles, 1950” or “New York, 2002” (cf. *The Hours*), and the spectator will realize that the events took place at various points in the past. But once the pictures begin to move, the spectator experiences the events as taking place in the present. The same phenomenon occurs in novels. Written narrative uses tense, a device unique to language, to express temporal remove, but immersed readers transport themselves in imagination into the past, and they apprehend it as “now” regardless of the tense used. Even when stories are ostentatiously told by looking backward, they are experienced by readers, spectators and arguably players by looking forward, from the point of view of the characters. There are consequently only superficial differences, in terms of the lived experience of time, between games, movies, and novels.

But let’s imagine that Eskelinen’s and Juul’s observations present no exceptions: no games have narrators; they place no restrictions whatsoever on the sequence of events; and they do not tolerate tampering with chronological order, while novels, movies and the theater behave in the exact opposite way. Let’s further assume that game players experience the action as happening now, while novel readers and movie or drama spectators always remain conscious of the difference between the time of the narrated events and the time of narration, even though the events never really happened. Would it mean that games cannot suggest stories? No, it would simply mean that they do so in a partly different mode than novels, drama and movies. As we have seen in chapter 1, every medium capable of narrativity presents its own affordances and limitations; why then couldn’t video games present their own repertory of narrative possibilities?

The “games are simulations, narratives are representations” argument

This argument rests on the observation that games, unlike novels and movies, are different every time they are played: “But traditional media lack the ‘feature’ of allowing modifications to the stories, even if exceptions happens in oral storytelling” (Frasca 2003, 227). Here Frasca captures an important difference between games and “traditional media narratives,” but why should their variable character disqualify games as narratives? Besides oral storytelling, story-generating programs and hypertext novels also produce variable outputs. For Frasca, the variability of games is incompatible with narrativity, because narratives are in essence representations, while variability is the product of a process that he calls simulation: “There is an alternative to representation and narrative: simulation... Traditional media are representational, not simulational. They excel at producing both descriptions of traits and sequences of events (narratives)” (223). Frasca defines simulation in these terms: “To simulate is to model (a source) system through a different system which maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviors of the original

system” (223). As the term behavior suggest, a simulation is a dynamic system that models a dynamic process. A representation may also offer an image of a dynamic process, for instance a film may show an airplane taking off, but it presents only one image, while a simulation will model multiple instantiations of the same process: in a flight simulator, the airplane can perform many different take-offs.

Frasca’s characterization of games as simulations is appropriate in the case of representational (dare one say narrative ?) games, but questionable in the case of abstract games: simulation suggests external referents, but games like Chess, Go, Tetris or Pac Man do not model anything outside themselves. As Jesper Juul (2004a, 57-58) has shown, the concept of state-transition machine, or finite state acceptor, provides a more general theoretical model of games. A state-transition machine is an automaton made of five elements: a finite set of states; an input alphabet (the possible actions by the user); a next state transition function, which leads the machine from one current state to another depending on the input, a start state, and one or more end states, interpreted in a game as winning or losing (Savich 1982, 31).⁴ Simulations are technically state-transition machines whose elements depict something external to themselves: state 1 is interpreted as the airplane on the ground, state 2 as the airplane in the air, and the transition is initiated by the player’s hitting a certain key. It takes consequently a mimetic dimension to turn a state-transition machine into a simulation of something.

While the simulation machine cannot in itself be called a narrative, each of its individual runs produces images of a world that undergoes changes as the result of events. In other words, games may not be stories, but they can be machines for generating stories. English does not make any distinction between a game as a system of rules, and a particular instance of playing a certain game, but if it did (as does French), the narrative status of games would be easier to grasp. “A game” (French: *une partie*) of a certain game (French: *d’un certain jeu*) will produce an output on the computer screen, which may trigger the cognitive template constitutive of narrativity. The open character invoked by Frasca as a significant difference between games and narratives is thus a feature of the game viewed as machine; but each “game of the game” produces a fixed sequence of events that actualizes one of the possible stories allowed by the system.⁵

What is needed to accept games as narrative machines is the proposal that I make in chapter 1: recognizing other modes of narration than “telling somebody that something happened.” As we have seen, literary theory already accepts dramatic enactment, or mimesis, as an alternative to representation, or diegesis. My suggestion, then, is to regard simulation as a legitimate member of the paradigm that includes these two modes.

The “games are like life, and life is not a narrative” argument

According to Aarseth, the proper model for the gaming experience is life itself, rather than reading novels or watching movies. He bases the analogy of games and life, as opposed to “stories,” on several arguments. The first is the personal involvement of the player: “in games, just as in life, the outcomes (winning, losing) are real and personal to the experiencer, unlike in stories” (2004b, 366). But winning and losing are experiences specific to games, at least when winning and losing are pursued for their own sake and determined by strict rules. In real life, by contrast, the outcome of actions is evaluated in

terms of practical goals. You do not win or lose the game of life (despite the popularity of this metaphor); you succeed or fail at concrete attempts to satisfy your desires.⁶ In abstract games such as chess and Tetris, the values of winning and losing are arbitrarily attributed to states that would not matter to the player if it weren't precisely for the emotions attached to winning and losing. In the type of game that I call narrative, on the other hand, winning and losing are linked to the kinds of event that matter intrinsically to the experiencer, such as acquiring valuable objects, averting dangers and fulfilling missions, but the experiencer is the avatar and not the real-life persona of the player. In other words, players win or lose because avatars reach their concrete goal or fail to do so. It is precisely because all the unpleasant experiences that occur during games—killing, getting hurt, or dying-- do not count in the real world that games are enjoyable. Inverting Kendall Walton's claim that literary fiction is like games because it involves make-believe, we can say that the reliance of video games on make-believe brings them closer to the narratives of literary and cinematic fiction than to life itself.

Another of Aarseth's arguments invokes the player's relative freedom of action: "In a game, everything revolves around the player's ability to make choices." Choice is also a feature of life, while novels and movies are entirely pre-scripted. But why couldn't the player's choices be interpreted by the player in narrative terms? Aarseth anticipates this objection through an argument borrowed from Ragnild Tronstad: the game experience is a matter of engaging in a quest, not of receiving a story (2004b, 368-9). While narrative involves constative acts, the quests of games as well as the quests of life belong to the order of the performative: the player's actions makes events happen, rather than describing them. But if the player's input counts in the game world as the performance of actions, these actions are replayed on the screen through constative acts of the system. These constative acts may take the form of verbal retellings, for instance when the bulletin board of EverQuest flashes the message "you killed the tiger," but most of the time they consist of animated visual sequences. Without this possibility of watching an image of the game world, players would have no idea of the consequences of their actions, and they would not be able to play the game intelligently. This means that players are not only agents, but also spectators of their own pretended actions. The game experience is therefore halfway between living life and watching a movie. Moreover, game action operates on symbols, within a designed environment, whereas real-life action operates on material objects within a world thrown together for no obvious purpose.

We must concede to Aarseth that the interactivity of games brings them a step closer to life than movies and novels, but the ontological divide between unmediated and mediated experience, between working on things and working on their images, between an objectively existing world randomly put together and an imaginary world designed for a specific purpose outweighs the divide between choice and no choice, because in the case of games choice concerns only pretended actions without durable consequences for the player. If games were actual life, players would be responsible for their actions in games, and most of them would end up in jail. The opposition of games and life to the various forms of narrative is therefore fallacious; rather, there is life on one side, and its various modes of imitation on the other, including the diegetic narration of novels, the mimetic enactment of drama, and the interactive simulation of games. (See Table 8.1 for a comparison of games, life and traditional forms of narrative.)

Telling stories about games

When players of computer games recount their experience, they frequently do so by telling a story. For instance, a lengthy passage of Espen Aarseth's essay "Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis" consists (ironically) of a narrative of his experience in the fictional world of Morrowind:

With an unlimited supply of money, I could buy the training and weapons I wanted, and become a master fighter, the scourge of Morrowind. No monster too dangerous, no quest too hard. I could explore freely, and I could enter the most dangerous places I could find, such as the volcano at the center of the world. There, in a dungeon, lived a demon named Dagoth, and this, finally, was an opponent worthy of my might and magic. (2003, 5)

Is this retellability of games evidence of their narrativity? Janet Murray thinks so: "Games are always stories, even abstract games, such as checkers or Tetris, which are about winning and losing, casting the player as the opponent-battling or environment-battling hero" (Murray 2004, 1). To prove this claim, Murray tells a story about Tetris, perhaps the most abstract of computer games: "This game is a perfect enactment of the overtasked lives of Americans in the 1990s - of the constant bombardment of tasks that demand our attention and that we must somehow fit into our overcrowded schedules and clear off our desks in order to make room for the next onslaught" (1997, 144). For Murray, games and stories share an important structure: "the contest, the meeting of opponents in pursuit of mutually exclusive aims." This structural analogy leads Murray to wonder: "which comes first? The story or the game? For me, it is always the story that comes first, because storytelling is a core human activity, one we take into every medium of expression, from oral-formulaic to the digital multimedia" (2004, 1).

These are the kind of statement that fan the anti-narrativist fire of the ludologists. They would reply to Murray that it is possible to tell stories about anything; but this does not make "everything" into a narrative. Aarseth would argue that his retrospective account of his adventures in the world of Morrowind differs as much from the actual game experience as being raped differs from reading about rape in J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace. For Jesper Juul, it would be a "big narratological mistake...to confuse the game with the stories that you can tell about the game" (2004a, 171). In other words, retellability is no sign of narrativity.

I would like to defend an intermediary position between Murray's extreme narrativism and the ludologists' rejection of the concept of narrative. For me some games have a narrative design and others do not. For a game to lend itself naturally and effortlessly to retelling, its narrative design must be more developed than the general analogy between competitive games and the rivalry of the hero and the villain in archetypal narratives: it must reside in the concrete surface structure, and not merely in the abstract deep structure. Chess, for instance, is a classical example of war-like, competitive deep structure, and it is one of the most complex and fascinating games in existence, but it is also one of the most resistant to narration. Chess games are reported in terms of precise moves on a grid (A3 to A4, E5 to F3, B3 to F7), and not by narrative

statements such as: “The Queen, worried about the safety of the King, made a daring sortie to chase the knights of the opposing army back into their camp.” As we have seen in chapter 4, sports games are much more amenable to narration than chess, even though they are not built around stories, but this is mostly because sports broadcasters constantly inject the action on the playfield with information concerning real-world and human interests. It is only when the development of the game starts resembling the deep structure of a dramatic plot, with sudden reversals of fortune or heroic deeds by the underdog that the broadcast can concentrate exclusively on the action on the field. But the main source of the tellability of sports games lies in the fact that the spectators/hearers develop emotional relations to the players as persons, and care passionately about the outcome, as if the fate of their city depended on the performance of its team. The strength of this link to the real world, as well as their attractiveness as spectacle, make sports unique among abstract games.

For the vast majority of games, (re)tellability is a function of the particular nature of the generated events. It is easy to narrate the adventures of your Sims family—how Bob got depressed about not finding a job, how the house caught fire, how Betty saved everybody by calling the fire department—but it is hard, if not impossible, to tell stories about fitting blocks of various shapes falling from the top of the screen into a neat row. Murray’s allegorical reading of *Tetris* is not a narration of a particular playing session, but a subjective interpretation of the game, as defined by its timeless rules. Other players may interpret the game very differently, but most likely, they will not interpret it at all. For a game to inspire specific retellings, to be narratively designed, it must involve actions whose purpose is not just winning or losing, but fulfilling a concrete goal. It cannot therefore be about aligning three tokens on a line on a game board, nor about kicking a ball into a net. But it can be about stealing cars or using cars to chase bank robbers. Above all, it must take place in a fictional world, and not merely on a playfield. While retellings should not be confused with the live game experience—players, like fishermen, are prone to aggrandizing their exploits-- they suggests that a mental act with narrative content takes place during the playing of the game. Players learn from past mistakes, and plan strategies for future actions by mentally constructing the developing story of the game. The greater our urge to tell stories about games, the stronger the suggestion that we experienced the game narratively.

Figure 8.1 represents the contrast between abstract and narrative games by tracing it back to a distinction between two types of human action: practical and ludic. The ultimate purpose of practical actions is to ensure our survival (for instance by acquiring material goods), while the purpose of ludic actions (i.e. playing games) is to provide entertainment. According to Huizinga, ludic actions take place in their own time and space, and they are not connected with material interests (1955, 13). But they are supported by gestures that take place in the real world, just as the actions of drama characters in the fictional world are supported by the gestures of actors on the stage. Ludic actions must therefore be analyzed into a physical and a symbolic, game-specific component. This game-specific component can either mimic other actions, or constitute a species without equivalent outside the game of which the actions are a part. A mimetic ludic action can in turn simulate either a practical or a ludic action: the first case is represented by children’s games of make-believe and by the type of computer games that I call narrative, the second case by games that simulate other games, such as computer

versions of chess, go, football or golf. Most of these simulations concern abstract games, but it is not out of the question that an advanced computer technology may one day simulate older, narrative computer games. An example of this situation would be a full-body version of a first person shooter taking place in either Virtual Reality or Augmented Reality. For a game to convey a story, then, it must either simulate practical actions, or simulate other games that themselves simulate this type of action.

The aesthetic and functional question

When the anti-narrativist school runs out of suitable theoretical materials in its efforts to build a protective wall around game territory, it switches to aesthetic arguments: “Adventure games seldom, if ever, contain good stories,” writes Espen Aarseth (2004a, 51), in an apparent concession to narrativism: for a bad story is still a story, unless one works aesthetics and tellability into the definition of narrative. “Much of the vast journey that it takes to complete *Half-life* would be excruciatingly dull if retold in any detail,” writes Jesper Juul (2001, 5), mindless of the fact that people don’t particularly care for detailed retelling of novels and movies either.

In 2001 the hypertext promoter and theorist Mark Bernstein issued a challenge to the game community: find me a game that speaks of serious human interests, such as sexuality (as does literature, and by extension literary hypertext).⁷ Whether or not some games have met this challenge is a matter of opinion, but the question betrays a dubious desire to find the same kind of gratification in games and literary narrative, and to submit them to similar evaluation criteria. A game does not need to tell stories that would make it as literature to immerse the player in the fate of its fictional world, because the thrill of being in a world, of acting in it and of controlling its history makes up for the intellectual challenge, the subtlety of plot and the complexity of characterization that the best of literature has to offer. The pursuit of large audiences by the game industry and its reluctance to take risks explains in part why it has been sticking so far to stereotyped narrative themes and formulae, such as medieval fantasy, science fiction, thrillers, horror, and the mystery story. But through their emphasis on action, setting, and imaginary creatures of fantastic appearance, these narrative genres are much more adaptable to the interactive and fundamentally visual nature of games than “high” literature focused on existential concerns, psychological issues and moral dilemmas. Literature seeks the grey area of the ambiguous, while games and popular genres thrive in the Manichean world of “the good guys” versus “the bad guy” (Krzywinska 2002): if players had to debate the morality of their actions, the pace of the game, not to mention its strategic appeal, would seriously suffer.

Many commentators attribute the difficulty of creating truly good game stories—not necessarily the equivalent of *Hamlet*, but more modestly stories as engrossing as the novels and films of popular culture—to the inherent incompatibility of interactivity and narrativity. According to the game designer Greg Costykian, “Creating a ‘storytelling game’ (or a story with game elements) is attempting to square the circle, trying to invent a synthesis between the antitheses of game and story” (on-line, 9). As I have observed in chapter 5, the root of the conflict between narrative design and interactivity (or gameplay) lies in the difficulty of integrating the bottom-up input of the player within the top-down structure of a narrative script: if the player’s choices are too broad, there will be

no guarantee of narrative coherence; if the choices are too narrow, the game will be boring. But a conflict can be seen as a challenge, and its resolution as an artistic feat. This is how Costykian envisions the situation:

Precisely because the two things--game and story--stand in opposition, the space that lies between them has produced a ferment of interesting game-story hybrids. And yet the fact remains: game and story are in opposition, and any compromise between the two must struggle to be successful...So should designers eschew attempts to inject story into the games they design? By no means; past efforts to do so have been fruitful, and have led to interesting and successful games. What designers must do, however, is understand that they are not involved in the creation of stories; gaming is not inherently a story-telling medium. (on-line, 9)

For Costykian, a game is primarily a game, not a story, and an interesting gameplay represents the only valid criterion of success; otherwise game designers could just as well switch to the writing of novels or movie scripts. When conflict arises between story and gameplay, story should be subordinated to gameplay, rather than gameplay to story.

In many types of computer games, as I observe in chapter 5, the narrative design is not the focus of the player's attention, but an "affective hook"⁸ that lures players into the game. This is particularly true of first-person shooters (FPS). Once players are absorbed in the fire of the action, they usually forget whether they are terrorists of counterterrorists, humans defending the earth from invasion by evil aliens or aliens conquering the earth. Having fulfilled its role as a lure, the story disappears from the player's mind, displaced by the adrenaline rush of the competition.

This ancillary role of narrative offers a better justification for an opposition of games to the traditional narrative genres of novels and movies than the narratological considerations mentioned in a previous section. Yet games are not the only texts that use stories as a means toward goal, rather than displaying them for their own sake: sermons, philosophical writings, political speeches and advertisements frequently make their point through parables and narrative examples. In the opera, similarly, the plot of the libretto functions as a support for music, and while a good libretto enhances the work, the opera is evaluated on the basis of the music and not the plot. It is certainly not on the basis of the story that The Magic Flute is recognized as one of the greatest operas ever composed. If an opera or advertisement can tell stories without ceasing to be an opera or advertisement, why couldn't a game do the same thing? Narrative is not a genre that excludes other genres, but a type of meaning that permeates a wide variety of cultural artifacts, and the ludologist claim that game and story form mutually exclusive categories betrays a lack of understanding of the nature of narrative. The fact that games may subordinate narrative to gameplay rather than making it a focus of interest can be easily accounted for by recognizing an instrumental mode of narrativity. Tweaking an expression coined by David Herman,⁹ we may call the games that use this mode "narratively organized systems for playing."

Yet some game narratives are more memorable than others: it may not matter to serious chess players whether their pieces are called kings and queens or cats and dogs; and shooters will be mostly remembered for the sophistication of their weapons, not for the concrete mission given to the player, but as Stuart Moulthrop observes, you could not

replace Lara Croft of Tomb Raiders with a “less salacious anatomy” (2004, 47) without a significant impact on the game experience. Or to take another example, the appeal of the video game version of Harry Potter resides as much, if not more, in finding oneself in a favorite fictional world with beloved characters and familiar activities, such as Quiddick matches, as in solving the particular problems presented by the game. Appealing in variable proportions to the strategic mind and to the imagination, computer games are an art of compromise between narrative and gameplay. If designers had truly fascinating stories to tell, they would write novels and film scripts rather than games. If the rules were as productive as those of chess and Go, we would not need the narrative. But a stereotyped story can be redeemed by interesting player action, while a game without originality on the level of rules can be improved by narrative packaging. In the design of games, gameplay and narrative remediate each other’s deficiency.

The idea of an instrumental mode of narrativity explains why stereotyped game stories can do their job without rivaling the aesthetic appeal of literature, yet it does not do justice to the diversity of computer games, nor to the diversity of interests found among their players. Plato distinguished two types of games: ludus and paidia. Ludus corresponds to what Jesper Juul calls the “prototypical game situation,” a situation he defines through the following conditions: (1) prototypical games are rule-based; (2) they have a variable, quantifiable outcome (3) values are attached to the outcomes (winning or losing); (4) players invest efforts to influence the outcome; (5) players are attached to the outcome—they want to win and hate to lose (2004a, 30).¹⁰ Paidia, meanwhile, is a free play without computable outcome, characterized by “fun, turbulence, free improvisation, and fantasy” (Motte, 1995:7). While ludus dominates board games, sports, and many computer games, especially FPS, paidia is represented by all the games that are played for the sake of an imaginative experience: children’s games of make-believe, playground activities, the use of toys, the transgression of social rules that takes place during the carnival, and within video games, by the so-called “simulation games” (SimCity, Civilization, The Sims) in which players manage a complex system and observe its behavior, rather than trying to pass levels or to beat opponents.¹¹ It is perhaps the major contribution of the computer to human entertainment to have allowed a combination of ludus and paidia within the same game environment—a combination that Caillois thought impossible: for him, games were either rule-based, or invitations to make-believe (1961, 8-9).

In a classic paper, the MUD designer Richard Bartle has distinguished four types of players among the denizens of virtual worlds: killers, achievers, socializers and explorers.¹² Though the labels are self-explanatory, let me quote Bartle for a thumbnail characterization of the four types:

Achievers regard points-gathering and rising in levels as their main goal, and all is ultimately subservient to this... Killers get their kicks from imposing themselves on others...[They] attack other players with a view to killing off their personae... Socialisers are interested in people, and what they have to say. The game is merely a backdrop, a common ground where things happen to players... Explorers delight in having the game expose its internal machinations to them...The real fun comes only from discovery, and making the most complete set of maps in existence.

Killers and achievers are primarily ludus players, socializers and explorers paidia players. We can expect these four types of players to display significantly different attitudes toward narrative. Killers and achievers may regard the game story as a quickly forgotten, disposable commodity, good only to provide clues for progressing in the game. Socializers will exchange stories about the game world, perform small narrative scripts of their own invention, and generally enjoy the enactment through role-playing of the narrative design written into the game. As for explorers, they will view the game world as a space full of stories awaiting discovery: the legends that explain landscape features, the gossips of non-playing characters about people and places, the knowledge of the natives that will lead them into new territories. When explorers play games of emergence such as The Sims—games without a built-in script—they find their pleasure in coaxing new stories out of the system to find out how it works.

Far from being always subordinated to gameplay, narrative sometimes forms the purpose of playing. In both on-line and single player virtual worlds, many players use “cheats”—solution posted on the Web—to perform the tasks given to them by the game. For these players, being taken step by step through the storyline of a quest, and getting to see more of the fictional world in the process, is more important than solving problems all by themselves. Interest in game worlds as narrative environments has been boosted by the phenomenon of the game camera. The Sims for example features a camera that enables players to save screenshots from the game. Some players put these screenshots together into stories, adding text to the images, and post the results on a Web site specially dedicated to this type of project.¹³ The stories do not necessarily retell the events generated by the player during the game session. But players have been known to manipulate the game in order to produce certain shots that will fit into the stories they want to tell. From a “narratively organized system for playing,” The Sims database has been subverted into a “ludically organized system for storytelling.” These formulae describe the two ends of a spectrum that accomodates a wide variety of games and player preferences.

The methodological question

Jesper Juul has recently made a conciliatory move toward narrativism by endorsing the concept of fictional world: “The big mistake of ludology has been to dismiss the importance of fiction in games, for example cut-scenes, and to ignore the way that video games play at least a minor role in the general storytelling ecology” (2004a, 171).¹⁴ For a narratologist (or at least, for a narratologist of the cognitivist school), capturing a fictional world that evolves in time under the action of intelligent agents is all it takes for a semiotic artifact to fulfill the semantic conditions of narrativity—and no ludologist would deny that game worlds present these properties. It may turn out in the end that the quarrel between ludologists and narrativists (if I may speak for this elusive class) revolves more around the scope of the term narrative than around the nature of games, for I am not aware of any narrativist claiming that games are the same thing as novels and movies. But whether we speak of narrative or of fictional world, these terms capture a dimension of video games that ludology cannot ignore any longer: the thrill of immersing oneself in an alternative reality.

The standard narrative approach to games has been so far comparative studies of games adapted from film or literary narratives, or vice-versa, of the less common occurrence of movies adapted from games. But the concept of narrative has more “ludologic,” more game-centered contributions to make to the new discipline:

1. Investigate the heuristic use of narrative. As Salen and Zimmerman have shown (2003, 396), creating a game story, rather than listing a series of abstract rules, is an efficient way to facilitate the learning process. If an object on the screen is an abstract shape, we must learn from the user’s manual how to manipulate it; but if it looks like a car, and if it is involved in a narrative scenario relevant to cars, the user will know that it can be used to move around in the game world, for instance to escape enemies.

2. Explore the various roles and manifestations of narrative in computer games:

- The narrative script that is designed into the game
- The narrative that players write through their actions, actualizing a particular sequence of events within the range of possibilities offered by the built-in script
- The narrative that lures players into the game (cut scenes and background information that introduce the game; text on the box)
- The narrative that rewards the player (cut scenes that follow the successful completion of a mission)
- The micro-stories told by non-playing characters
- (For games with recording devices): The narratives that players make out of the materials provided by the game

3. Describe the various structural types of game narrative. For instance: narratives of progression (Juul 2004a), structured according to the flowchart, where players follow a fixed, predominantly linear narrative script that takes them through discrete levels; narratives of emergence (Salen and Zimmerman 2003), structured as a playground, where players choose their own goals and actions in a world teeming with narrative possibilities; and narratives of discovery, featuring two layers of story, “one relatively unstructured and controlled by the player as they explore the game space and unlock its secrets; the other pre-structured but embedded within the *mise-en-scène* awaiting discovery” (Jenkins 2004, 126).

4. Investigate how the game story is dynamically revealed to the player: how much of this story is told top-down, through non-interactive cut scenes, how much is discovered when the player takes the right action or finds the right information within the game world, and how much emerges bottom-up, through the choices of the player. Are the player’s actions an integral part of the plot, or merely a way to gain access to spaces where more of the story will be revealed? How are the personality and past history of the avatar presented to the player? When the player gets to know his avatar only gradually, how can he take meaningful actions for this character when he is still incompletely acquainted with him? Which elements in the dialogue between the avatar and non-playing characters have ludological functions (i.e. provide clues on how to solve problems), and

which ones serve the narrative function of fleshing out the characters and the fictional world ?

5. Map the fictional world and its objects against the rules of the game. We can distinguish several types of game objects, and several types of relations between objects and rules: (1) Objects internal to the fictional world attached to rules. The player can manipulate them, and they fulfill both a strategic and an imaginative function—what Kendall Walton calls “a prop in a game of make-believe.” The rules however may or may not be consistent with the nature of the object, as we shall see below. (2) Objects internal to the fictional world not attached to rules. The player cannot do anything with them, and their function is purely imaginative. They are the video game equivalent of Barthes’ “reality effect.” (3) Objects external to the fictional world attached to rules, such as the buttons of a menu. The function of these objects is purely strategic. Theoretically we could have objects external to the fictional world not attached to rules, but these objects would be useless.

6. Evaluate the connection between gameplay and narrative: could the same system of rules be narrativized in many different ways, or is there an organic, necessary connection between rules and narrative ?¹⁵ Do the problems presented to the player grow out of the narrative theme, or are they arbitrarily slapped upon it ? (Critics of the game Myst argue for instance that there is little connection between the game story and the problems that need to be solved in order to unfold it.) When the player solves a problem, does he understand the narrative logic of the actions that led to the solution, or do the problem-solving actions appear random to him ?

7. Ask whether the rules and the events they create are consistent with the fictional world. Why is it, for instance, that in The Sims you must pay for commodities, but there is always food in the fridge, even when there is no money left in the bank ? As Juul observes,

in many cases, the fictional world gives the impression that many things are possible which are not implemented by the rules. The reverse case is when the rules allow for actions that the fictional world does not cue the player into expecting. Many first person shooters of the late 1990’s featured wooden crates which turned out to contain medical kits and other items that the player could pick up. For a non-player this is nonsensical and not cued by the representation: only the trained player knowing the conventions of the game genre would understand this. (2004a, 155).

The main reason for using narrative concepts in game studies is to come to terms with the imaginative dimension of computer games—a dimension which will be overlooked if we concentrate exclusively on rules, problem-solving and competition. It is perhaps the major contribution of the computer to human entertainment to have allowed a combination of strategic action and make-believe within the same environment. The ludologists approach, so far, has heavily favored the point of view of a specific type of player, namely the “hard-core gamers” who devote most of their free time to games, play

in a ruthlessly competitive spirit, know the system well enough to modify the rules or to program new levels, and are so familiar with the structures and conventions of games that they can jump right in, “ignoring game guides, opening cinematic, and in-game cut scenes” (Salen and Zimmerman 2003, 411). But as Bartle’s player typology indicate, not all game-players are killers and achievers, and even those players who prefer ludus to paidia are not necessarily insensitive to the particular embodiment of the game world. I am not proposing a literary approach that isolates narrative scripts from the rules of the game and studies them for their intrinsic aesthetic merit (though such an approach would be justified if game narratives rose to an appropriate aesthetic level), but rather, a functional ludo-narrativism that studies how the fictional world, realm of make-believe, relates to the playfield, space of agency. By connecting the strategic dimension of gameplay to the imaginative experience of a fictional world, this approach should do justice to the dual nature of video games.

	Designed for a certain purpose	Relevance of winning and losing	Choice of action	Perceived events affect the life of the experiencer
Life	–	–	Unrestricted	+
Games	+	+	Restricted by design	–
Novels and Film	+	–	None	–

Table 8.1:
Comparison of life, games and standard narrative media

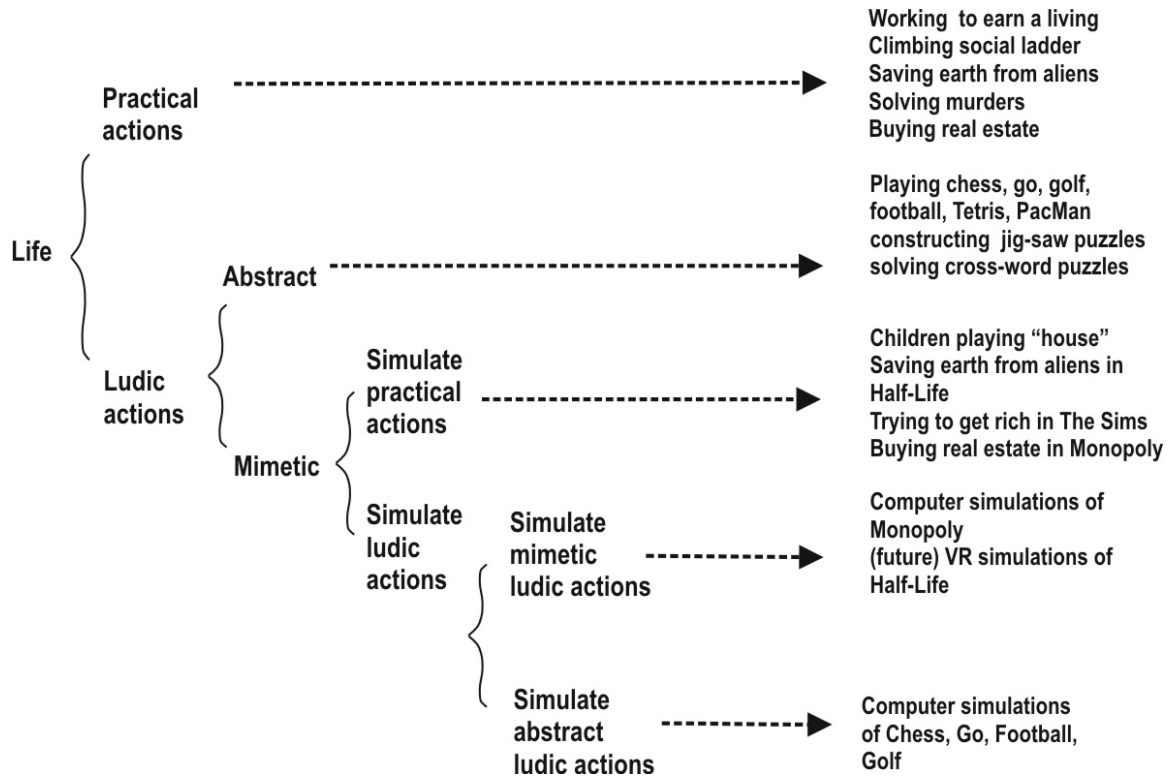


Figure 8.1
Types of games

¹ By this criterion, computer version of board games (chess, Monopoly) or TV games (Wheel of Fortune) are not genuine video games, while computerized sports games (baseball, football, car racing) are, because of the significant difference between the “real thing” and its computer version: the participation of the whole body.

² Or at least, the computer has greatly facilitated this integration. As Greg Costykian observes in “A Farewell to Hexes” there existed, between 1958 and 1996, a rich tradition of paper and pencil war games that combined strategy and narrative theme. The board game Monopoly can also be considered an example of this combination, though its narrativity is rudimentary, compared to that of recent computer games.

³ See Margolin 1999 on non-retrospective narratives.

⁴ The computer is also a state-transition machine, and this explains the particular affinity of computers for games, but the states of the computer are much more finely-grained than the strategic states of a game. For instance, some games allow players to get two different views of the same situation: vertical projection (map view) and horizontal (point of view of the avatar). Switching from one view to the other does not alter the game state, but the two views correspond to different computer states, triggered by different inputs.

Similarly, when a player makes a Sim character walk from the fridge to the mailbox, the action mediates between two relevant game states where different actions are possible, but the animation that shows the character walking requires a very large number of different computer states—at least one for every frame.

⁵ Frasca recognizes that the output of a simulation does indeed look like a cinematic narrative: “To an external observer, the sequence of signs produced by both the film and

the simulation could look exactly the same. This is what many supporters of the narrative paradigm fail to understand: their semiotic sequences might be identical, but simulation cannot be understood by just its output” (203: 224). This observation amounts to equating narrative to a process of production, not to the product itself.

⁶ We customarily speak of winning and losing wars, but in human conflicts these outcomes are not nearly as clear-cut as in games: the winner always loses something, and the loser may profit. Wars, moreover, are fought for practical interests, not just to see who has the better army.

⁷ A discussion of this challenge can be found on Grand Text Auto, October 2003. http://steel.lcc.gatech.edu/cgi-bin/mt/mt-comments.cgi?entry_id=99 . Accessed March 2004.

⁸ Term proposed by J. Yellowlees Douglas (2004, 36).

⁹ The original is "narratively organized systems for thinking" (Herman 203, 308) and it is meant to explain the importance of narrative as a cognitive tool.

¹⁰ Juul suggests a sixth rule: the same game can be played with or without real-life consequences. I find the constitutive status of this rule problematic: isn't the ludic status of the game diminished, when we play it for money or for life? Playing professional sports is no longer a game, it is a job. On the other hand, there are some games, such as

roulette or extreme sports, which wouldn't be thrilling if they did not put something real at stake.

¹¹ The relation of simulation games to paidia has been noted by Gonzalo Frasca in "Ludology Meets Narratology." (Note that Frasca's own concept of simulation applies to all games, not just to the game type represented by The Sims family).

¹² Bartle's typology was meant for text-based MUDs, but it applies equally well to MMORPGS (Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games), such as EverQuest. In addition, different individual games will attract different types of players.

¹³ <http://thesims.ea.com/us/exchange/index.html>

¹⁴ Gonzalo Frasca has taken a similar turn. In a review of Grand Theft Auto he writes: "Both GTA3 and Shenmue tell a story. Yes, here you have a ludologist publicly say that games do tell stories. Spread the news !" ("Sim Sin City," 5-6). In another article ("Ludologists Love Stories Too") he claims that the debate between narrativists and ludologists never happened. It may have been a one-sided affair, rather than a dialogue, but if the articles by Aarseth, Juul, Eskelinen and Frasca quoted in the present essay don't take a stance against the idea of games telling stories, what will it take to start a polemic? See also the quotes in Jenkins 2004, 118 as evidence that the debate did indeed happen.

¹⁵ Salen and Zimmerman(127-138) propose several examples of isomorphic games that dress up the same set of rules in different garbs, some narrative and some not. For instance, the thematically concrete and therefore mildly narrative board game Chutes and Ladders could be transposed into a totally abstract game in which players would pick numbers, rather than falling through chutes and climbing ladders.