

The Narrative Edge of Gaming

Although they have existed for decades now, narrative computer games are still in many respects at the edge of gaming and game-related research. Scholars will disagree as to what a narrative game is, and some will reject the term altogether, but even its most outspoken critics cannot deny that games frequently make use of narrative techniques and invite players to perceive them partially as stories.¹

Most commercial games contain at least some narrative elements. Even predominantly ludic games like *Flower* (ThatGameCompany 2009) have individualized agents who must achieve particular goals to affect changes in a highly specified fictional world. These are the very characteristics of transmedial narrative defined by Marie-Laure Ryan (2005, p. 4). That means that even if *Flower* is not telling a story, unlike wholly abstract games such as *Tetris* (A. Pazhitnov/V. Gerasimov 1984) or *Bejewelled* (Pop Cap Games 2001), it invites being perceived as a story, which is arguably the most important factor in narrative (Ryan 2004, p. 11). The recourse to narrative can be nothing more than a rudimentary framing, but it may as well manifest in the completely fleshed-out main-quest-storylines of open-world role-playing games like *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Softworks, 2008), where the player is free to pursue or ignore the narrative, or the attempts at total integration of gameplay elements into a narrative structure in action-adventures such as *Fahrenheit* (Quantic Dream 2005), *Mirror's Edge* (Electronic Arts 2008) or *Kane & Lynch: Dead Men* (IO Interactive 2007). In all cases, narrative and game influence each other, and while this often results in conflict, it sometimes produces a synergetic effect.

This boundary-crossing phenomenon challenges notions about both games and narrative, especially when there is no perceptible preference toward either side.² Consequently, there is a widespread tendency in game studies to marginalize the phenomenon as “attempts at telling stories, cleverly disguised as games” (Aarseth 2004, p. 367). If one agrees with my assessment that combinations of game and narrative are rather the rule than the exception, understanding the effects that occur when they encounter is essential to understanding computer games in general. This paper will develop a typology of such encounters in order to distinguish the completely different effects perceived on a general level (narrative influences on the overall game design) and a concrete one (proportions of ludic and narrative elements within a game). In a next step, elements with both ludic and narrative functions, like the avatar, will be discussed, before a final example will show the equally productive and disruptive friction between all these factors.

Game concepts

The relation of game and narrative on the general level of overall design choices can be described in terms of both dominance and quality.³ In some games, narrative influence seems to be the dominant factor. The *Max Payne*-series (Remedy 2001–2003) or *Kane & Lynch: Dead*

Men privilege the adaptation of a fiction genre over perfecting the game mechanics. Especially *Kane & Lynch: Dead Men* has a very simple, straightforward gameplay without much variation. Its characters and the density of themes and imagery, however, are as remarkable as the level of detail with which climactic sequences of Michael Mann's thrillers *Heat* (1999) and *Collateral* (2004) are recreated, especially the shootouts on a downtown main street and a discotheque. A dominance of gameplay in the adaptation of fictional premises is found in *Need for Speed: Undercover* (Electronic Arts 2008), which revolves around street racing as depicted in movies, especially *The Fast and the Furious* (2001) and its sequels. Plot and characters are of no real consequence and remain largely undeveloped, while the racing and tuning of cars is considerably fleshed out in diverse game mechanics.

Even in games that favor neither game nor narrative, the quality of their coexistence can be anything from completely arbitrary to mutually beneficial. Examples for the latter are *Prey* (Human Head Studios 2006) and the *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time*-trilogy (Ubisoft 2003–2005). *Prey* starts out from a clichéd first person shooter convention – the alien invasion –, but achieves great originality by choosing a Native American as its avatar and developing both the technological and spiritual superiority of the respective parties into game devices. Artificial gravity, portal technology and the Spirit Plane of the Ancestors do not remain a backdrop for derivative action, but get turned into determining factors of the game world to be explored by the player.

In a similar fashion, *Prince of Persia* connects narrative and ludic ideas to an extent that makes it almost impossible to tell which inspired the other. The story revolves around the prince's ability to manipulate time, gained by a mistake of his that killed countless people. When he manages to undo the damages he brought about, he only sets off an even greater catastrophe. Questions of cause and effect, guilt and responsibility form the thematic core of a complex time-travel narrative, but they also find their way into gameplay. When the prince realizes that his attempts at manipulating time are only making things worse, he sacrifices his life, becoming an undead that lives literally in time. The prince can revert this process later on, but his body intermittently changes back to the dark, undead form. Whenever this happens, the game mechanics are turned on their head: With time as his lifeblood, constantly trickling away, the dark prince has to act much more aggressively and decisively, which not only forces the player to change strategies, but is in the end of the story arc interpreted as a manifestation of the prince's suppressed subconscious. This way, *Prince of Persia* connects narrative (themes and plot) with gameplay (rules and goals). Especially in comparison with similarly themed games such as the far less accomplished *Timeshift* (Saber 2007), the *Prince of Persia*-series' elegance becomes apparent.

Elements and Proportions

To really understand the exchange of play or narrative in games, one has to identify passages and elements that are dominated by one of them. Each narrative game includes portions in which no play takes place, which can be executed as written texts, film sequences (cut-scenes) or scripted sequences. In these passages, the player-role is changed to that of a recipient, as the interactive involvement gets replaced (at least to a great extent) with an immersion into fiction.

The use of narrative passages in game software can be classified and quantified in many respects. Although traditional narratologist approaches such as that of Gerard Genette are not useful for describing game elements, they offer a number of suggestions for systematizing narrative passages (1983, p. 25-28).⁴ Three central criteria are the complexity of the story, the length of narrative passages and the frequency with which they appear. There is an obvious difference in complexity between the prose sketch that sets up *Quake* (id software 1996) and the involved and extensive metaphysical story of *Planescape: Torment* (Black Isle 1999) that might as well be told in a novel. Length ranges from short and fragmentary narrative passages that make comprehension and immersion difficult – which is especially irritating in ambitious adaptations like *Ring: The Legend of the Nibelungen* (Cryo Interactive 1999) –, to drawn-out sequences that seriously disrupt ludic continuity. Adventure and role-playing games have a certain tolerance in this respect, as dialogue is an integral part of their game mechanics. In action games, however, lengthy narrative sequences can bring the otherwise fast pacing to a stop, especially if they cannot be skipped, as in *The Operative: No One Lives Forever* (Monolith 2000). The same is true for the frequency of narrative passages. While infrequent narrative passages make the story seem irrelevant, their overly frequent uses endanger ludic flow. Many Japanese games have a tendency towards this end of the spectrum: *Metal Gear Solid 2: Substance* (Konami, 2003) offers a whole series of introductory film sequences, which are well written, professionally executed and not too long in themselves, but when they run to a length of half an hour, all but the most patient players will become frustrated.

Apart from the proportions of game and narrative, the modalities of their combination can be distinguished in logical, temporal and spatial dimensions along axes of contingency and integration. But even then, both elements are treated as completely separate entities – which, in today's games, they are only in rare cases.

Narrative Dimensions of Game Elements

Early narrative action games like *Karateka* (Brøderbund, 1984) exhibit a clear division with little or no overlap between phases in which only play or narrative are present. Before and in-between fights, the energy-level of avatar and enemy fades out and a short cut-scene plays out. But whenever play is in progress, the game will communicate no information apart from that necessary for ludic success.⁵ Current games will, however, frequently superimpose narrative on play sequences. This started with games such as *System Shock* (Looking Glass 1994), which employed log files scattered throughout the game world to tell its story. In the CD-ROM version of the game, these logs are audio files that keep playing while play carries on, thus creating a narrative overlay. Not only is the act of play accompanied by an act of narration, the narrative itself is triggered by interacting with the environment, which means that objects of the game world not only have ludic relevance, but are inscribed with overt narrative content.

Integrating narrative with game elements has become ubiquitous in real-time 3D environments, but it is possible to distinguish a number of manifestations. Dialogue is one of them, and while it is found in most recent games, it is most crucial to role-playing games. Here, both the general exposition of the game world and the descriptions of distinct riddles or challenges usually rely heavily on dialogue. As in reality, these dialogues communicate more than mere information: They give their speakers a certain amount of individuality and provide

particulars about characters, objects and events. Especially when the player can choose between dialogue options that have an impact on events in the game world, the overlap of game and narrative is an almost total one. In *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (Bioware 2003), the endgame changes depending on the romantic sub-plot of the game's storyline, which is entirely furthered through dialogue choices. Yet dialogue does not need to be interactive to afford additional meaning to the game world. Verbal information, e.g. in mission updates, is not always geared towards instructing the player about relevant actions. In *Portal* (Valve 2007), the majority (if not all) of them are illustrative of the game world and further the plot.

Less pronounced, yet even more frequent, is the infusion of objects with implicit narrative information. The design of objects in the game world exceeds necessities of usability and rule-oriented signification, and not all the extra detail is merely a means of creating a sense of realism or beauty. They are polysemic, acting as signs to both a rule set and a mimetic construction. As attributes, they create a context for characters, while as elements of the game world, they are indicative of the peculiarities that set the fictional world apart from reality. Although this is most evident with writing on objects (inscriptions, signs or graffiti), sounds, music and witnessed events produce similar effects. All these elements can not only overlap the act of play, but also each other, be it as veritable palimpsests as in *Dead Space* (Electronic Arts, 2008), or as complex, multi-sensoric environments such as the abovementioned discotheque-sequence in *Kane & Lynch: Dead Men*, where sound, light and motion in the game world intermesh with the dialogue.

The Avatar as Character and Cursor

The most central *locus* of overlap, though, is the avatar, which is simultaneously a player-controlled agent within the simulated world and a fictional character within the story. As representation of the player within the virtual world, the avatar has to be user-controllable as immediately and as widely as possible. As a fictional character, though, it is subject to an author's will, the dictates of verisimilitude and the necessities of a story arc.

This duality is never completely resolved, and attempts to minimize it have their own side effects. By allowing us to look through its eyes, first person shooters remove the avatar from the field of vision, which generally reduces the perception of the avatar as an entity apart from the player. But as soon as the avatar in such a setup acts on its own, even by something as mundane as talking, its dual role becomes obvious again, leading (especially close to the beginning of a game) to disorientation: While the first person view suggests that I am seeing the game world myself, it is not my voice that I am hearing, nor are those my words. Having the avatar remain silent is no perfect solution to this issue, either, as it raises the question of why this character is not speaking, which, again, is a trait of character and as such a narrative element: Is *Half-Life's* (Valve 1998–2007) avatar Gordon Freeman a man of few words, is he mute, or am I, for some reason, not hearing what he says?

As in any kind of narrative, the acceptance of character decisions – including those of the avatar – depends on verisimilitude and coherence of motivation. This is achieved most easily by creating desperate situations. As with many other gaming conventions, *Portal* acknowledges this approach and uses it in a most effective way by starting with the avatar waking up in a

labyrinth. Just as the avatar can either stay in the first room and starve to death or explore the labyrinth, the player must give up play or accept rules and goals.

The imposition of authorial will upon the avatar (and thus the player) is present even in those games that strive to give the player real influence on the story progression. Every story has a backbone of key points which Roland Barthes calls “cardinal functions” (Barthes 1979, p. 93-95) on which the narrative progression hinges because of decisions, actions or coincidences that realize one of multiple possible outcomes. Computer games can give the player influence on these cardinal functions, be it through explicit decision making, through attaining optional goals or through role-play development of the avatar. The degree to which the player is included in this process varies widely. Most games don’t realize this potential at all, while many others limit it to a single instance.⁶ Some games like *Fallout 3* give the player enormous freedom, up to the point where the central narrative of the main quest can be completely ignored, but when the player decides to pursue the main quest, the majority of cardinal points are pre-decided by the author.

Even this does not necessarily provoke a conflict, because every player of narrative games has been socialized as a recipient of narrative and thus has an understanding of the indispensable nature of authorial construction for narrative pleasure. We know that the outcome of a playthrough is predetermined, because even if there are multiple endings to the game, it is impossible to break free from this structure. What this also means is that it is possible to reach the end, narratively and ludically, because every story has an ending.

According to Roger Caillois (2001, p. 14-19) all games of performance and competition share a set of meta-rules concerning fairness, equality and the minimizing of coincidence. In essence, games have to be winnable. When playing a game, it is acceptable to lose for lack of training, having a bad day or inadequate equipment, but not because of unequal odds. *Ludus* – the rule-oriented principle of play Caillois distinguishes from the free play he calls *paidia* – is aimed at reaching an arbitrarily chosen goal that is pursued for its own sake, i. e. to become better at it (Caillois 2001, p. 29). Some traditional computer game genres like Jump ‘n’ Run and Fighting Games are almost pure exemplifications of this kind of game, because being good at them is only achieved by mastering the games’ principles. To progress through them, the player has to do everything right. Failure usually results in the option of starting over or abandoning the game. Exclusively ludic play is unconditionally linked to success: One only advances to the next round, race or level by completing the previous one, and failure to do so means losing the game. Some games eliminate the losing part and simply arrest the player’s progression when goals are not reached: Most Adventure Games since the 1990s have no “Game Over”-Screen, since the player is allowed to try every conceivable approach until he or she happens upon a solution. This is only a way of signaling to the player that there has to be a right solution and that the game is winnable. The narrative component of Adventure Games supports this impression, because we expect a story to have an ending: If the game starts ‘telling’ a story, we assume that it must be possible to ‘hear’ that story until the end. The ludic and the narrative teleological principle complement and reinforce one another as long as both are geared towards the same goals of success.

Game Progression and Narrative Failure

Game and narrative come into conflict when the author exerts power upon the character that is the player's avatar, especially when this happens in situations that are ostensibly ludic. Since ludic play is geared toward success, the player will assume that not only the game in its totality, but also every situation is winnable, which leads to possible disorientation and frustration when a negative outcome is forced by the author.

Failure is one of the most important tools of narrative authors for creating conflict. Compared to other options, creating conflict from failure has the added benefit of creating a rift between character and recipient. The recipient of fiction has no possibility of influencing characters, which becomes painfully obvious when we are aware of peril that the character is not. Forcing the recipient to watch the hero struggle and fail is the basis of narrative empathy, a major factor in Aristotelian catharsis, and narrative suspense.⁷ This has two reasons: First, there is a discrepancy between the recipient's knowledge and that of characters, and second, the recipient has some distance to fictional events. Our strong sympathy toward Romeo stems from our knowledge that Juliet is still alive, that he will kill himself because of a misunderstanding, and – most importantly – that we can reflect from a safe distance upon which course of action we might have taken in his situation.

Using narrative failure in games inevitably results in friction with player expectations of ludic success. This is problematic when the game's author has the avatar do things in cutscenes that the player can predict will be harmful, all the more so when the rules of verisimilitude are violated. *Doom 3* repeatedly has the avatar carelessly enter dangerous rooms, so as to present the player with a challenging situation. By this, not only the player's abilities are negated (who may have chosen a more prudent strategy), the character's abilities are called into question as well, because his behavior does not seem appropriate for an experienced soldier.

Integrating the avatar's failure in the play process is exacerbating this effect, unless it is handled very carefully. One positive example is an early situation in *F.E.A.R. – First Encounter Assault Recon* (Monolith 2005) in which the avatar is blindsided by his opponent, who then delivers an expository monologue. The whole scripted sequence is nothing but a seamless integration of narrative into play, with the avatar's temporary capture used as nothing but a means of focusing attention at the villain's explanations. When play resumes afterwards, the player faces no additional difficulty, but has learned that the opponent may need approaching in a special way.

The most extreme friction of narrative and play results from constantly forcing failure upon the player, as can be demonstrated on the final example of *Kane & Lynch: Dead Men*, a game based on a premise of failure. Avatar Adam 'Kane' Marcus is a mercenary who has spent the last fourteen years in prison. Although he is considered a criminal by the law and a traitor by his brothers in arms, his only qualm is that he barely knows his daughter Jenny, who was born shortly before his incarceration. On his way to death row, Kane is freed by former allies, who suspect him of having hidden away the payment for their last mission. They have taken Kane's wife and daughter hostage to make him recover the money, constantly guarded by fellow inmate James Lynch. Yet Kane cannot get the money back, so he starts to fight the kidnapers in order to free his daughter. It is only in the second-to-last level of the game that he succeeds, only to find her bitter and ungrateful. She has no love or forgiveness for the stranger and the criminal she sees in him.

At this point, the player can end the game by having Kane flee with his daughter who consequently feels even more contempt towards her father for what she interprets as an act of treachery and cowardice. The alternative is having Kane come to the rescue of his last remaining allies who have been caught in an. To this end, Kane has to endanger Jenny's life by taking her into the warzone. Kane arrives too late to make a difference for his team, and both the sole survivor and Jenny reprimand him for his hesitance. When they try to escape by boat, Jenny and Lynch are shot, and in the final scene, it is unclear whether anyone except for Kane will survive at all.

From an exclusively narrative point of view, this story is intriguing and satisfying. As in Shakespeare's histories, the protagonist's failure is predetermined right from the beginning – a narrative configuration that other games, most notably *Max Payne* (Remedy 2001), have made use of before. Therefore, it is not the avatar's inability to actually achieve something that creates enormous friction between narrative and game in *Kane & Lynch: Dead Men*, but the *locus* of Kane's final failure.

Throughout the game, the player will lead Kane to achievements that only in hindsight prove meaningless, i. e. the player can experience ludic success which furthers the game progression by triggering new problems. In the final level, though, the game is scripted in a way that makes it impossible to win by cheating in a way that secures both the avatar and the player will fail. This is achieved by having the game's final enemy fire exclusively at Jenny and making him invulnerable until he has hit her.⁸

Kane & Lynch: Dead Men thus violates both ludic and narrative principles. From a ludic standpoint, the meta-rule of fairness is ignored, and doing so to achieve a desired narrative outcome belittles the player's efforts. From a narrative perspective, the achieved effect is ambivalent at best, because it implies that Kane is either inept or inattentive at this crucial moment. It is hardly plausible that a man determined enough to steal, blackmail and kill for his daughter should make such a grave mistake without a reason. A cutscene would have avoided both problems:⁹ It would probably have produced some frustration as well by taking control from the player at the very climax, yet it would have made it possible to legitimize Kane's failure. Forcing the player to watch how the tragic hero stumbles would have been plausible and emotionally satisfying. An even greater emotional impact could have been achieved if his inattention had been due to his expressing sympathy or gratitude towards Lynch, tying the complex emotional bond between the two men and the daughter's rescue even tighter. In comparison, the developer's choice of having the climactic moment play out in a manipulated game sequence only realizes a part of the game's narrative and ludic potential.

But even with this shortcoming, *Kane & Lynch: Dead Men* is special in the earnestness and sincerity with which it tries to fuse game and narrative. The bold choice of having the avatar in a major game release inevitably fail is especially praiseworthy in times when *New Super Mario Bros. Wii* (Nintendo 2009) allows the player to fast-forward through challenging passages.¹⁰ A game that can be won (in the sense of meeting all challenges) while telling a story about a fight that cannot be won, especially on a personal and emotional level, is a very engaging experience. It is also very vulnerable to the different issues prevalent in combining game and narrative, but when these issues are systematically analyzed in a fashion as the one demonstrated here, the unmistakable potential and promise of narrative gaming becomes very tangible.

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¹ Also, one must not forget that narrative has playful properties. Roger Caillois explicitly includes crime fiction in his definition of games, because the recipient's attempts at identifying the culprit are essentially a puzzle (2001, p. 30).

² For a concise introduction to the problem, cf. (Simons 2007).

³ This distinction is loosely based on Irina Rajewsky's categories of inter-media relations (2002, p. 11-19).

⁴ As I have argued before (Backe 2008), computer games lack the fixed surface text necessary for a meaningful application of narratological tools.

⁵ The strict distinction can still be found in minigames embedded in the context of narrative single player campaigns. When the player has the avatar use his game console in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar 2004), the narrative progression is suspended.

⁶ One might further distinguish between games that only appear to offer influence like *Mirror's Edge*, games that make player-decision irrelevant like *Doom 3* (id software 2004), and games that change their outcome like *Splinter Cell: Double Agent* (Ubisoft 2006).

⁷ The relation of catharsis and suspense is too complex to be broached here. For an assessment of the issue cf. (Ferrari 1999).

⁸ The soldier's invulnerability can be checked from an elevated spot in the level that allows to shoot him in his hiding place. He reacts to the hits, but he does not take any damage.

⁹ There are examples of seamless integration of game events, scripted sequences and cut-scenes in, among others, *Dead Space*, which orchestrates its climax by avoiding the mistakes of *Kane & Lynch: Dead Men*. In the final boss fight, the avatar cannot defend his companion because the gargantuan monster's appearance makes the earth tremble, causing the avatar to stumble.

¹⁰ Molina, Brett; Snider, Mike; Saltzman, Marc. „A quick-play wrap-up for E3 summit.“ USA Today. <http://www.usatoday.com/tech/gaming/2009-06-04-e3-wrapup_N.htm.> 19.09.09