

## CONCEPTUALIZING NEW CONTEXT OF STORYTELLING THROUGH DIGITAL GAMES

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### Abstract

*Video games often suffer unjust prejudices and resentment as a cultural object. Culture conservatives have turned a blind eye to how they became a part of modern/contemporary culture in an uncontested manner. However, even if one does not engage with video games, it is difficult not to acknowledge its emerging significance. It has now become necessary to promote disciplined and serious researches that are more naturalist study and less morally imperative and literary approach to video games is one such contribution towards fulfilling this aim. Video games are cultural objects with roots that go to the literary tradition as they are based on literary genres such as adventure quest, spy novels etc. In the past few decade video games began integrating story in the traditional gameplay which soon developed as a specific genre called story/ narrative-driven games. Video games are a largely unexplored territory with so many variables and unknown factors to consider. They are multi-branched narratives for a new generation of immersive experiences. This paper is an attempt to analyze video games from narrative perspective. It would try to understand the complex narrative structure of video games that is found in the story-driven games which would contribute to unravel video games as a potential area of literary study.*

**Keywords:** Narration, Storytelling, Digital games, Embedded-Emergent Narrative, Interactive Storytelling

The term 'text' today is not just limited to literary or scriptural objects. Within the realm of literary studies, a text could be referred to all those objects through which meanings can be decrypted. It is a coherent set of signs that communicate any form of informative message. The symbol is understood in terms of its informative message content. Before understanding the potential of digital games as a storytelling medium, it is important to look at how Barthes in his 'An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative' sees the narrative potential in all the objects:

"There are countless forms of narrative in the world. First of all, there is a prodigious variety of genres, each of which branches out into a variety of media, as if all substances could be relied upon to accommodate man's stories. Among the vehicles of narrative are articulated language, whether oral or written, pictures, still or moving, gestures, and an ordered mixture of all those substances; narrative is present in myth,

legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, tragedy, drama [suspense drama], comedy, pantomime, paintings (in Santa Ursula by Carpaccio, for instance), stained-glass windows, movies, local news, [sic] conversation. Moreover, in this infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies” (Thabet 12).

Barthes sees narrative as something which is all encompassing, shaping everything that surrounds us and explaining it to us. In recent decades, literary approaches tried to seek the degree in which the text is implied more as the product of culture than a literary script. In this age of technological advancement, the ways through which narratives are represented are getting complex. These technological developments along with the evolution of philosophy of art generate new mediums of storytelling that result in the complex structure of the story.

### **Narrative Structure of Video Games:**

In the last few decades we have seen that video games began incorporating story in the traditional gameplay in the hope that these stories would not only improve the play but would enhance the playing experience by engaging the player emotionally into the games. The players engage themselves not only with the story but also with the character they are playing. These games are called *story/ narrative driven games*. This incorporation neither places the gameplay nor the narrative at the subordinate position but rather assimilates them in the form that they layer each other when interacted by the player. Over the years, the designers of videogames not only tried to incorporate narrative into gameplay but also experimented with narrative designs to present an immersive storyworld that could establish video games as an effective storytelling medium. Different narratives not only provide emotional recognition by acting as a vehicle to live another life but also present the player with variety while working within similar rules and mechanics of games.

### **Embedded and Emergent Narrative in Video Games:**

Video games could be understood as a new storytelling medium that engages innovative forms of expression. Along with the pre-existing narrative it demands the inclusion of player agency to precede the story and this results in the overall complex narrative structure of the medium. Video game contains both the embedded narrative and emergent narrative and throughout seeks to maintain the balance between the two in order to build a story that is both engaging and entertaining.

Salen and Zimmerman define embedded narrative as a “pre-generated narrative content that exists prior to the player’s interaction with the game” (Salen and Zimmerman 383) which provides the background and reasons for the actions of the game. Embedded narrative in video games is in the form of introduction, cut scenes, information booklet etc. Salen and Zimmerman use the example of ATARI’s Super Breakout (1978) to indicate the early tendency from game designer to create a context of the story for the player through backstories. In The Legend of Zelda the informational text presented to the player prior to the gameplay or the premise of Link, the protagonist of the game, or time travel in the Hyrule act as an example of embedded narrative of video games.

Marie Ryan describes emergent narrative as an event that is not “preplanned by the designer but takes the shape dynamically as a result of the interaction between the user and

the system”(Ryan). Louchart and Aylett who are working on interactive storytelling define emergent narrative as: “the construction of systems in which users actively participate in the narrative process in a highly flexible realtime environment, where authorial activities are minimized” (Louchart and Aylett). The nature of video game is fundamentally emergent as it has the transformative quality which is the result of a player’s interaction with the pre-existing game components. It is the result of a player’s interaction with the gameworld, designed levels, and rule structure. The choices made by the player influences the way in which the story could develop. Moment-by-moment play in the game creates this emergent narrative that varies from play session to play session, depending on the user’s actions. This makes the game engaging while making the narrative complex.

Embedded narratives provide the story context and background of the game, designed with the aim to “provide motivation for the events and the actions of the game” (Salen and Zimmerman 383). Emergent narrative makes the game choice driven by immersing the player in a virtual world where they are in control of the actions performed. With embedded narrative the player engages with the storyworld while the emergent narrative immerses the player by giving them the ability to make changes in the game and therefore making the game their own. Videogames in a way give players the control of creating their own experience by engaging with an already designed system. Emergent narrative, unlike embedded narrative which refer to the content in the storyworld, gives its player the authorship to construct their version of events through the play that would document a particular play pattern. In videogames, narratives are not just meant to be told but rather to be constructed. Therefore, the components of embedded narratives are adjusted so as to enable sufficient interactivity that could as Jenkins proposed create “the preconditions for an immersive narrative experience” (Jenkins 123). Thus, a successful narrative game is designed when there is a fine balance between these two types of narrative.

### **Narration through Player:**

Video games present its audience with a fictional worlds where as players they not only witness the already created narratives but also engage with the virtual live stories by assuming a role in contributing to the narrative events and therefore in narration. They engage with a virtual world where by playing the fiction they witness emergent realities. This makes the narration in video games complex as it defies the traditional manner of narration by telling the story not only through the environment of the storyworld but also through the actions of the players’ in the game. Video games differ from traditional media in an aspect that they are interactive. In video games all the actions revolve around the performance and decision making of the player who acts not only as the audience but also as the protagonist of the text. Videogames therefore act as a story fiction that makes its audience tell the story by acting in it. Thus, we see players performing multiple functions while engaging with the game as text. They are not just an audience or the reader of the game who witness the unfolding of the plot but also the protagonist who perform the actions of the game as well as the narrator of the game who by making choices direct the way how the story could be unfolded. The interactive nature of video games demands for the reconsideration of concepts of literary theories such as narrator, perceiving agent narration, the idea of reader etc. as it makes the narrative simultaneous and complex. Usually the perceiving agent (often termed as

focalizer) is the character who experiences the events in the text whereas the narrator is the narrating voice of the text. However in video games this line of distinction is blurred and the player is often found assuming the role of both.

Every story needs a storyteller. Taking gameplay one could relate it to the act of narration in video games. Playing games needs coordination of watching, listening, controlling, deciding, and sequencing the events in the manner that could lead to the resolution of the game. Didier Coste draws on Genette, Lubomir Dolezel and defines the role of narrator as “representative, controlling and interpretive” (Coste 164). Comparing the act of playing with the act of narration one could easily find the similarity between both the acts. Player as narrator controls the story, by performing and sequencing the story represents the narrative and by deciding interprets the narrative.

However, apart from these numbers of other text functions are also attributed to the narrator. John Manfred in *Narratology: A Guide to the Theory of Narrative* defines narrator:

“A narrator is the speaker or “voice” of the narrative discourse. . . . He or she is the agent who establishes communicative contact with an addressee (the “narratee”), who manages the exposition, who decides *what* is to be told, *how* it is to be told (especially, from what point of view, and in what sequence), and *what is to be left out*” (Thabet 16).

Videogames combine printed text, visuals, and sound to create the narrative environment, and moving through it, the player interacts and influences the events of the game. In videogames it is the player who communicates the narratives through his action. It is the player’s action that progresses the game. The visuals and textual narrative environment, if not cease to exist, would become sterile if the player stops controlling the game. It could therefore be said that the narration of the game would stop if the player becomes inactive and takes off his control from the play. The player does not just stimulate the action but is responsible for the expression of these actions. Successful game narrative demands control and performance of the player.

In literary theories control is considered an essential function of the narrator. The narrator decides the structure of the text by controlling the reporting of the events and characters. In videogames the player functions as the discourse narrator when he or she chooses, organizes, and arranges the events through controlling the action, camera, sequence and time. The narrative game systems are designed in a way that it leaves upon the player to present certain additional information. Such information does not disturb the development of plot but when added; influences the meaning of the narrative significantly.

Performance is not only the actions that the player performs in the gameplay but also the choices that he makes from the variety of actions that influence the outcome. The player chooses different ways to perform the same action which in turn affects the context of game.

In literary text the narrator is assumed to be a metaphorical agent imagined by the reader. The narrator is often anthropomorphized and is assumed as someone who actually narrates the event or comments on the character. Herman and Vervaeck shows the inclination towards the humanness of the narrator.

“One cannot deny that here again structuralism catches a textual aspect in all too human terms. Most narratologists use the term *narrator*, and we will do so too since the use of less anthropomorphic terms such as *narrating instance* does not prevent this instance from being characterized by means of such anthropomorphic criteria as ‘reliability’ and ‘detachment’ ” (Herman and Vervaeck 81 emphasis in original).

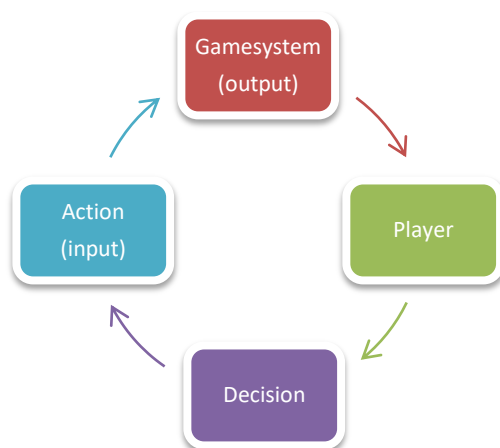
With the advent of films, when many a times camera acted as anarrating agent, the emphasis was laid on the narrator as an abstract figure and was rather assumed as an agency that communicates. Chatman emphasized the functional attribute of the narrator rather than inclining towards its humanness. He states: “As Sarah Kozloff puts it, simply but incisively, ‘Because narrative films are narrative, someone must be narrating.’ . . . Or if not necessarily someone, at least something” (Chatman 133).

The main difference between the narrator of games and traditional story media is that the narrator in games is neither just an object nor an anthropomorphized entity but rather a real human. Along with the narration through the player video game fiction narrate through the gameworld. It is true that without the player the narration in video games would become sterile but it is also true that the pictures, graphics, written languages, sound tracks (which combine music and dialogues) and rules together makes gameworld which contribute equally to the narration.

#### **Narration through Gameworld:**

Narratives capacity of the video games could be read through two ways. First, through emergence, that is, the actions player performs in the gameplay and through the design of the gamesystem which remediate the traditional media such as novels or films. Like any product of the modern world, the design of the game is influenced by its contemporary technological parameters. Due to technical primitivism the games initially were not rich in its embedded elements and were mainly judged through its emergence element that is play.

The game system narrates what player does not. It does the telling in the form of happenings, setting, character, sound, time and rules. It presents the content by combining these elements with which the player interacts. This gamesystem along with the setting, sound, time etc. consists of wide options of actions to be performed in the game. The way a player opts to play the game is nothing but the particular pattern of actions that he chooses from the wide range of options.



Meaning making in Video Games

When the player interacts with the game system he/she selects the information to be presented in the form of evaluating the way to play the game. Once he decides a particular option from the range of actions, such as which path to take, how to take that path, where to go etc. he gives an input to the gamesystem in the form of action performed in the gameplay. This action influences the gamesystem and the gamesystem responds to the action performed which acts as the output of the game. The meaning derives when this event cycle is completed. Video games are made up of several such event cycles which when together read generate the meaning of the complete text. Games, therefore, generate meaning when there is a balance between the narrative elements of gamesystem and of the player's interaction with this system. This active relation needs to maintain throughout the game to get the complete whole of the videogame story.

Narration through images is as natural at the transmission of ideas as verbal forms of narration and has existed throughout the human history in various forms from cave paintings to modern comics. In games graphics, pictures and textual instructions are responsible for narrating major portion of information. Since the gameworld of videogames which combines moving graphics, visuals and sound tracks in the form of music and dialogues is similar to the films, therefore, the narrative theories of films would act as an important tool to understand the narration through onscreen gameworld in videogames.

Robert Burgoyne, an eminent film scholar defines narration in film as "the discursive activity responsible for presenting or recounting the events or situations of the story" (Thabet 28) and assuming film as text he suggests that there are two types of narrators in films. The first kind of narrator is personified character narrator and the second is cinematic narrator. The first is the voice of the character and the latter narrator functions as "the overall control of the visual and sonic registers... [it is an] impersonal extradiegetic narrator, who manifests itself not through verbal discourse but through a range of cinematic codes and channels of expression". This impersonal narrator is responsible for the "larger narration produced by the ensemble of cinematic codes, the overarching discourse" (Thabet 28). In case of videogames, the actions performed by the player can be understood as the personified-character kind of narration whereas the game world functions as the impersonal

narrator. The game system of the videogames is the amalgamation of program codes that arranges the representation of not just the audio and visual elements but also setup the interactive element in the gameplay.

Burgoyne emphasizes that image, mise-en-scène, sound, character appearance, time, space, location; etc. which makes up the fictional world of these digital texts needs to be distinguished from the narrator's discourse. These impersonal narratives exist autonomously prior to the interaction of the player as the narrator discourse of the game. These narratives provide orientation to the player by contextualizing the gameplay. The player witnesses, reacts and contributes to this fictional narrative world and this is when we understand the difference between "the mimetic stratum of the film-text and the shaping activity of the narrator" (Burgoyne 115).

### Conclusion:

Video games might readily be considered as a new form of storytelling. It is a unique medium where the meaning or narrative is made out of "verbs" within a game design. On one hand, the elements of a gameworld act as a strong narrating agent, often more powerful than the player as it grants as well as restricts a player's ability to narrate through his or her gameplay, designed in a way that a space is created for the player to not only engage with the story world but also to make changes in it. On the other hand, the narrator too acts as an important narrating agent who with his actions inscribes the narrative space of the gameworld. He/she by understanding the gameworld which compose of virtual characters and objects, light, sound or other narrative elements that facilitates actions- do the telling by performing the events in the game. The player not only interacts with the system discourse of the gameworld designed by the game designer but also reacts to it and produces a counter discourse. The discourse generated by the game system and the counter discourse generated by the player together produce the final discourse of a game text. Since this counter discourse depends on the player and the way he/she plays, therefore, each game session gives unique experience of interacting game text.

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