THEORISING VIDEO GAME NARRATIVE

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Abstract

This thesis examines several aspects of narrative in video games, in order to construct a detailed image of the characteristics that separate video game narrative from other, non-interactive narrative forms. These findings are subsequently used to identify and define three basic models of video game narrative.

Since it has also been argued that video games should not have narrative in the first place, the validity of this question is also examined. Overall, it is found that while the interactive nature of the video game does indeed cause some problems for the implementation of narrative, this relationship is not as problematic as has been claimed, and there seems to be no reason to argue that video games and narrative should be kept separate from each other.

It is also found that the interactivity of the video game encourages the use of certain narrative tools while discouraging or disabling the author's access to other options. Thus, video games in general allow for a much greater degree of subjectivity than is typical in non-interactive narrative forms. At the same time, the narrator's ability to manipulate time within the story is restricted precisely because of this increased subjectivity. Another interesting trait of video game narrative is that it opens up the possibility of the game player sharing some of the author's abilities as the narrator.

Three models of video game narrative are suggested. These included the linear 'string of pearls' model, where the player is given a certain degree of freedom at certain times during the game, but ultimately still follows a linear storyline; the 'branching narrative' model, where the player helps define the course and ending of the story by selecting from narrative branches; and the 'amusement park' model, where the player is invited to put together a story out of a group of optional subplots. The existence of a fourth model, the 'building blocks' model, is also noted, but this model is not discussed in detail as it does not utilise any traditional narrative structure, instead allowing the players to define every aspect of the story.

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1. Introduction

Ever since the study of video games[1] has expanded beyond the basic debate of video game violence, and turned to analysing the content of the games themselves, one of the most frequently debated questions has been that of game narrative.

Noted game scholar Espen Aarseth once asked whether games are or can be stories[2]. The answer to such a question is, naturally, no. But books and films aren't stories either – they merely contain them, so Aarseth's question couldn't produce an affirmative answer for any medium. A potentially more effective question would be whether games can *contain* stories. However, given the number of examples out there of games that purport to contain stories, a negative answer would be almost certainly untenable, and thus answering this question doesn't really help us to better understand any issues of the interaction between gameplay and narrative.

The real question, then, is two-fold:

a) Do game narratives have any special traits of their own, or is it merely a case of traditional, linear narratives being superimposed onto a non-linear game environment?

b) *Should* games even have narrative, given the fact that they are games?

Of these two questions, the latter seems to have all but exhausted its usefulness. It is becoming clear that computer games are not a single form – indeed, it is difficult to decide whether they even constitute a single medium, even if it is more convenient to

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[1] Throughout this thesis, the terms' video game', 'computer game', and 'game', will be used interchangeably. Computer games and video games are not particularly different in regards to narrative, and using the terms interchangeably helps make this point. Needless to say, whichever term is used, I am only referring to digital games and not their analogue counter-parts.

[2] Espen J. Aarseth, 'From games to game studies: how to build your own department', paper presented at the *From Space War! to the Ivory Tower* conference, May 26, 2003.

keep them grouped together as a single academic field of study than to separate them into different fields. Thus, narrative is simply appropriate for some games, and inappropriate for others – not all criteria that can be used to study games will apply in all cases.

It is that first question, then, that needs to be examined in detail. Indeed, the need to examine the characteristics of video game narrative is especially urgent precisely because we need to understand what constitutes video game narrative in order to be able to determine what the differences are between the narrative forms of video games and the non-narrative forms. A few words, however, must be first said about the idea of narrative. Film theorists David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson state that narrative is "a chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space"[3]. Thus, a narrative is a story consisting of a number of events, and narration is the act of relaying this story to an audience. Not all the events and causal links in a story need to be explained by the narrator, leading to the distinction between the plot (everything that is explicitly presented to the audience) and the story (the entire narrative)[4], but in order to form an understandable narrative, the plot needs to include a sufficient amount of information for the audience to perceive the existence of a chain of events and their causal links[5].

The basic distinction between narrative and non-narrative forms of media is thus generally a simple matter – the narrator in narrative forms seeks to relay enough of the plot to the audience to allow them to construct the story, whereas in non-narrative media, even if there is a narrator, she does not attempt to do this. This is not always a clear-cut divide, however – although, as Markku Eskelinen notes, if another person throws a ball in

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[3] David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film art: an introduction*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 2001, p. 60.
[4] Ibid., pp. 61-62.
[5] Ibid., pp. 60-61.

your direction, you do not see this as a narrative situation[6], other similar situations might be closer to narrative – a board game like *Monopoly* can be considered as a narrative of an individual person's rise to wealth within the capitalist system.

In video games particularly, the separation of narrative and non-narrative forms can be problematic – *Tetris* (1985) and *Space Invaders* (1977) are equally abstract situations, but whereas the former is clearly non-narrative because it makes no attempt to tell a story, the latter is a more complicated case. Its title suggests that an invasion has taken place, and a causal link between the invasion and the player's fight against alien creatures is implied, thus generating a rather rudimentary narrative. In general, however, even if a game cannot be identified as completely non-narrative or completely narrative, either one of these aspects will be emphasised by the game as being more important than the other. One way in which this can be seen in games is the degree of abstraction of the player's reward for playing the game. Games where the non-narrative element is the dominant one will reward the player with points, as is the case in both *Tetris* and *Space Invaders*. On the other hand, games that emphasize narrative may reward the player with nothing more than the conclusion of the story, as is the case in *Wing Commander* (1990). Another distinction that could be made between the two is that non-narrative games will emphasize the experience of playing the game, with the player's enjoyment being derived from the gameplay[7]. On the other hand, playing the narrative game, the game's story is emphasized – which is not to say, of course, that the player of a narrative game plays it solely for the story; the gameplay presumably needs to remain enjoyable, because

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[6] Markku Eskelinen, 'The gaming situation', *Game studies*, http://www.gamestudies.org/, vol. 1 no. 1, 2001, http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/.
[7] See, for example, Steven Poole, *Trigger happy: videogames and the entertainment revolution*, New York, Arcade Publishing, 2000, pp. 168-171.

otherwise negotiating through the game's story would be a tedious process. In this thesis, at any rate, we will be mainly examining those games where a causally-linked chain of events – a narrative – can be perceived.

This thesis will begin by reviewing some of the most notable arguments for and against video game narrative. Although, as I've explained above, question of whether games should or shouldn't have narrative is not an especially constructive way of approaching the subject, it still needs to be examined here to demonstrate why this is the case. This will be done by first examining the most extreme arguments on both sides. We will begin by discussing Markku Eskelinen's claims that video game narrative is nothing more than a marketing tool undeserving of study, and that it is gameplay that should in fact be studied. Another author that will be discussed is Janet Murray, who claims that the future of interactive games, if they are to be considered as a mature art form, is inextricably bound with narrative. These two authors represent the outer edges of the debate, rejecting the value of either narrative or non-narrative games. We then will proceed to explore more moderate points of view, and in particular the work of Jesper Juul, who has suggested that narrative and gameplay are two separate things in conflict with each other, but that hybrids combining narrative and gameplay can exist, and can be interesting. Juul's arguments are useful in defining some of the basic limitations that are imposed on narrative in games. In terms of narrative techniques, Juul argues, games are limited in the range of temporal possibilities available. He argues that within the video game, story, narrative and reading (playing) times are conflated to the point where they appear to be a single temporality. This argument does not seem entirely accurate – the single temporality is an illusion, since a game's story may take place in the future or the

past, regardless of when the player is playing it; however, it is true that the kinds of temporal manipulation that are commonplace in non-interactive narrative are difficult to implement in video games. This, together with the other problems that interactivity imposes on narrative, leads to the separation of the narrative video game into gameplay (interactive, action-centred) and cutscenes (non-interactive, narrative-centred) sequences. Juul's work helps to illustrate these problems, exploring the relationship between gameplay and cutscene sequences in video games.

Juul's work will serve as a transition of sorts, shifting our focus away from the question of whether video games should have narrative, onto the actual nature of narrative in games. Following this transition, then, I will devote the rest of this thesis to the construction of a more comprehensive analysis of video game narrative – or indeed, the dramatic experience of video games, since some academics have argued that many games are more like theatrical drama than like narrative books[8]. Theatre, being more akin to an event unfolding before the audience's eyes than to an event being narrated to an audience, arguably does not constitute narrative as such[9]. This will be one of the first points to be examined in the second part of this thesis – although performance studies is not synonymous with narrative studies, some space needs to be devoted to examining the dramatic performance aspect of video games in order to better understand the player's relationship with the game. The comparison of video games to theatrical drama seems particularly noteworthy in regards to Jesper Juul's arguments that games, compared to traditional narrative media, offer a highly truncated range of temporal possibilities, with

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[8] Brenda Laurel, *Computers as theatre*, Reading, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1998, pp. 93-97.
[9] However, it can also be argued that theatre is a type of narrative, with the dramatic performance being the interface. See for example Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: perspectives on ergodic literature*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, pp. 136-138.

most games unfolding entirely within the present tense[10]. Thus, it may well be that the experience of playing a computer game has as much in common with watching a film as it does with an actor's experience of performing a role in a play.

Apart from offering the benefit of looking at game storytelling from an alternative point of view, I believe that examining the performance aspect of video games will also help shed some light on issues of subjectivity in games. This is an aspect in which video games differ vastly from other forms of narrative media – while films where all or even most of the scenes are presented in first-person view, as though the audience and the lead character were one and the same, are an extremely rare occurrence, there is an entire category (or genre, or form – such divisions remain questionable in video games) of computer games where the player spends most of the game looking through the eyes of her character.

The next aspect of game narrative that I examine is the basic narrative structure in games. This will focus on the narrative structures present in all stories. Robert McKee identifies three basic narrative structures in linear texts – the classical structure, the minimalist structure, and the anti-structure[11]. The first of these is essentially the so-called hero's journey structure. This type of structure, first theorised about by Vladimir Propp and Joseph Campbell is explored in the works of Christopher Vogler, and Robert McKee, among others, and dominates not merely Hollywood cinema, but indeed most storytelling traditions[12]. The remaining two structures are variations, and in some ways reactions to that first, most standard structure. All three structures will be described here, and then the

[10] Jesper Juul, *Time to play – an examination of game temporality*,
    http://www.jesperjuul.dk/text/timetoplay/, 2002.
[11] Robert McKee, *Story*, New York, ReganBooks, 1997, pp. 44-47.
[12] Christopher Vogler, *The writer's journey*, London, Pan Books, 1999, pp. 1-7.

ways in which they are affected by the interactive nature of the video game will be examined.

Which of these three linear narrative structures best reflects the experience of playing a computer game? It seems as though most narrative games utilise the classical structure to some degree, This is usually possible because most such games restrict the player's possibilities of influencing the narrative, in such a manner that the story's overall structure can remain fairly linear. However, there are some narrative games that are more experimental with their narrative, offering the player the ability to select the outcome of the story, and others that allow the selection not of the outcome, but of the story itself; in such cases, the experience of playing the game becomes less like a classically structured narrative and more like a minimalist structure or anti-structure.

Meanwhile, even games that let the player choose the outcome of the story are not exactly what the utopian ideal of 'interactive narrative' would seem to have in mind – as Steven Poole writes, such narratives are far from true interactivity, because they offer only a limited number of opportunities for choices within the narrative, and even then, only a limited number of options in each such situation. Indeed, Poole notes, such limitations are necessary for a storyline to have strong emotional resonance[13]. This is confirmed by a recent quantitative and qualitative study of video games, which found that the stronger the storyline gets, the less the player can influence it[14]. The biggest scope of influence is present in games that quite simply have no narrative – however, studying such games from the perspective of narrative studies would offer little insight.

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[13] Steven Poole, op. cit., pp. 96-99.
[14] Jeff Brand, Scott Knight, and Jakub Majewski, *The diverse worlds project*, unpublished.

Within this thesis, I examine what can be described as the three basic models for narrative structure in video games. A fourth model, for games with unstructured narrative that is generated during gameplay, can also be identified, but does not entirely fit in within this work. Those first three models include the 'string of pearls' approach, where the player goes through a series of pre-set events. In between these major events, the player has more freedom, but ultimately can only go on to the next event[15]. The second model is the 'branching storyline' approach, where the player may affect the story by making choices at strategic moments during the story. Finally, there is what may be called the 'amusement park' approach. This approach is similar to the beaded necklace approach, but the exploration is emphasized over the central storyline, and the narrative is fragmented into sub-plots. The player has a certain degree of freedom to move from one sub-plot to another, and advances made in one sub-plot may affect other sub-plots. There is likely to be an overarching plot that needs to be resolved in order to finish the game. The stronger the overarching plot, the more the game will resemble the beaded necklace approach.

The fourth model, for games with unstructured narrative, will also be discussed. This model, which we will here call the 'building blocks' model, is visible in games such as *Civilization* (1991), and stands on the border between narrative and non-narrative. *Civilization* is a game where the player guides a civilisation throughout history, striving to expand its influence in the world, and its importance compared to other civilisations. In other games of a similar type, the player may be guiding a city or a nation. These games do not so much tell a story as they create it in collaboration with the player. Nor is it a

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[15] Jane Jensen, in Mark Saltzman (ed.), *Game design: secrets of the sages*, Indianapolis, Macmillan Publishing, 2000, pp. 96-99.

typical story – Ted Friedman argues that the primary narrative agent in *Civilization* and other games like it is actually geography. Thus, *Civilization* tells the story of a map changing over time[16]. Although one might disagree with this conclusion, arguing that *Civilization* is rather the story of the player's civilisation over time, the point remains that it is not the story of a particular character, and it has no pre-designed structure – unlike in the other three models, the designers here can only create the initial situation. What happens next is entirely in the hands of the player.

In this thesis I focus on pre-designed narrative, and thus most of my attention will be on the first three models. These three models are not entirely independent of each other – nor, indeed, of the building blocks approach – so-called massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) would fall in the grey area between the building blocks and the amusement park models.

In the course of the discussion on game narrative structures, each of the three pre-designed narrative models is discussed in detail, with various games being dissected to provide examples of these narrative models. I will compare them to each other, and to the more traditional structure found in linear narratives. I will also discuss which types of games are more likely to use which approach. As for the building blocks model, a detailed discussion of this model would be outside of the scope of this thesis. However, the model will nonetheless be briefly discussed in order to explore the idea of narrative as the player's post-gameplay reconstruction of the story generated by the game during the gameplay.

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[16] Ted Friedman, 'Civilization and its discontents' in Greg M. Smith (ed.), *On a silver platter: CD-ROMs and the promise of a new technology*, New York, New York University Press, 1999, pp. 138-143.

Before we begin exploring all these subjects in depth, a terminological side-note needs to be made here. Over the past few years, the concept of interactivity has been increasingly questioned. Aarseth has in fact rejected its use altogether, utilising instead 'ergodicity' – a term derived from the Greek words 'ergon' and 'hodos', meaning 'work' and 'path' respectively. Thus, ergodic texts (a category in which computer games may be placed) are texts where 'nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text'[17]. By contrast, Aarseth argues, the term 'interactivity' carries with it ideological implications of an equal partnership between the user and the interactive text, while simultaneously remaining rather vaguely defined[18]. In this thesis, however, I will generally continue to use the term 'interactive' rather than 'ergodic', except where the latter seems to be more appropriate.

The reason for this decision on my part is that while interactivity may indeed be interpreted as overplaying the games' interaction with the player, it seems as though the notion of ergodicity may be doing the exact opposite – reducing the player-game interaction to a one-sided effort on the part of the player to traverse the text. Thus, ergodicity is a highly limiting notion as far as the study of computer games go. For example, when this notion is applied to a non-narrative game, like a computerised chess game (where one player is a computer), the idea of a reader engaged in a non-trivial effort to traverse the text entirely misses the point. The notion of chess as a one-sided effort rather than an interaction between two players simply doesn't work. Ergodicity makes more sense when applied to narrative games where there is a limited number of possible outcomes and the player is indeed striving to attain a particular outcome. Even

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[17] Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: perspectives on ergodic literature*, op. cit., pp. 8-9.
[18] Ibid., pp. 47-51.

for narrative games, however, it does not apply to every case – especially in games where the narrative fits the amusement park model, the player's experience may be more focussed on interacting with the game world than reaching the end of the text.

Having listed the topics that will appear within this thesis, we can now begin an in-depth exploration of the first of these topics, the validity of the question of whether computer games should actually have narrative.

2. The gameplay vs. narrative debate

This section examines the academic debate dealing with the presence, need for, and problems associated with narrative in video games, given the video game's emphasis on the interaction between the player and the game. This emphasis on play in games has led some academics to suggest that narrative should not be present at all in video games, or at least that there is no reason at all to study game narrative. Others, meanwhile, have responded by pointing out the video game's potential for interactive narrative, where the player can interact with the world of the story and thus influence the story's outcome. The arguments presented by both sides of the debate are problematic, as they generally have little to support their opinions besides the deep conviction that they are correct. Meanwhile, other scholars have, rather than pronouncing that games should or shouldn't have narrative, chosen to explore the issues that come up when narrative is implemented within a medium that emphasizes interactivity over linearity.

This section of the thesis will examine the three points of view one after the other. The anti-narrative positions will be examined first, followed by the pro-narrative positions, and ending with a discussion of the third view, that it is possible – but not unproblematic – for video games to incorporate narrative.

Games as a non-narrative medium

Let us begin this discussion by looking at the anti-narrative positions at their most extreme. Consider, for example, Markku Eskelinen:

> "Outside academic theory people are usually excellent at making distinctions between narrative, drama, and games. If I throw a ball at you, I don't expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories. On the other hand, if and when games and especially computer games

are studied and theorised they are almost without exception colonised

from the fields of literary, theatre, drama and film studies."[19]

As far as it goes, Eskelinen's argument is at least partially accurate – in real life, we don't expect ball games to have a story attached to them. However, there are other types of games in real life where a story may be present, even if not narrated per se – one need only look at children playing, according to Henry Jenkins[20]. Indeed, Jenkins has argued that today, computer games replace outdoor play, rendered impossible by the lack of space in a highly urbanised environment[21]. Of course, the outdoor play that Jenkins describes, incidentally, might best be qualified as unstructured narrative following the building blocks model. However, non-digital games with more structured narrative also exist – one need only to look at role-playing games, where one player (called the game master or the dungeon master) performs the role of the author, controlling the game world, while the remaining players attempt to fulfil their objectives within the context of the game master's storyline[22].

In the above quote, Eskelinen also claims that the study of computer games has been colonised by scholars from various fields that deal with storytelling in one form or another. This seems to be true as well – except that 'colonisation' seems to carry with it connotations of foreign invaders taking control of an area from its rightful owners. This, I would argue, cannot be the case – after all, computer games are a new phenomenon, and there were no rightful owners to speak of. Indeed, given the diversity inherent in these

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[19] Markku Eskelinen, op. cit., http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/.
[20] Henry Jenkins, '"Complete freedom of movement": video games as gendered play spaces', in Henry Jenkins and Justine Cassell (eds.), *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: gender and computer games*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1999, pp. 262-265.
[21] Ibid., pp. 270-277.
[22] Kurt Lancaster, *Warlocks and warpdrive*, Jefferson, McFarland & Company, Inc., 1999, pp. 32-34.

games, it seems that there is more than enough room for scholars from a very wide range of academic disciplines. At the same time, Eskelinen's claims, as a response to the more extreme arguments from the other side of the narrative debate (which will be discussed further on), serve as a warning well worth heeding – there is an inherent risk of narrative studies becoming too dominant in the study of games, with other game elements being given too little attention or ignored outright.

As far as academics that deal with narrative or drama, their presence is wholly justified by the presence of storylines within games. Even Eskelinen does not dispute the presence of such storylines. He does, however, conclude that stories are just 'uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings to games'. Stories in games thus function purely as a marketing tool, and it is a waste of time to study them[23]. By dismissing the value of narrative in computer games, Eskelinen is arguing that in fact, it is the gameplay that we should be studying. He illustrates this point by examining the game *Tetris*, first by criticising Janet Murray's narrative-oriented analysis of the game, and then by applying his own criteria to examine the game. Janet Murray's analysis of *Tetris* as a metaphor for modern life[24] is, according to Eskelinen, completely irrelevant, because instead of studying the game, Murray tries to interpret the game's content, or perhaps even "project her favourite content on it"[25].

The problem with Eskelinen's claims is that he does not in any way attempt to justify his dismissal of game stories as unworthy of academic attention. He does not explain why he believes they are mere marketing tools (or indeed, why, if they were marketing tools,

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[23] Markku Eskelinen, op. cit.
[24] Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the holodeck: the future of narrative in cyberspace*, New York, The Free Press, 1997, p. 144.
[25] Markku Eskelinen, op. cit.

they wouldn't need to be studied). However, he is also correct – there *are* games out there, like *Tetris*, which are better studied through their gameplay than through their non-existent storyline.

Eskelinen's arguments are quite illustrative of the difficulty (or even futility) of arguing against narrative in video games. Yes, it is possible to argue, based on non-narrative games like *Tetris* or *Spacewar!* (1962), that it is not necessary to examine narrative or performance in video games. However, such an argument must either ignore outright, or dismiss as worthless, any games that do have a story. The former option is hardly worth considering, as ignoring something won't cause it to disappear. Dismissing the value of game stories is a more defendable position, but it does ultimately fail, as I will discuss in a moment. All in all, Eskelinen's discussion of the characteristics of gameplay is certainly worthwhile, and reveals much about the nature of games – but only non-narrative ones. As far as narrative games are concerned, Eskelinen's position doesn't achieve much, because he does not defend sufficiently his claims about the low value of game stories.

Games as the future of narrative media

Eskelinen represents the extreme end of one side in this debate. However, there is also an extreme element on the pro-narrative side, highlighting the problems of coming in from a narrative or drama-related field of study and trying to apply the theories from such a field without acknowledging that narrative is just one aspect of games, and that gameplay is generally the more important aspect. These kinds of problems are visible, for example, in Kurt Lancaster's discussion of the game *Quantum Gate* (1993). Describing the ending of the game, Lancaster criticises the game's designers for including a particular gameplay segment near the end of the game, rather than using a video clip,

primarily because according to Lancaster, the game segment detracted from the drama of the situation because it did not look particularly good, while video could have looked better[26]. This criticism may indeed be valid – *Quantum Gate*'s ending might indeed have been more dramatic and satisfying if it was done entirely in a video segment. However, it may be that a different game player would disagree with Lancaster – the player might enjoy the gameplay more than he would enjoy a video clip.

Furthermore, it would be easy to take such criticisms too far. For many older games in particular, one might conclude that the gameplay elements detract from the experience because they are visually inferior to the pre-rendered or pre-recorded images used to present the storyline. Thus, such a criticism threatens to devalue the very notion of gameplay being an important part of games.

Because the narrative in present-day games is often displayed in the very same style and quality of graphics as the gameplay[27], such arguments are redundant for modern games, and in general will only apply to discussions of older games. Nonetheless, even where they are applicable, such arguments need to be treated with a lot of caution. Games may involve drama and narrative, but if these elements were to be considered more important than the gameplay itself, then game studies would cease to be game studies, instead becoming just another sub-field of narrative or performance studies. Such a situation would certainly justify Eskelinen's warnings about colonisation.

A similar problem is associated with a few works that discuss the relationship of games and narrative in ideological, indeed evangelical tones, with authors such as Janet

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[26] Kurt Lancaster, op. cit., pp. 120-121.
[27] Sacha A. Howells, 'Watching a game, playing a movie: when media collide', in Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (eds.), *Screenplay: cinema/videogames/interfaces*, London, Wallflower Press, 2002.p. 116.

Murray arguing that the potential for future development and improvement of games lies primarily in their narrative aspects[28]. Unsurprisingly, where the proponents of games as a non-narrative medium tend to focus on examples of games without narrative, arguing that these games are the most representative of the medium's potential[29], the reverse is the case here, with narrative games being presented as the best possible future for the medium[30]. Thus, where Eskelinen (and, to a lesser extent, Jesper Juul, who will be discussed later) rejects narrative in games as a worthless marketing tool, here non-narrative games are the ones being rejected. The computer, Murray writes, 'is first and foremost a representational medium, a means for modelling the world', and 'we should hasten to place this new compositional tool as firmly as possible in the hands of the story-tellers' – for games to become mature, we need a cyberbard, the digital age's equivalent of Shakespeare[31]. Much like Eskelinen's arguments, Murray's arguments are valid to a certain degree – narrative games (while arguably already an art form well worth investigating) hold a lot of potential for the future. However, there seems to be no particular reason why non-narrative games should be considered only as a starting point for the evolution of narrative gaming.

Another problem with the arguments of authors like Murray is their tendency towards utopianism. There is a desire here not only for stronger narrative with 'more dramatic resonance and human import'[32] within them, there is also a desire for increased interactivity and control, with current games being criticised both for their narrative

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[28] Janet H. Murray, op. cit., pp. 185-186.
[29] Jesper Juul, *A clash between game and narrative*, http://www.jesperjuul.dk/thesis/, 2001,
    http://www.jesperjuul.dk/thesis/7-conclusions.html.
[30] Janet H. Murray, op. cit., pp. 208-213.
[31] Ibid., p. 284.
[32] Ibid., pp. 54-55.

poverty and their lack of interactivity[33]. This idealistic vision, embodied within the 'Holodeck' from the *Star Trek* franchise, is nothing less than an environment where the player does not simply control, but actually becomes a character, becoming intellectually and emotionally involved at every stage of the story.

Yet, as Poole notes, there is an opposition between strong, emotional narrative and interactivity. Not only is it technically difficult (with current technology at least, it may well be outright impossible) to design a narrative that would allow the player to truly influence it at any point, but such interactivity, if implemented, would weaken the story's impact – dramatic events need to be irreversible to have emotional resonance[34]. Games, however, are almost always reversible – if the player's character dies in a video game, the player will not stop the game there, but will rather reload a previously saved game and try again. This means that the player character's death has no emotional impact, and indeed isn't really an option in the story[35]. In fact, it is desirable in game design to ensure that the player will die (at least) a few times during a game, while at the same time it is even more important to ensure that, in the hands of an expert player, the game can be completed without any loading of saved games[36].

Thus, as interactivity increases in a game, narrative becomes more and more problematic. It is a paradox – the closer the game designers would get to one aspect of the utopia, the further away they would be from the other aspect, and vice-versa. Even if the

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[33] Janet H. Murray and Henry Jenkins, 'Before the holodeck', in Greg M. Smith (ed.), *On a silver platter: CD-ROMs and the promise of a new technology*, New York, New York University Press, 1999, pp. 35-37.

[34] Steven Poole, op. cit., pp. 96-100.

[35] Diane Carr, 'Playing with Lara', in Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (eds.), *Screenplay: cinema/videogames/interfaces*, London, Wallflower Press, 2002, pp. 173-174.

[36] Bob Bates, *Game design: the art and business of creating games*, Roseville, Prima Publishing, 2001, pp. 97-98 and p. 114.

technological problems associated with creating a truly interactive narrative could be overcome, the emotional impact of the narrative would depend on a psychologically unlikely leap of faith by the player. The player, faced with an undesirable narrative event, whether this event was pre-planned by the game designers or a consequence of her own actions, would have to accept this event without utilising the game's interactivity to change it by loading a previously saved game and adapting one's actions to prevent the undesirable event. As Marie-Laure Ryan notes, it is uncertain if the player would get any gratification (which is always one of the primary reasons for a reader or a player to engage with a text, interactive or otherwise) from experiencing the emotions of a character in an a strong, complex and emotionally resonant narrative – the main characters in such narratives often suffer a lot during the course of the story. Such suffering would be experienced very differently if the player and the character were the same person:

> "Any attempt to turn empathy, which relies on mental stimulation, into
>
> first-person, genuinely felt emotion would in the vast majority of cases
>
> trespass the fragile boundary that separates pleasure from pain."[37]

We will return to the relationship between players and game characters later on. For now, it is sufficient to say that the idea of the Holodeck is an impossible utopia, because it ignores the fact that games are games, and the player's desire for an emotionally-powerful narrative experience will be tempered by the desire to overcome the challenges of the game – to *win*.

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[37] Marie-Laure Ryan, 'Beyond myth and metaphor: the case of narrative in digital media', *Game studies*, http://www.gamestudies.org/, vol. 1 no. 1, 2001, http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/ryan/.

The examination of the various arguments for and against narrative games has allowed us to establish, thus far, that in this complex situation, neither side can actually win. Both sides are simultaneously correct (in their claims about the nature of present-day games) and wrong (in their rejection of narrative or non-narrative games as worthwhile, and their imposition of narrative/non-narrative games as the only desirable future for games). The problem lies within the assumption that if one of these game types can or should exist, then the other cannot or should not exist. There is no reason to accept such an assumption – it is time to accept that narrative and non-narrative games are two separate entities, both equally worthy of our study.

Gameplay and narrative as a problematic combination

During the examination of the game vs. narrative debate, we have also touched upon the fact that the relationship between gameplay and narrative is a problematic one. The problems of this relationship are the primary subject within the works of Jesper Juul. Juul does not attempt to determine whether games with narrative should or should not exist – his argument, instead, is that while narrative can exist in games, its relationship with the rest of the game will generally be a problematic one. This is because, he argues, interactivity causes difficulties for narrative, for similar reasons as have been discussed above – that a continuously interactive story cannot exist, and that the relationship between the player and the game is different than the relationship between the reader and the non-interactive story[38]. Juul's argument is also not without problems; he limits his analysis of the nature of narrative to literature, and consequently his description of narrative does not necessarily apply even to other media already accepted as narrative

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[38] Jesper Juul, 'Games telling stories?', *Game studies*, http://www.gamestudies.org/, vol. 1 no. 1, 2001, http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/.

media, such as film and theatre. Furthermore, the distinction between his arguments and those of more extreme authors like Eskelinen is a delicate one.

Nonetheless, the difference is there – where Eskelinen argues that games shouldn't have narrative at all, Juul's argument is that the more a game develops its narrative complexity, the less game-like it is going to be, and that consequently, it will be less interesting than a game with less narrative but more interactivity. Such a claim definitely cannot be rejected outright. The first part, indeed, is almost certainly true – in current games, the increasing strength of narrative *does* adversely affect the player's ability to influence the outcome[39]. Whether this indeed makes a game less interesting, is much more arguable. We will now examine Juul's arguments in detail. In doing so, we will begin to develop a picture of the relationship between game and narrative, and the methodology of narration in games, and thus make the transition from the game vs. narrative debate into the study of the nature of video game narrative.

To begin with, Juul points out that computer games and narrative, while sharing some traits, are extremely different. He notes that narrative's weight comes from the causal logic and inevitability that bind together a sequence of past events. Thus, even if a narrative takes place in the future, it will still be written in past tense, as though it had already occurred. It's a different story with video games – they are defined by the player's influence of present events. Thus, the player can only interact with the game whenever it is using the present tense[40]. In a game like *Doom II* (1994), Juul notes, it is difficult to see any temporal distance between story time (the time when the story is set),

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[39] Jeff Brand, Scott Knight, and Jakub Majewski, op. cit..

[40] Jesper Juul, *A clash between game and narrative*, op. cit, http://www.jesperjuul.dk/thesis/1-introduction.html.

narrative time (the time when the narrator relays it), and reading time (the time when the reader experiences it). There is no grammar to depict any temporal distance between story, narrative, or reading time, and in fact the player's ability to directly influence the events represented makes it clear that the events cannot be past or future, or else the player wouldn't be able to influence them[41].

This is only partially true, however. Even in *Doom II*, which has very little indeed in terms of storyline, the player is given sufficient information to know that the events he is participating in take place in the future. This is not especially different to what one might experience in film, where story events are usually depicted in the present tense. This creates the illusion of story time and reading time being one and the same, but the distance is merely hidden, not removed. In video games, the concealment of the distance is even more sophisticated, with the player being able to influence events regardless of whether they are set in the past or the future[42]. It is further worth noting that in most cases, it is not the player that influences the story – more often than not, the player doesn't exist in the game world. Instead, she guides a character within this game world, and interaction with the world takes place through this proxy. This becomes more complicated in games where the discourse between the game and the player is in second-person (you are here, you see this). Even there, however, the player isn't necessarily a character in the game world, but rather the relationship between him/her and the game character becomes an even closer one, not unlike the relationship between the actor n a play and the character he's playing.

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[41] Ibid., http://www.jesperjuul.dk/thesis/4-theoryofthecomputergame.html.
[42] This is a fact that Juul himself has taken note of and acknowledged in his subsequent work. See for example Jesper Juul, *Time to play – an examination of game temporality*, op. cit..

The difference between the time of narration and the other two temporalities is a more problematic one. Here, it seems, Juul is indeed correct – given the lack of a distinctive temporal setting for the narrator, it seems logical to assume that the narration is taking place now. However, this doesn't actually make games different from narrative – it merely makes them more similar to the oral storytelling tradition (where reading and narration time are the same) than to narrative in literature.

A further point related to temporality in games as compared to other narrative media is the seeming inability for a game to use the temporal devices that appear in those media. There is, Juul argues, a problem when it comes to use devices such as the ellipsis (skipping time) and pauses; returning to his example of *Doom II*, he notes that the game essentially takes place entirely in real-time[43]. The player does have the ability to pause the game – but this is more like the act of putting away the novel than a story pause within the novel itself. Juul is also correct that ellipses serve no purpose in games[44]. It is worth noting that ellipses are actually used in game cutscenes. A cutscene, however, suspends gameplay, and thus the use of narrative devices such as ellipses in cutscenes helps to support Juul's claims about the conflict between game and narrative – in order to become more interesting from a narrative point of view, the game must temporarily surrender its interactivity. Still, some temporal devices are available in the game, though

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[43] Jesper Juul, *A clash between game and narrative*, op. cit., http://www.jesperjuul.dk/thesis/4-theoryofthecomputergame.html.

[44] Which is not to say that they do not appear in games. However, when they do, it is a problem, not a game feature. Thus, when multiple players are playing the same game across the internet, temporary problems with one player's internet connection may cause her to see another player 'skip' across her screen – an ellipsis caused by the game's need to catch up with the temporality of the other players.

they are controlled by the player, rather than by a separate narrator. Thus, the player can slow down or accelerate the game speed[45].

Another temporal issue that differentiates between games and narrative according to Juul is sequentiality and chronology. Juul notes that narrative is based on repetition; the narrator, within the plot, repeats the story. Games, meanwhile, cannot be based on repetition, because they do not follow a fixed sequence. They thus lack the inevitability that is present in sequential narratives – when a character dies as a consequence of the player's actions, it does not feel like inescapable destiny; indeed, if the character has a detailed psychological profile, the player might end up pursuing a course of action that the character's psychology would not permit[46]. In this way, the interactivity of games does indeed destabilise narrative structure – as we had discussed earlier in relation to Murray's work, in a video game a character might die at the wrong time ending the story prematurely. This, and the player's other possibilities of changing the outcome, weaken the emotional resonance of events – rather than destiny, they are now an option.

The interactive nature of games also means that the designers' options in terms of chronology are severely limited. While there is no problem depicting events in a non-chronological order in a novel or a film, doing so in a game may cause difficulty. In a non-chronological game, a player's actions in the game world's past could make impossible the actions that she had already taken earlier during the gameplay, but which take place later in the game world's time[47]. Here too, Juul's point demonstrates that

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[45] Jesper Juul, *Time to play – an examination of game temporality*, op. cit..
[46] Jesper Juul, *A clash between game and narrative*, op. cit., http://www.jesperjuul.dk/thesis/4-theoryofthecomputergame.html.
[47] Jesper Juul, *Time to play – an examination of game temporality*, op. cit..

narrative and gameplay do not sit perfectly together – any time a game wishes to revisit the game world's past, it does so in a non-interactive cutscene[48].

A further point that Juul makes is the problematic nature of the narrator in video games:

> "A narrative can also be characterised by the fact that there is narration. If the narrator is not characterised as such, at least there is some kind of selection of what to tell and emphasise. This selection is related to the temporal situation and variations in narrative speed."[49]

Juul goes on to note that in a game like *Space Invaders*, the process of selection and variation does not exist during gameplay. It does appear, in a vestigial manner, between gameplay sequences, but not sufficiently to give the audience any idea of the narrator. In another of Juul's examples, *Myst* (1993), there is a more explicit narrative frame, but here the narrator only establishes the world of the narrative, setting up the structure within which the player's actions take place, but having no control over the actions themselves[50]. However, Juul does seem to be overly focused on what David Bordwell calls diegetic narration – how the story is told. In doing so, he ignores the other type of narration that Bordwell identifies – mimetic narration, where the narration controls how the story is shown[51]. The latter type of narration seems clearly enough to exist in all video games – somebody, after all, controls what is shown on the screen, and what is heard through the sound system. This can be the game designers or the player, but in either

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[48] One might speculate that a game where the player can in fact play game events out of sequence and render already-completed sequences impossible, is in fact possible. As fascinating as such a game might be, however, it would pose an enormous technical challenge to its designers.

[49] Jesper Juul, *A clash between game and narrative*, op. cit., http://www.jesperjuul.dk/thesis/4-theoryofthecomputergame.html.

[50] Ibid., http://www.jesperjuul.dk/thesis/4-theoryofthecomputergame.html.

[51] David Bordwell, *Narration in the fiction film*, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p. 3.

case, a fully-fledged narrator does exist (the fact that the player can be both the reader and the narrator is an intriguing one, and we will return to it in the next section of this thesis). Thus, while narration in video games certainly is not without problems, it does also appear to be more sophisticated than Juul would suggest.

The final of Juul's points that we will consider here is the question of replayability. Juul notes that our culture values the idea of the 'endless work', a text that can be read and reread repeatedly without it becoming tedious. In non-interactive narrative media, this is the category that high literature (as opposed to 'trash novels', disposable after a single reading) falls into. However, in video games, it seems as though the less plot a game has, the more replayability it will have. If you add a story to a game, it will become less replayable, and thus will get further away from the high-culture endless text – once you know the story, there's just no point playing again, as you already know exactly what to do[52].

As far as Juul's work is concerned, this is the closest he comes to supporting Eskelinen's arguments against the study of video game narrative. It is, however, a curious and self-destructive argument. If the lack of interactive challenge was to dissuade one from replaying a narrative game, then how can a non-interactive 'endless work' exist in the first place? It would certainly be fair to argue that, playing an adventure game like *The Curse of Monkey Island* (1997) is much less of a challenge the second time around - the player can already get through all the puzzles that blocked his progress the first time. However, it is not logical to argue that this reduction of challenge will also automatically reduce the value and enjoyment of replaying the game. It *might* do that, if the game's

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[52] Jesper Juul, *A clash between game and narrative*, op. cit., http://www.jesperjuul.dk/thesis/5-theplayerandthegame.html.

narrative is not worth re-experiencing; however, the narrative may well be interesting and worthwhile enough to rise in value above the gameplay. As Ben Talbot notes, the lack of playability in *Myst* does not necessarily come from its use of narrative, but rather its game engine[53].

Indeed, it is worth noting here that in terms of limiting gameplay possibilities, narrative is not necessarily any different to the other rules of the game. In *Tetris*, blocks fall from the top of the screen, and the rules require the player to keep arranging them as long as possible – failure to comply will result in defeat. The gameplay is thus very restricted, and these restrictions are just as arbitrary as one might argue narrative restrictions are. Thus, narrative can be looked upon as merely providing another type of game rules. Gameplay would not be any more open or freeform without narrative. As Johan Huizinga notes, all play has its rules[54]. Narrative, therefore, is not necessarily an alien presence within games.

In conclusion, it seems clear enough that the combination of narrative and gameplay *is* a technical challenge. The points made by authors like Juul and Poole certainly need to be considered; it is difficult to conceive how narrative could make the transition from a linear, non-interactive to an interactive, exploratory media without any difficulty. However, this does not necessarily mean that narrative should not exist in video games, or that, as Eskelinen argues, it is unworthy of academic study where it does exist. At the same time, the future of games is not the development of narrative games exclusively – it is time to accept the diversity of possibilities within video games. Narrative games and

[53] Ben Talbot, 'Compete, command and conquer: playing for space at the international games cultures conference', *Intensities*, http://www.cult-media.com/, no. 2, 2001, http://www.cult-media.com/issue2/CMRtalb.htm.
[54] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, Boston, The Beacon Press, 1955, p. 11.

non-narrative games can exist and develop alongside each other, and indeed they already do. Outside academic theory, this debate simply does not exist. A game designer may not like to implement complex narrative in her games, but is also not likely to categorically dismiss narrative games as something that should not exist[55]. At any rate, most commercially available games of today do have some form of narrative[56], and that fact in itself makes the study of game narrative a necessity. It is this necessity that I will now attend to. We have already begun, above, exploring some aspects of game narrative, such as their limited temporal possibilities and their focus on mimetic narration. Let us proceed to explore some of these issues further, by looking at subjectivity, performance, and the player's participation in the process of narration within the video game.

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[55] See, for example, Sid Meier, cited in Richard Rouse III, *Game design: theory & practice*, Plano, Wordware Publishing, Inc., 2001, pp. 39-40.
[56] Jeff Brand, Scott Knight, and Jakub Majewski, op. cit..

3. Reader, actor *and* narrator - subjectivity, performance and narration in video games

Given the player's active involvement within the computer game, there is a need to examine games not only from the point of view of narrative studies, but also from the fields of drama and performance studies. Indeed, the player's active participation in games has led some authors, and Brenda Laurel in particular, to claim that computer games are (or should be, as Laurel's work is both descriptive and prescriptive) drama rather than narrative. Laurel argues that drama differs in three primary ways from narrative, by involving enactment rather than spectatorship, intensification rather than extensification, and unity of action rather than episodic structure[57].

Each of these differences will be discussed in turn, in order to determine whether games are indeed more like drama than narrative. The rest of this part of the thesis will then be used to examine the limitations and possibilities of the use of diegetic and mimetic methods of narration within the video game.

Drama and narrative – subjectivity and performance

Firstly, then, drama involves enactment, rather than spectatorship. The events unfold in real-time, and the player takes action within the drama – as Laurel puts it, the stuff of narrative is description, while the stuff of drama is action[58]. Of course, this claim seems to carry with it the implication that drama only exists from the point of view of the actors involved – since the audience at a dramatic performance does not take action, to them this dramatic performance would simply be a particular form of narrative[59]. Be that as it may,

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[57] Brenda Laurel, op. cit., pp. 93-97.
[58] Ibid., pp. 94.
[59] Indeed, this is the point behind the idea of mimetic narration – to depict action, such as a dramatic performance, to an audience. See David Bordwell, op. cit., pp. 3-7.

however, the player's active participation within the computer game does suggest that the player experiences the game more from the subjective point of view of an actor within the game than a spectator.

Indeed, games can be an intensely subjective experience. Playing a first-person shooter, you are encouraged to feel as though you are there, in the game world. You see and hear everything from the point of view of the character you're playing. This character forms the interface between you and the game world[60]. And it is not merely perceptual subjectivity – when the player's character is wounded in *Quake*, the screen flashes red, as though the character was in pain. It is total subjectivity, and when speaking of their first-person game experiences, players often make no distinction between themselves and their characters[61].

Even outside of the first-person view, subjectivity remains strong. Thus, in the third-person action game *Indiana Jones and the Emperor's Tomb* (2003), the player has some control of the camera, but ultimately cannot see more than the player's character, Indiana Jones (Indy), might himself see if he chooses to look around. The player still controls Indy's every move. Every once in a while, Indy reacts to a player's action by speaking, but it doesn't seem like he's speaking aloud – it is his thoughts that the player is privy to.

It can sometimes be a very curious relationship. On the one hand, the player seems to become the character that he plays. Indy represents the player in the game world, and in fact cannot make any move without the player's input. Thus, the player *is* Indy, in the

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[60] Jo Bryce and Jason Rutter, 'Spectacle of the deathmatch: character and narrative in first-person shooters', in Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (eds.), *Screenplay: cinema/videogames/interfaces*, London, Wallflower Press, 2002, pp. 71-72.

[61] Talmadge Wright, Eric Boria, and Paul Breidenbach, 'Creative player actions in FPS online video games', *Game studies*, http://www.gamestudies.org/, vol. 2 no. 2, 2002, http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/wright/.

same way that an actor may for the duration of a play become Hamlet. On the other hand, however, Indy's thoughts are not the player's own. In the satirical *Escape from Monkey Island*, the player's character, Guybrush, at one point in the game has a conversation with a dart-thrower in a bar. One of the options that the player has is to instruct Guybrush to ask the dart-thrower to throw a dart at 'that guy over there'. When the dart-thrower complies, it comes as something of a surprise that the dart is thrown in the direction of the player – not only does Guybrush have, like Indy, his own thoughts and comments on the game situation, but he even appears to be vaguely aware that he is being watched and controlled by the player.

Subjectivity can thus vary a lot from game to game and genre to genre (even non-narrative games can be highly subjective, although they will not be discussed here). In general, however, there will be a lot more subjectivity involved than in other media[62]. The player is always more than just the audience, and frequently she's more than even an actor in a play.

Given this heavy reliance on subjectivity in games, it is natural that some academics would approach the study of games from the points of view of drama and performance studies. Lancaster, for example, notes the similarities between video games (or rather CD-ROM movie, as Lancaster seems insistent on separating the interactive CD-ROM movie from the video game) and the experimental drama of environmental theatre, where the audience's interactive capabilities are also placed somewhere between performance and spectatorship[63]. The similarity does indeed appear to be there, although it is not a perfect analogy – the interactivity of environmental theatre is still quite different to that

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[62] Jesper Juul, *Time to play – an examination of game temporality*, op. cit..
[63] Kurt Lancaster, op. cit., p. 108.

of the video game. The spectator in environmental theatre can move about freely, interacting with the cast members as though she was in fact a part of the cast. Thus, the spectator's possibilities of action are very broad – however, the spectator cannot influence the outcome of the plot[64]. This is different to the video game, where the player's scope of actions is generally limited[65], but where (in some cases, at least) the player's influence on the outcome of the plot may be greater. For example, in *Wing Commander IV* (1996), the player, through the character of Blair, can dramatically affect the final outcome of the story, but his range of possible actions is severely limited – actions that can be directly seen to affect the plot usually come in the form of dualistic choices. Furthermore, even in games where the player cannot affect the final outcome, her role within the game story is much more significant than that of the spectator in environmental theatre, who, ultimately is nothing more than a bystander, albeit a diegetic one, unlike the audience of a traditional theatrical performance – in the video game, the player performs the role of a character central to the game's story. Indeed, as Angela Ndalianis notes, the game cannot progress if the player refuses to play the assigned part[66]. Whereas the spectators of environmental theatre are present merely to observe the events unfold, the player of the video game actually drives the narrative progression there.

There is another feature that makes the player's experience of interactive media different to environmental theatre – most video games with narrative utilise the non-interactive cutscene to further the plot, periodically forcing the player out of the

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[64] Ibid., pp. 108-110.
[65] So far, in fact, always. The scope of actions the player can undertake has been increasing as the technology used by the video game has improved, and it probably will continue to increase in the future, but it seems unlikely that game designers would ever want to implement the possibility of actions that have absolutely nothing to do with the objectives of the game.
[66] Angela Ndalianis, '"Evil will walk once more"', in Greg M. Smith (ed.), *On a silver platter: CD-ROMs and the promise of a new technology*, New York, New York University Press, 1999, p. 97.

subjective interaction mode. The player is separated from the character, seemingly becoming an ordinary spectator. This is not something the player has any choice about – as Lancaster notes, it is the director at work, returning control of the game to the computer[67]. These periodic interruptions of interactivity are one of the more frequently criticised aspects of games. Poole notes that this loss of control for the sake of the story, is (depending on whether it is the story or the gameplay that's of primary interest to the player) either like being forced to play a game of ping pong between every chapter of a book, or like being forced to read a chapter of a book between games of ping pong[68]. A similar argument can be detected within Juul's work that we examined earlier – the idea that gameplay and narrative are in conflict with each other in fact presupposes that narrative cutscenes are to be considered as a separate entity from the gameplay. Other authors have also noted that the transition from active participation in gameplay to that of a spectator in a cutscene is a highly disruptive one, and has been especially so in the past, when the visual quality and level of detail within the cutscene was invariably higher than that of the gameplay, making the transition even more obvious[69].

Yet, the use of cutscenes to further the plot is, at least with the current technology used in video games, a necessity. Indeed, it seems to be the only way to ensure that the game's story has any noticeable dramatic and emotional resonance – as we had discussed in the previous section of this thesis, dramatic events only seem significant if the player has no control over them – if a character dies because of the player's ineptitude, the player will

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[67] Ibid., p. 112.
[68] Steven Poole, op. cit., pp. 95-96.
[69] Sacha A. Howells, op. cit., pp. 114-117.

merely re-play the level; but if the same character dies in a cutscene, the player will know that the event was inevitable.

The necessity of the cutscene, however, does not mean that the player remains stuck in a situation of two opposing modes of experience, connected only by the fact that they both came from the same box. James Newman has challenged the notion of the cutscene being an entirely passive experience. He notes that the distinction between active participation and spectatorship is often blurred. The player might retain some minute amount of control during a cutscene – for example, in the game *Shenmue* (2000), the cutscenes are punctuated with brief interactive moments[70]. Similarly, in *Wing Commander III* (1994) and *Wing Commander IV*, the player is given a certain amount of control within the cutscenes – at critical moments, the player will be required to make a choice of what his character, Blair, says or does. These choices are always binary, and pre-designed by the game's developers. However, the very existence of some kind of choice, together with the fact that the cutscenes can unfold very differently depending on the player's choice (which may also have long-term ramifications), means that the player remains highly involved within the cutscene – he is not merely a spectator. Blair may have a mind of his own, but some vestigial control over his actions remains. It also seems logical to assume that this sort of residual involvement will be present even in cutscenes where the player has no control whatsoever. Since the cutscene is always triggered by the player accomplishing (or failing to accomplish) something within the game, the player would presumably feel that the cutscene is in some way a result of her own actions. As Sacha Howells notes, cutscenes are often used not merely to further the narrative, but as a

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[70] James Newman, 'The myth of the ergodic videogame', *Game studies*, http://www.gamestudies.org/, vol. 2 no. 1, 2002, http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/newman/.

form of reward for the player, replacing the more traditional (and more abstract) system of scoring points[71].

Returning to Laurel's work, it seems as though, while the difference of enactment versus spectatorship that she has identified as distinguishing drama from narrative does indeed indicate that games tend more towards drama than narrative, things are not entirely black and white here. As Newman argues, spectatorship and enactment are not binary opposites per se, but rather form the extreme edges of 'an experiential or ergodic continuum'[72]. Thus, in terms of the player's involvement in the story, most computer games lie somewhere in between spectatorship and enactment; indeed, the player's position on this continuum is different not only from game to game, but from one part of the game to the next.

The second difference that Laurel identifies between drama and narrative is that drama intensifies the experience, while narrative extensifies it. That is to say, drama condenses time and intensifies emotions, trying to reach a maximum emotional impact, whereas narrative frequently does the opposite, expanding time for the sake of description or to depict a particular incident from multiple points of view[73]. This argument is a difficult one even outside of computer games, as it would imply that if a book consisted of sufficiently terse descriptions of events, it would no longer be narrative, instead becoming drama; however, Laurel does note that this argument is something of a generalisation[74], which would presumably make exceptions are more or less acceptable.

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[71] Sacha A. Howells, op. cit., pp. 112-114.
[72] James Newman, op. cit., http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/newman/.
[73] Brenda Laurel, op. cit., p. 94.
[74] Ibid., p. 94.

To discuss this idea in terms of video games, meanwhile, it is worthwhile to recall Juul's argument that games, at least during gameplay sequences, tend towards real-time experiences[75]. If intensification makes an experience more dramatic, then the tendency for video games not to expand time for the sake of description would certainly indicate that games are quite dramatic. Of course, even while being real-time, the computer game might still move quite slowly. If the player is exploring an empty area, one cannot expect there to be a lot of intensity, regardless of whether the player does so in real-time or not. This potential problem of low-intensity (and therefore, boring) periods, Juul notes, is solved in many computer games by designing a game world where non-stop action is required of the player[76]. However, this would seem to only apply to action (and non-narrative) games – and even then, only to situations where the player continues to move forward in the game. In the first-person shooter *Doom II*, for example, once the player eliminates all the enemies in an area, there is no longer any danger there – one can revisit and simply look around. Indeed, if the player failed to pick up an item or activate a switch during her first visit, a return journey may well be required. In such a case, the player is likely to remain in the constant action of walking – but even if walking is action, it is certainly not the sort of action that Laurel suggests is intensified in drama. Nor is walking necessarily looked upon by the player as nothing more than a way to get from one area of intense action to the next. In *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (2002), for example, one of the primary attractions of the game is in fact the huge game world, which the developers make a point of advertising on the game's cover:

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[75] Jesper Juul, *Time to play – an examination of game temporality*, op. cit..
[76] Jesper Juul, *A clash between game and narrative*, op. cit., http://www.jesperjuul.dk/thesis/4-theoryofthecomputergame.html.

"The enormous game world is open and free for you to discover. Go

anywhere you want and do anything you want."[77]

In such a game, walking and looking become the attraction. The player may seek out locations where intense action is required to survive, but she may also choose instead to move slowly (even though the game is real-time), stopping to look at the scenery. Thus, whether the game is an intensive or extensive experience is a choice for the player to make – a fact well worth considering regarding the question of the narrator in video games, which we will examine further on. As far as the intensiveness/extensiveness of the experience is concerned, it should also be noted that the difference between cutscenes and gameplay sequences makes it harder still to pinpoint even a tendency for games to go into either of these directions. It seems likely that taken separately of their games, cutscenes would probably tend towards an intensive approach, depicting important events as needed to continue the plot – however, the cinematic origins of the cutscene, along with its secondary role as a visual reward for the player[78] suggests that cutscenes may just as easily take an extensive approach, focussing on visually interesting details rather than on emotionally intensive events. All in all, to conclude that games in general are either intensive or extensive would almost certainly be erroneous – there is a vast scope for varied approaches both between and within games.

The final difference between drama and narrative that Laurel describes is drama's tendency towards unity of action, as opposed to the episodic structure of narrative – thus, there is a strong central thread of action within drama, with the various incidents being

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[77] Bethesda Softworks Inc., *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, 2002.
[78] Sacha A. Howells, op. cit., pp. 110-114.

causally linked, while narrative often consists of semi-independent events, 'connected thematically rather than causally to the whole'[79].

This difference, according to Laurel, drama is likely to be a tighter, more economical and more intense experience than narrative. At the same time, her wording highlights the fact that these are merely tendencies, rather than a strictly binary opposition, so in this aspect, the difference between drama and narrative is fuzzy to begin with[80].

Unsurprisingly, things become even fuzzier when we try to apply this concept to video games. Laurel herself notes that in the period when she wrote her book, the text adventure game, which she claims to be more narrative than dramatic, had been replaced with graphical adventure games with 'a stronger central action'[81]. This is a somewhat peculiar claim, given that graphical adventures were never dramatically different to text adventures in this regard. Indeed, adventure games like Ron Gilbert's (whom Laurel cites at this point) *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990), had a central plot running through, but there was an episodic element to them, as well – the player's quest to become a pirate, as is the case in the first part of *The Secret of Monkey Island*, does not really have very much to do with the subsequent quest to rescue the kidnapped Governor Marley. At any rate, game storylines in general tend more towards semi-independent episodes with an overarching plot to connect them, than towards strong central action. In *Wing Commander III*, for example, the overarching story is the Terran Confederation's quest to defeat the alien Kilrathi Empire, which threatens to wipe out mankind. Within this story, the player's character takes part in several loosely connected military actions, each of

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[79] Brenda Laurel, op. cit., p. 95.
[80] Ibid., p. 95.
[81] Ibid., p. 96.

which consists of one or more independent missions. *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* is even more episodic – as a player, I spent approximately 40-60 hours playing this game, of which perhaps 10 hours had been the pursuit of the main storyline. The remaining time has been spent exploring the world and pursuing sub-plots unrelated to the main storyline.

Not all games, however, are episodic. The horror survival game *Alone in the Dark* (1992), for example, had a more tightly focused plot – the player's character was trapped by supernatural forces in an old mansion, and the game revolved around the escape from the mansion. Thus, whether a game is episodic or not is likely to depend on the game's genre. Furthermore, it may also depend on the player's choices – in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, a player could focus exclusively on the main storyline, making the experience somewhat less episodic. On the other hand, the player could also neglect the main storyline altogether, turning the game into a series of completely unrelated episodes.

In general, then, it is not possible to conclude that computer games are explicitly dramatic rather than narrative, though they certainly do contain elements of the drama. There is a clear tendency in games towards an experience far more subjective and active than within more traditional linear media where the spectator has little power to influence the reading of text. When it comes to intensification versus extensification, a clear tendency in either direction is harder to locate. Finally, games can just as easily consist of semi-independent or fully independent episodes as they can of a central, tightly focussed plot. Laurel's work, then, can help to identify whether a game is more like drama or narrative, but unsurprisingly, it is of little use in defining the nature of games in general.

There is, however, one clear trend that we have touched upon briefly before, and which the examination of Laurel's work highlighted even further. This trend is the tendency for the player to exercise a certain control over the narration of the text. It is now time to take a closer look at the role and identity of the narrator within the computer game.

Who's narrating here?

The narrator's power lies in determining how the narrative is experienced in every way – how and what is seen, how and what is heard, and by extension, how and what is felt and thought by the audience. This power becomes especially evident in oral narrative, where, because of the interaction between the audience and the storyteller, the story is always different – the narrator adapts it to the audience[82]. In an oral telling, the interaction between audience and storyteller is constant, and serves as both a constructive and disruptive force – disruptive, as the audience generates 'noise' that disrupts the telling, and constructive, because it generates energy, pushing the narrator towards better narration[83]. Intriguingly, it has been noted that one way of looking upon oral narrative is as a game or even a battle:

> "Narrative may be seen as a delicate interplay of power in which the
> narratee submits to the control of the narrator while the narrator must
> scheme to overcome the power of the narratee."[84]

Thus, the narrator has power, but is only in control as long as the audience permits it. Some of this power translates from oral narrative to other, more formalised types of

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[82] Marie Maclean, *Narrative as performance*, New York, Routledge, 1988, pp. 4-6.
[83] Ibid., pp. 2-4.
[84] Ibid., p. 17.

narrative – the reader of the book, for example, is free to close the book at any time, or to read it out of sequence. Thus, a pre-designed text, such as a book or a film, is completely under control of the reader[85]. However, this is a different power than that of the audience listening to the oral narrative – the reader may close the book, the audience may walk out of the cinema, and indeed they may even change the text, by skipping a chapter of a book or writing on its margins. They do not, however, have the power to directly influence the narrator – the written or recorded text interacts directly with the reader[86]. Thus, it seems that the narrator's narration of the text is completed when the text is published, becoming permanent.

The video game, seems to once again present a multitude of different models of narration, some tending more towards the model of oral narration, and others closer resembling written or recorded narration. Before we begin, however, to examine this question in detail, we must briefly consider exactly what the tools of the narrator are.

According to Bordwell, there are essentially two sets of theories of narration. The first of these sets includes diegetic theories, which look upon narration as the telling of a story, verbally or in written form. These theories, then, deal primarily with the role of language in narrative, and how language can be used to manage temporality and subjectivity within the story[87]. Most of the works discussed so far in this thesis have analysed video game narration from this angle. Jesper Juul, for example, was comparing the temporal limitations of video game narration to the much wider range of temporal

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[85] Ibid., pp. 8-9.
[86] Ibid., pp. 10-11.
[87] For a closer look at diegetic theories of narrative and particularly in the context of film, see David Bordwell, op. cit., pp. 16-26.

possibilities present in literature[88]. Similarly, Espen Aarseth, in his discussion of the adventure game, limits himself mostly to the text adventure game, and indeed seems to view the graphical adventure game (which, in its narrative methodology, would draw as much from diegetic as from mimetic narrative techniques) as a much more commercialised and therefore less interesting form than the text adventure[89]. It also seems as though Laurel's comparison of drama and narrative is in fact a comparison of drama and diegetic narrative rather than narrative in general.

At any rate, the diegetic narrator's tool is language. In literature, of course, language is the only tool available to the narrator, allowing him/her to make smooth transitions between times, places, and people. The diegetic narrator does not control what the readers see, hear or feel; instead, he tells them what is experienced within the diegesis. Bordwell writes that the diegetic narrator does not try to conceal the fact that she is in fact the narrator[90] – this very explicit nature of diegetic narration is perhaps why diegetic narration seems to dominate the discourse about computer game narration, leading authors like Juul to compare computer game narration directly to narration in literature. Indeed, Juul's work paints quite a detailed picture of the use (and limitations thereof) of diegetic narration in the video game. Diegetic narration, then, is vestigial at best in video games, and mostly appears within cutscene sequences. The problems associated with changing temporal and subjective conditions within gameplay enforce this restriction on diegetic narrative – in games like *Doom II* or *Space Invaders*, even if the narrator was to relay to the player what is happening in the gameplay, the games' real-time nature and

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[88] Jesper Juul, *A clash between game and narrative*, op. cit., http://www.jesperjuul.dk/thesis/4-theoryofthecomputergame.html.
[89] Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: perspectives on ergodic literature*, op. cit., pp. 127-128.
[90] David Bordwell, op. cit., p. 16.

lack of variation in the narrative frame[91] would mean that this narrator would be more like a sports commentator in television or radio than the storytelling narrator in literature. The diegetic narrator is invariably placed in the game by the designers – like the reader in traditional media, the player cannot really add anything to the diegetic process of narration. Players can, of course, recount their game experiences to somebody else, resulting in a kind of emergent narrative that Henry Jenkins and Mary Fuller compare to the narratives of New World exploration, published in personal accounts by explorers like Walter Raleigh[92]. In doing so, however, they do not add anything to the original narrative – their narration is a new work including elements of their play session and the original story and spaces of the game. Indeed, as Juul notes, the fact that something can be recounted through narrative does not mean that it was a narrative to begin with[93].

Because the diegetic narration comes primarily from the designer, it becomes a lot more noticeable in cutscene sequences, where the designers have far more direct control over what they choose to reveal to the player, and may freely change conditions like time and degree of subjectivity without causing problems for the gameplay. The contrast between diegetic narration in the cutscene and the gameplay can be seen particularly well by examining the example of *Max Payne* (2001). A third-person action game, *Max Payne* tells the story of an undercover policeman, Max Payne. Although both the gameplay and the cutscenes use the third-person point of view, looking at Max from outside of his body, it is primarily *his* story, narrated by him. In the game's introductory cutscene,

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[91] Jesper Juul, *A clash between game and narrative*, op. cit., http://www.jesperjuul.dk/thesis/4-theoryofthecomputergame.html.

[92] Henry Jenkins and Mary Fuller, *Nintendo and new world travel writing: a dialogue*, http://www.rochester.edu/College/FS/Publications/FullerNintendo.html, 1995.

[93] Jesper Juul, 'Games telling stories?', op. cit., http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/.

which in fact depicts events that take place later in the game, Max tells the player what he has been through; then he proceeds to recount the events from the beginning. The diegetic narrator's capabilities within the cutscene, then, seem as potent as in any other narrative medium. Once the gameplay begins, however, the range of diegetic narrative techniques used is much reduced – all Max can do is report directly on what the player sees and finds.

One must note, however, that while diegetic narration during gameplay in *Max Payne* is much weaker than during the cutscene, this may be more a consequence of conservative game design than of any inherent limitations of video game narrative. Since Max's oral narration presumably comes from the future (that, as the player saw in the introductory cutscene, is when he began telling the story), there is certainly no reason why Max couldn't, at the start of a new level, inform the player of how dangerous this particular location was, thus using diegetic narration to build suspense within the gameplay. Thus, it may well be that the limitations of diegetic narration in video games that Juul describes may only apply to currently-available games, and not to video games in general. However, no matter how complex diegetic narration in video games could become, it will in most of its aspects merely imitate diegetic narration in other media. Although video games are interactive, there is little scope for the player to actively participate in the creation of the diegetic narrative – the best the player can do is participate in the selection of the diegetic narrative that is being recounted (in a game with branching storylines). Such selection, however, in turn limits the narrator's options. As Poole notes in his discussion of the problems and capabilities of branching narrative, it is difficult to think of a film or a novel where the lead character does not at any point

comment or think about previous events[94]. Yet, the only way that a diegetic narrator can make the narrative more complex than the running commentary of a football game is to look back upon past events – in which case, the narrator must, like in *Max Payne*, be narrating from a time *after* the story – as Juul notes, narrative in literature is almost always presented in the past tense[95]. This potentially frees up the narrator to speak of any event in the story, including events that have yet to happen (but already have happened from the narrator's point of view). If the player, however, can have an impact on the outcome of the story (which is not the case in *Max Payne*, where the story is linear), the narrator's possibilities are restricted – only events that have already happened to both the narrator and the player can be discussed, and the narrator cannot in any way suggest or imply what is yet to come, due to the risk of creating a paradox by discussing, as though it has already occurred, an incident that the player can then choose to avoid.

The other narrative theories discussed by Bordwell are those that deal with mimetic narration – that is, narration through the imitation (mimesis) of the action being narrated. Mimetic narration, thus, is a method of presenting a spectacle[96]. Consequently, although some scholars have used mimetic theories of narration in their examination of literary narration[97], for the most part mimetic narration has been bound to theatre and film, the two media where narration generally means depicting an event rather than telling the audience about it. It is therefore rather natural to assume that mimetic narration also takes

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[94] Steven Poole, op. cit., p. 98.
[95] Jesper Juul, *A clash between game and narrative*, op. cit., http://www.jesperjuul.dk/thesis/4-theoryofthecomputergame.html.
[96] David Bordwell, op. cit. p. 3-4.
[97] Ibid., p. 4 and p. 16.

place in video games, where the depiction of events as though they were happening right before the player's eyes is standard procedure.

There are many different factors that affect mimetic processes of narration, offering the narrator (that is, whoever is responsible for the spectacle's presentation) many different tools and methods of narration. Thus, for example, there is perspective, which determines how the story space is shown, and the spectator's position relative to this space. Perspective can be manipulated in many different ways and for many different purposes – for example, by depicting an object or person from below and looking up at it, the object can be made to appear larger and more imposing than it is in reality[98]. Apart from the angle, perspective can be manipulated through the vertical location of the spectator or camera, as well as the spectator's viewing direction and distance from the action. Perspective can be pre-determined by the use of a particular medium – ancient Greek theatre, for example, was so organised that the spectators would have the same perspective on the scene regardless of what play was being shown[99]. In a more flexible medium, perspective will vary between individual works and within these works.

Obviously, mimetic narration involves more than perspective. Consciously or unconsciously, the narrator manipulates every aspect of the visual and aural presentation of the story – the lighting, use or lack of colour, stage direction, sound, and indeed every object and actor visible on the stage as well as their words and actions, are all determined by the narrator within the limits of the medium. Depending on the medium and the work, each of these aspects can be manipulated to depict the action in the most interesting or aesthetically appealing fashion, or in a more utilitarian way, to depict the action from the

[98] David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, op. cit., pp. 218-224.
[99] David Bordwell, op. cit., p. 4.

perspective that allows the audience to absorb the story easily and comfortably. Such a utilitarian style can be observed, for example, in classical Hollywood cinema narration, where the objective of the narration is to become invisible, allowing the audience to forget the fact that they are watching a mediated spectacle[100]. The opposite can be seen in the cinematic style of German expressionism, where the action was often presented in a distorted fashion, for example to recreate the point of view of a madman in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1921)[101].

Mimetic narration in computer games often imitates the mimetic narration of the fiction film, but, as with diegetic narration, the narrator's access to options commonly used in the fiction film is limited by the interactive nature of the computer game. Where a cinema director might choose to obscure the viewer's vision of the action to create tension or surprise, mimetic narration in video games cannot be entirely subjugated to the narrator's wishes to impart a particular mood on the player – video game narration always has a utilitarian element. In order to control the character on the screen, the player needs to always be as aware of the character's surroundings as the character is. As Poole notes, where in the cinema the difference in the level of the spectator's knowledge compared to that of the on-screen protagonist serves the purpose of generating dramatic irony, no such irony can be present in video games, where the player is both spectator and protagonist. Similarly, although the game may sometimes switch from one point of view to another, it remains severely limited in terms of editing – if a game was to use the kind of rapid editing that often appears in film, it would become confusing to control, and

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[100] Ibid., pp. 162-164.
[101] David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, op. cit., pp. 406-408.

consequently difficult and frustrating for the player[102]. Thus, during gameplay, the game cannot intercut between two story threads happening in different places; just as the gameplay needs to remain relatively close to real-time, so it needs to remain bound to the player's character.

In general, then, pre-scripted mimetic narration in the video game is limited to those techniques that do not interfere with the player's actions. Indeed, in some cases, the range of available mimetic techniques is even further limited by the type of game – the first-person shooter, for example, is distinguished from the third-person shooter by the manner in which it restricts the player to looking through the character's eyes[103]. The main exception to all of these limitations would of course be the cutscene, which allows the game's creators to the complete range of mimetic narrative techniques that are present in film[104]. This can result in the cutscene defining the game to a certain degree – for example, when discussing the generic links between the stalker/slasher film tradition and the adventure game *Phantasmagoria* (1995), Ndalianis notes the similarities between the camerawork of the game and the type of camerawork that appears in stalker/slasher films[105]. However, Ndalianis also notes that the game uses some of the subjective camera conventions of the stalker/slasher films within the gameplay sections[106], indicating that the generic roots of the game's style of narration are visible both in gameplay and cutscenes. All in all, given the extremely broad range of options that the mimetic narrator has available, the limitations imposed by the computer game are not really that significant

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[102] Steven Poole, op. cit., pp. 81-83.
[103] Sue Morris, 'First-person shooters – a game apparatus', in Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (eds.), *Screenplay: cinema/videogames/interfaces*, London, Wallflower Press, 2002, pp. 85-86.
[104] Sacha A. Howells, op. cit., pp. 119-120.
[105] Angela Ndalianis, op. cit., pp. 98-100.
[106] Ibid., pp. 97-98.

– the player, after all, still operates within a world designed by the mimetic narrator in almost every aspect.

Interestingly, video games are able to further compensate for the limitations they impose on the mimetic narrator by shifting some of the responsibility for mimetic narration from the game designer to the game player. Unlike any other narrative medium (except theatre, and especially the environmental theatre that was discussed earlier in this thesis), the audience's view of the action is determined by the audience itself. This is as true for first-person games, where the simple act of the player moving also determines what the player sees and from what angle, as it is for third-person games, where the player is often explicitly given control of the camera, allowing him/her to determine what the best viewing angle would be for a particular section of gameplay[107]. Of course, the player's mimetic narrative abilities are as restricted as the game creators' abilities – while the creators do not have the freedom to manipulate the camera any way they like, the player does not generally have much freedom to alter the lighting beyond the options available diegetically to her character. Thus, in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, the player can use a torch to light up a dark cavern, but only if the player's character is in possession of such an item.

All in all then, narration in video games is rather different to what one might find in other media. Outside of the cutscene, the narrator is constrained by the interactive nature of the video game, which makes it impossible to use the full range of narrative

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[107] Steven Poole, op. cit., pp. 133-134. Some games also offer the possibility of recording the gameplay for subsequent watching, often giving the player a lot of freedom to re-edit the recorded sequence later, using even cameras that were not used during the gameplay sequence itself. This, however, is more like the creation of new cutscenes than the manipulation of mimetic narration in gameplay or in existing cutscenes. See Steven Poole, op. cit., pp. 84-85.

techniques, both diegetic and mimetic. Diegetic narration is particularly limited – during gameplay at least, the diegetic narrator cannot do much, because such narration depends to a large degree on the narrator being aware of what happened before and what will happen next – and the video game narrator can only know about events which have been pre-scripted by the game designers. Thus, diegetic narration can only develop in games with only one ending, and indeed even in such games, there has been very little development of diegetic narrative complexity. Furthermore, mimetic narration is also limited by the interactive nature of the experience. However, unlike diegetic narration, mimetic narration manages to maintain some of its complexity by shifting some of the narrator's responsibilities from the game designer to the game player.

It is also worth noting that while both mimetic and diegetic narration is restricted in the gameplay, they are much less restricted within cutscenes. Thus, by combining gameplay with cutscenes, video games can present narratives in no way less complex than what we're used to encountering in other media. Indeed, video game narratives are often *more* complex than traditional narratives, because their structure must take interactivity into account. Having examined how subjectivity and narration works in the video game, it is narrative structure that we will now proceed to examine in the next section of this thesis, with the objective of theorising the basic structural models of video game narrative and determining how the various aspects of narration discussed above function within these models.

4. Structural models in non-linear environments

This section will examine narrative structure in the context of the video game. This will be done in two stages – firstly, the various aspects of the three basic linear narrative structures described by Robert McKee (the classical structure, the minimalist structure, and the anti-structure[108]) will be outlined briefly and compared to what happens in video games; the purpose of such a comparison being to determine which of these, if any, closest resembles the narrative structure of video games.

Subsequently, we will embark on a detailed exploration of three basic models of pre-designed video game narrative. These three models are the string of pearls model, where the player essentially moves from one pre-designed event to the next, with a greater amount of freedom of action between the events, the branching narrative approach, where the player is occasionally able to affect the narrative by choosing from pre-designed narrative paths, and the amusement park approach, where the player is placed in a world with many possible narrative plots to tackle. Of these three approaches, the string of pearls approach is perhaps the most common; it is also the one best understood, as it is often described in video game design books[109]. Somewhat less common is the branching narrative approach, perhaps because games with branching narrative require more cutscene material and thus end up costing more, with *Wing Commander IV* being the extreme example, at a cost of over US$12 million[110], and a 480 page script[111] – of which, in a single game, the player would only see a certain portion. Finally, the amusement park

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[108] Robert McKee, op. cit., pp. 44-47.
[109] See for example Jane Jensen, in Mark Saltzman (ed.), op. cit., pp. 95-99.
[110] Anonymous, 'Wing Commander IV: the price of freedom review', *Computer games online*,
    http://www.cdmag.com/, 1996,
    http://www.cdmag.com/simulation_vault/wing_commander_iv/page1.html.
[111] Rex Wiener, 'CD shoots now major league', *Variety*, 21-27 August, 1995, p. 24.

approach, seems to be tied to the role-playing game (RPG) form, where, although a strong central plot can be present, the emphasis is on the evolution of the player character's abilities, thus creating the need for a large world with many possibilities[112]; this model's restriction to the RPG (a restriction which, it must be noted, does not imply that RPGs are in turn restricted to this narrative model) means that games offering the player this much freedom within the context of pre-designed narrative are rare[113].

As an aside, there is an alternative explanation for the prevalence of the string of pearls model in games. This explanation is that, as this model is the one most similar to linear narrative, it is the most obvious choice in the early years of the video game, in the same way that many early films were simply recordings of theatre plays[114]. At the same time, the question of whether games should or shouldn't have some kind of linear narrative is one to which various game designers have different answers. As Richard Rouse notes, many writers in the video game industry have backgrounds in (or dreams of) writing screenplays or novels, and regard game design as a day job, necessary for financial support, and often actually dislike the interactive nature of the games they write[115]. Jane Jensen, on the other hand, criticises non-linear narratives and particularly the idea of multiple endings, because these multiple endings are red herrings – the game players, according to Jensen, will want to reach the 'right' ending[116]. Both Jensen and Rouse seem to have a very clear idea of what the correct way of designing game narrative is – what is less clear is whether there is anything more than personal taste behind their

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[112] Bob Bates, op. cit., p. 10.
[113] Jeff Brand, Scott Knight, and Jakub Majewski, op. cit..
[114] Richard Rouse III, op. cit., p. 228.
[115] Ibid., pp. 228-230. Rouse's criticisms do not appear to be intended to apply to all games using the string of pearls model, however, but rather those games that use this model in its simplest, most linear interpretation.
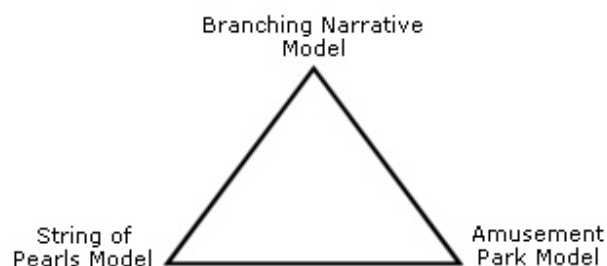[116] Jane Jensen, in Mark Saltzman (ed.), op. cit., p. 96.

arguments. Again, it is worth pointing out that it is more or less futile to look upon games as being a single monolithic medium.

Returning to the three models for pre-designed video game narrative, it seems as though most narrative games do not follow a particular narrative model to the letter. While one approach can be generally seen to dominate within a game, elements of the other approaches will be also be visible. For example, *StarCraft: Brood War* (1998), follows the string of pearls model, but also features at one point an element of the branching narrative, with the player's actions in one mission allowing him/her to choose which of two possible missions will be played next. However, regardless of which of the two missions is chosen, at the end of it there will be only one possibility for the subsequent mission, thus returning the game's narrative to the string of pearls model.

In order to better visualise the possibilities of hybridisation, the three models can be plotted onto a graph. The purest implementations of the three models then form the points of an equilateral triangle. Within the space of this equilateral triangle, games featuring purer implementations of each model would sit closer to their model's corner, while games with a more hybridised narrative would sit nearer to the centre of the triangle.

Once these three models for pre-designed narrative have been discussed, this section of the thesis will be concluded with a brief discussion of the fourth model for video game narrative, the building blocks model, which functions in

The three models of video game narrative

games where the designers only create a framework for the narrative, and do not create the narrative itself; the building blocks model thus maps what might be called emergent narrative.

It must be noted that the four models mentioned above are defined by different aspects of narrative than the three structures that we discuss in the context of linear narrative. Whereas linear story structures are defined by diegetic factors, the four models of video game narrative are defined by their interactivity – in the case of the three models of pre-designed video game narrative, this means the player's ability to influence the outcome of the pre-designed narrative, and in the case of the building blocks model, the player's ability to create a new narrative. At any rate, the necessity of examining video game narrative from the angle of player's influence does not reduce the need to examine game narrative from the angle of traditional linear narrative structure. Indeed, a question that needs to be examined here is whether the four models of video game narrative affect a game's options within the context of traditional narratives – does, for example, branching narrative mean that a game will have to adopt some aspects of the minimalist story structure, characterised by its open-ended nature?

First of all, however, let us return to linear narratives, and examine the structures available there.

Linear narrative structures

The oldest and most often used structure in narrative, whether it be a film, book, or a theatre play, is the restorative three or four-act structure. This structure divides the overall plot into three acts, describing the different stages of the so-called Hero's Journey, during the course of which the hero of the story leaves his ordinary world, goes on a quest into a special world, and following the completion of the quest, returns to the ordinary world.

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The concept of the ordinary and the special worlds is a metaphor, meaning that a story does not necessarily need to involve travel – the worlds can just as easily be within the hero's psyche[117], although even then, the exploration of these internal worlds takes place through interaction with the hero's outside world – indeed, if a story was to take place entirely within the hero's head (i.e., as though it was a delusion), it would probably take on the appearance of an external story. At any rate, the problem that causes the imbalance within the hero's world is usually two-fold. There is an external problem that can only be overcome and fixed through external action. Then, there is the internal problem – the flaw within the hero that prevents him/her from fully understanding the external problem and its solution. This internal flaw prevents the hero from resolving the external problem when it is first detected, and needs to be fixed first, before the external problem can be overcome[118].

The first act introduces the story's hero and the world that she ordinarily inhabits. It then describes the events that create an imbalance within the hero's world, eventually forcing the hero to undertake a quest of some kind in order to restore the balance. This act ends when the hero crosses a threshold, leaving the ordinary world to enter the special world where the quest will take place[119].

The second act then describes the hero's quest, as he encounters problems of mounting difficulty, up to the point where the hero, having realised his internal flaw, gains a new insight into the nature of the external problem. With this insight comes some success, but

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[117] Christopher Vogler, op. cit., p. 13.
[118] Ken Dancyger, Jeff Rush, *Alternative scriptwriting*, Boston, Focal Press, 2002, pp. 22-24.
[119] Christopher Vogler, op. cit., pp. 13-18.

the external problem still remains[120]. This act is invariably the longest act of the story[121], and consequently is occasionally divided into two acts. However, the resulting four-act structure is not significantly different from the three-act structure, as the two central acts fill the same exact role as the central act of the three-act structure[122].

Finally, the third act is where the story is concluded. Having corrected their internal flaw, the hero can attempt to finally resolve the external problem, and, by extension, make her way back to the ordinary world once the balance has been restored. Overcoming the external conflict, of course, is not easy, and this act usually features various setbacks. However, the hero's newfound strength overcomes these setbacks, and in a climactic moment, the external forces are overcome. Victorious, the hero returns home to live happily[123] – or, having died in order to achieve this victory, lives forever in the memory of the witnesses, both diegetic and extra-diegetic, (that is, the audience) of her sacrifice. As such, the restorative three-act structure does not necessarily need to end happily – it needs to end in a way that satisfies the story[124].

The restorative three-act structure is the most common and most classical, but not the only structure that appears in traditional narrative media. Robert McKee identifies this kind of structure, as belonging to one of three basic structures, with the other two being the minimalist structure and the anti-structure[125].

Apart from the division into three acts (a division that can be used in all three structures) and the restorative nature of the plot, the classical structure is characterised by

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[120] Ibid., pp. 19-23.
[121] Ibid., p. 163.
[122] Linda Aronson, *Scriptwriting updated: new and conventional ways of writing for the screen*, St Leonards, Allen & Unwin, 2000, pp. 40-41.
[123] Christopher Vogler, op. cit., pp. 23-25.
[124] Robert McKee, op. cit., pp. 303-314.
[125] Ibid., pp. 44-47.

a plot of causally connected events, with a closed ending, a sense of linear temporal progression and consistent reality, as well as the emphasis of the external conflict over the hero's internal conflict; furthermore, one character can usually be identified as the hero of the story, and this hero is an active one, taking action and initiating events. The minimalist structure, on the other hand, while basically similar to the classical structure, leaves the ending open, allowing the audience to determine how the story really ended; it is also characterised by its use of multiple leading characters, their passive and reactive nature, and the focus on internal rather than external conflicts. Finally, the anti-structure, as its name suggests, is characterised by its rejection of the characteristics of traditional structure – the plot is advanced by unrelated coincidences, the story time is blurred to the point where linear temporal progression becomes impossible to discern, and reality is inconsistent; an object may obey the diegetic laws of physics at one point, and disobey them for no reason later on[126].

McKee notes that these three structures are not fixed and exclusive. There is a significant degree of hybridisation occurring between them; a story might mix and match between the characteristics of one structure or another, or it might settle for the middle ground. Thus, for example, a film like *Seven Samurai* (1954) includes multiple protagonists working together to overcome one external problem, and therefore is a hybrid of the minimalist and classical structures[127].

In general, however, most stories best resemble the classical structure – in film, for example, classically structured films are a staple product that dominates film production

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[126] Ibid., pp. 47-55.
[127] Ibid., pp. 56-57.

worldwide[128]. This tendency can also be seen within narrative video games. Bob Bates, writing about game design, describes the restorative three-act structure as the best plot structure available for use within the video game – indeed, he does not even mention the possibility of a different structure[129]. Certainly this emphasis on classical structure is reasonable – for example, it hardly seems possible to have a video game with a narrative that uses a passive protagonist, because if the player's character were passive, there would be no gameplay to speak of. The closest that a game can get to having a passive protagonist, then, is a situation where the player's character has no active role within the cutscenes, as often happens in strategy games. Thus, in *StarCraft* (1997), the player's character is frequently spoken to by the other characters involved in the plot; the manner in which he is spoken to and the player's role during the gameplay sequences, indicate that the character is certainly an important one – however, in order to maximise the player's ability to project him/herself into the position of the character, the designers left him/her out of the plot. In any case, the protagonists (plural, as the player switches between three characters during the game) in *StarCraft* are only passive within cutscenes. In the gameplay, the player is in command of an army, making all the decisions and striving to achieve the victory that will allow the continuation of the plot – a job that hardly defines a passive protagonist.

Games are also limited in terms of the anti-structure elements they can borrow. If a game uses a typically anti-structure element such as inconsistency within the game's reality, this will generally be regarded as a serious problem – such inconsistencies may be interesting in linear narrative, but for the player, they mean a frustrating inability to tell

[128] Ibid., p. 46.
[129] Bob Bates, op. cit., pp. 76-80.

what effect her actions will have, and why[130]. Of course, inconsistency in reality is not a problem in all games – the adventure game *The Secret of Monkey Island* along with its three sequels, is set in a quirky world where the 17th century Caribbean is liberally sprinkled with elements from the 20th century[131]. *The Secret of Monkey Island* is able to do this without frustration, however, because the game is specifically designed to limit the possibility of death or failure within the game to an absolute minimum[132]. Another aspect of anti-structure that doesn't seem to appear too often in video games is the idea of non-linear time, where the story's timeline is so blurred that it is difficult or outright impossible to determine which event came first.

At the same time, however, the coincidental causality aspect of the anti-structure is not only tolerated, but indeed embraced by the video game – for example, within *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, as the player explores the world, the game randomly places animals in the area surrounding the player. It is thus entirely possible for the player character to complete an important quest, and then die on his way home in a random encounter. Indeed, even if the player only has to deal with characters that were placed non-randomly within the game by the game's designers, their artificial intelligence will usually result in a slightly different encounter every time the player replays the game. Thus, depending on the type of gameplay involved, a game can utilise more or less pronounced features of the anti-structure. A game's position in relation to the four models

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[130] Steven Poole, op. cit., pp. 50-54.

[131] For an in-depth discussion of the peculiarities of the Monkey Island universe, see Owen Clayton, '"How appropriate. You fight like a corporation": consumerism and cultural tourism in the Monkey Island games', *The Scumm Bar*, http://www.scummbar.com, 2002, http://www.scummbar.com/uploads/FinishedMonkeyIslandessay.doc

[132] LucasFilm Games, 'The secret of Monkey Island: user's manual', *The secret of Monkey Island*, 1990.

of video game narrative that had been mentioned earlier will also affect the game's possibilities in regard to choosing the type of linear narrative structure.

Of course, given that all video games, regardless of which of the models described here they use, are to some degree non-linear, one might ask how the linear narrative structures from non-interactive media can be compared at all to video game narratives. The objective of this comparison, however, is not to seek out the similarities between the four models of video game narrative described here and the three linear narrative structures described by McKee. Rather, McKee's linear narrative structures become applicable when one looks at the experience of playing a video game. This experience is ultimately a linear one, since even if there are many non-linear possibilities to choose from, the player can only choose one course of action[133]; thus, when a player completes a game, she forges a linear story out of the game's non-linear possibilities. These linear stories will either belong to one of the three linear narrative structure types identified by McKee, or will be a hybrid combining their features.

Thus, it is not the stories themselves, but the possibilities of generating stories using one structure or another differ depending on the video game narrative model that is used. We will discuss these differences shortly, when we proceed to examine each of the four models in detail. In the meantime, it is also worth noting that the idea central to the restorative three-act structure, that of the hero embarking on a quest, is particularly appropriate to video games, especially if taken literally as a travel from one geographic area to another, since, as Jenkins notes, are very often spatial narratives, involving the

[133] Angela Ndalianis, op. cit., pp. 103-104.

geographic movement from one obstacle to the next[134]. Notably, it is often difficult to perceive any internal problem within the heroes of video games. Thus, *Doom* (1993) is divided into three acts, and as far as the structure of the external problems is concerned, the game's structure is identical to that of a typical three-act film – the hero encounters a problem in the ordinary world, enters the special world to solve it, and eventually returns victorious. However, because *Doom* is a first-person game and features very little in terms of cutscenes, the player never finds out anything about the hero's psychology – thus, the only psychological problems the hero may have are those that the player projects onto him. Indeed, the intensely subjective nature of the video game means that the player character's deep psychological problems can often be left unelaborated upon, as the players will project their own problems (such as their unfamiliarity with the game) onto their characters' performance.

Having examined story structures in linear narrative, we can now move onto the three models of pre-designed video game narrative structure.

The string of pearls model

Perhaps the easiest way for a game designer to transfer linear narrative into the non-linear environment, without sacrificing the control over the outcome of the plot, is to conceal the linear story behind an illusion of interactivity – as is very much the case in the rather ubiquitous string of pearls model. In this model, there can ultimately only be one ending. The players are given a varying amount of freedom, but their ability to

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[134] Henry Jenkins and Mary Fuller, op. cit.

trigger progression within the narrative is under very rigid control of the game designers[135].

According to game designer Jane Jensen, within this model, each major plot point can be visualised as the beginning part of a pearl; the player then moves on to the wider section in the middle of the pearl. Within this section, the player has the freedom to trigger many different events in any order, thus resulting in a degree of non-linearity. However, as the player continues to proceed through the pearl, it begins to get narrower, as does the player's range of options, until there finally is only one way for the player to proceed, or (more frequently) a non-interactive cutscene – the string connecting this pearl to the next[136].

This approach to video game narrative, then, is optimised to allow the game designers as much control as possible over the plot and, by extension, to maximise the impact of the story – the game may narrate events that have a high emotional impact, without the player wondering whether or not the event 'should' have happened or if it was triggered by the player's ineptitude. That is not to say that events cannot be triggered by a player's failure – however, such events become easy for the players to distinguish from the rest of the narrative. If, for example, the player's character dies during the story, the players will immediately and automatically understand whether this was or wasn't designed by the designer to occur[137].

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[135] Mark Finn, 'Computer games and narrative progression', *M/C: a journal of media and culture*, http://www.media-culture.org.au/archive.html#game, vol. 3 no. 5, 2000, http://www.media-culture.org.au/0010/narrative.html.
[136] Jane Jensen, in Mark Saltzman (ed.), op. cit., pp. 96-99.
[137] Ibid., p. 97.

The pseudo-linearity present within this model of video game narrative means that it is probably better suited to utilise the restorative three-act structure than the other models are. Indeed, it is perhaps unsurprising that this is the narrative model most often used for video game adaptations of stories from other media. For example, the adventure game *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1990), an adaptation of the 1989 film of the same name, uses this pseudo-linear model for most of its gameplay. The game is divided into a number of locations (New York, Venice, Iskanderun and multiple locations in Germany). In each location, the player is free to move around and in many places can solve puzzles in a non-linear order. However, within each location, there are several tasks that must be performed before the player can move on to the next location. At the same time, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* demonstrates the fluidity of these three models of video game narrative. While mostly sticking with the string of pearls model, the game cleverly adopts some elements of the branching narrative in order to allow the player to customise the style of gameplay – thus, for example, the player, guiding Indiana Jones and his father as they escape from Germany, can choose to either steal a biplane or sneak onboard an zeppelin. However, both paths join up soon afterwards, leaving the player once again with just one way to proceed, and thus re-establishing the string of pearls model as the dominant model within the game. Notably, in a pure implementation of this model, there is no alternative conclusion to the storyline that can be displayed if the player fails. This is indeed the case in *Oddworld: Munch's Oddysee* (2001), where the death of the player's character has very little meaning indeed – the only consequence is the need to restart the level, and this can be done an infinite number of times.

In some ways, it is difficult to discuss this model's narrative limitations, as they seem to be practically non-existent, at least once the innate limitations of video games in general have been taken into account – any narrative structure and narrative technique that can be used in a video game can also be used in a string of pearls game.

Thus, model's suitability for classically structured narratives does not close it off from other structures that can be identified within linear narrative. *The Secret of Monkey Island*, which, as was discussed above, borrows the anti-structure aspect of inconsistent realities, also happens to follow the string of pearls approach. Indeed, virtually any aspect of minimalist structure or anti-structure, insofar as it can actually appear at all in a video game, could be found in string of pearls games. This does not mean, of course, that they *will* be found. As Rouse notes, game protagonists usually do not have strong personalities[138]; this would suggest that games focusing on internal rather than external conflict are likely to be quite rare. Similarly, even in games that seem to utilise minimalist-style multiple protagonists, one character usually takes a more prominent role. Thus, in *Oddworld: Munch's Oddysee*, the player is given control of two characters, Abe and Munch, and is usually free to switch back and forth between one and the other. Furthermore, the gameplay here is designed to require the player's use of both characters. Ultimately, however, this partnership is more like what one might find in a classically structured story than a minimalist story with multiple protagonists working independently of each other.

The string of pearls model is also not restricted in any way, beyond the restrictions imposed by the nature of video games in general (as discussed in the earlier parts of this

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[138] Richard Rouse III, op. cit., pp. 229-230.

thesis), when it comes to subjectivity, the style of narration, and other aspects of narrative. In terms of subjectivity, for example, games following this model can range from the strict first-person subjectivity of *Doom* to the rather anti-subjective tongue-in-cheek attitude of *The Curse of Monkey Island* and the other games from this series, where the player is just a guide, and the protagonist frequently acts as though he was aware that his fate is in the hands of somebody else, occasionally going as far as to speak directly to the player. The same is the case for narration – on one end of the scale, there are games like *Max Payne* with its complex diegetic narration, and on the other end, there are first-person shooters like *Doom*, where the narration is almost exclusively mimetic. At the same time, games using this model have the potential to be less limited in diegetic narration within cutscenes than games using other models, because the narration can refer back to the events within previous cutscenes, whereas in other models, the game designers have much less knowledge of which scenes the player had seen at any given point in the game.

Nor is the string of pearls model is not limited to a particular form of game, although it is especially well suited for adventure games[139], where the emphasis is on the storyline. For example, *Doom* divides its narrative into three episodes, each divided into nine levels. Within a level, the player has freedom to tackle different areas of the level in any order she chooses. However, there is only one way to finish each level, so there is only a single line of progression within the game's narrative. It is, in fact, difficult to conceive a type of narrative game that couldn't operate within the string of pearls model, although at

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[139] Which doesn't mean that this model is necessarily ideal for adventure games – when Aarseth describes the adventure game, some of the traits he mentions would suggest a tendency towards the branching narrative model; see Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: perspectives on ergodic literature*, op. cit., pp. 100-101.

the same time, games already designed to use a different model couldn't be adapted into this model without significant alterations.

To summarise, the string of pearls model is perhaps the simplest form of video game narrative, in the sense that it is the closest to the pure linearity of non-interactive narrative. This often leads to criticism, as the model can easily be used to create games where a strongly linear storyline is prioritised in the development process, leading to rather weak gameplay[140]. The model's theoretical simplicity and potential of linearity, however, should not be taken to suggest that video games following this model are somehow less interesting than others. Indeed, it is a rather ironic fact that some of the most gameplay-rich and story-poor video games operate within this extremely versatile model. Most games are divided into a series of sub-games[141], called levels or missions depending on the nature of the game. Thus, this model is a natural fit for video games, with the levels forming the pearl, rich in possibilities of interaction with the game world, while the cutscenes placed between levels form the string, providing space for narrative sequences.

Using this approach, however, it is dangerously easy, if not enough effort is put into the game's development, to end up with a storyline that has been tacked onto the game without actually becoming an integral part of the game. In such a situation, the gameplay and narrative clash rather than compliment each other and the conflict between them can detract from the overall experience. This goes back to Poole's point – a sports player

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[140] Richard Rouse III, op. cit., pp. 228-230.
[141] Mark Finn, op. cit., http://www.media-culture.org.au/0010/narrative.html.

would find it very strange indeed to have to read another chapter of a book between one game and the next[142].

This is a problem for which game designers have come up with any number of solutions. One solution is to make the cutscenes pseudo-interactive, an example being the mission briefings in *Damage Incorporated* (1998) where the player is able to flip back and forth between text segments, pause, rewind and fast-forward through the spoken text, but ultimately still had no impact on the actual flow of the scene[143]. Other solutions, however, allow the player to directly influence the storyline, choosing which action their character should take in a cutscene, or which strand of the story they wish to pursue; the branching narrative and amusement park models can be seen as the end results of this quest for greater integration of the gameplay and narrative. We will therefore now move on to an examination of the branching narrative model.

The branching narrative model

One interesting, albeit perhaps somewhat unpopular method to improve the connection between the game and the narrative has been to give the player a say in how the narrative will unfold. This is what happens in the branching narrative model, where the story, rather than remaining linear (as is the case in the string of pearls model), is designed to branch off into different directions. This branching can be achieved in many different ways, both in gameplay and cutscene sequences, and it need not always be immediately obvious to the player that he's faced such a choice. A player may, for example, fail to defeat a particular opponent at a particular time, and consequently ends up having to

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[142] Steven Poole, op. cit., pp. 95-96.
[143] Richard Rouse III, op. cit., pp. 222-223.

confront the same opponent again later in the game, perhaps in tougher circumstances[144]. On the other hand, the choice and its results may be immediately obvious, as is the case in *Wing Commander IV*, when the player, in the midst of battle, is given the option of changing sides. Of course, even if the immediate consequences are obvious, there may be other long-term consequences that for the time being remain concealed.

The result of such branches is a tree or, in more complex cases, a network of possibilities. Sometimes, the branches join up later, leaving the player with only one way to successfully complete the story, although a second way to end the game, reachable by death or extreme failure, is generally also available. Whether this second ending it is more than a "you have died" message, however, depends both on the game and the situation within the game. Thus, in the space fighter simulation *Wing Commander*, if the player's fighter is destroyed (and the player does not eject in time), the game ends with a brief funeral scene for the player's character. However, if the player fails a certain number of missions without dying in the process, her failure has a more interesting result – the player's side in the war, the Terran Confederation, suffers a crippling defeat, with the remaining Confederation forces, including the player's character, shown retreating for a last-ditch defence effort. On the other hand, in the afore-mentioned *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, the player occasionally faces the possibility of defeat, but the result, regardless of which point the player has reached in the game, is always the same – a brief, one screen text summary informing the player of what happened to her character, Indiana Jones.

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[144] Ibid., p. 232.

The multiple outcomes of the game's story can also go beyond simple victory and failure. Several good examples of this are found in the third and fourth games within the *Wing Commander* series. In *Wing Commander III*, which tells the story of the conclusion of the Terran Confederation's war against the alien Kilrathi Empire, there are two main outcomes – either the player achieves victory for the Confederation, or, if the player fails, the Confederation loses the war and the human race is exterminated. While the outcome of failure is always identical, the victorious ending of the game comes in three versions. During the course of the game, the player's character, Blair, has two opportunities to be romantically involved with two other characters, Rachel and Flint. Consequently, while the grand narrative of the Confederation's victory remains the same in all three winning game endings, the conclusion of Blair's personal storyline is different depending on whether he got romantically involved with either Rachel or Flint, or if he is alone (either because the player chose not to pursue the romances, or because the character he chose died along the way). A more explicit (and perhaps disturbing for the player) difference exists in *Wing Commander IV*, where the player, once again controlling Blair, can successfully complete the game only to find that Blair, as a consequence of the player's choices during the game, has turned bad.

The branching narrative model is currently rather unpopular with game developers, and is also occasionally criticised by game scholars. One reason for this is the development cost of such games – the alternative storylines must be presented to the player, and the additional voiceovers or cutscenes needed for this purpose raise the overall price of the game's development[145]. Such costs are especially noticeable in the

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[145] Ibid., p. 232.

case of games that use cutscenes with live actors – in *Wing Commander IV*, despite the game's $12 million development cost, the graphics within the gameplay sequences remained virtually identical to *Wing Commander III*, indicating that most of the budget had been spent on the cutscenes. Equally telling is the fact that in the 1980s, branching narrative was a standard feature in text adventure games, where additional storylines required only additional text[146]. As the text adventure game was replaced by the graphical adventure game, costs of development forced a reduction in branching narrative[147].

Another problem with branching narrative especially when it ends with multiple endings, according to game designer Jane Jensen, is that players immediately sense that only one of the narrative paths is 'correct', and are not interested in experiencing multiple conclusions to the game – they only want the 'right' ending[148]. This, however, is a rather peculiar line of reasoning coming from someone working in an industry devoted to non-linearity. As Rouse notes, players are not looking for a linear experience, and they expect to fail and die in the process of playing a game[149]. More notable is Poole's criticism that, once the concept of branching narrative has been sufficiently reduced in scope to become feasible, it ends up losing much of its appeal, because it reduces the story's possibilities of referring to events that had occurred earlier in the game – in branching narrative, the game designers cannot always be sure exactly what events the player had gone through to reach a particular point in the game[150].

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[146] Steve Meretzky, in Richard Rouse III, ibid., pp. 193-194.
[147] Ibid., p. 200.
[148] Jane Jensen, in Mark Saltzman (ed.), op. cit., p. 97.
[149] Richard Rouse III, op. cit., p. 14.
[150] Steven Poole, op. cit., pp. 96-102.

Like games using the string of pearls model, games with branching narrative tend towards classically structured narrative. However, here the situation is necessarily more complicated – while there is no reason why it would be impossible to design a branching story where every single branch still results in a classic 'hero's journey' story arc, this has not thus far been implemented. Such an extensive branching structure would presumably increase even further the already high costs of developing a branching narrative. Consequently, games with branching narrative sit within the nexus between classical, minimalist and anti-structures. The player might encounter a classical structure while playing along one branch, and particularly the game's 'winning path'; on the other hand, completing a different branch can give the player a more minimalist structure, and the failing conclusion of a game almost invariably bears some resemblance to the anti-structure in its refutation of storytelling logic. An interesting example of this exists within the action game *Prince of Persia* (1989). The game is a hybrid of the string of pearls and branching narrative models – in a rather linear fashion, there is only one exit from each of the game's twelve levels, and there is no variation in the scene resulting from the victory. However, the player only has 60 minutes to complete the entire game, with failure to meet this time limit resulting in a different ending for the story. The story is thus a classically structured narrative when the player's character successfully completes his goals, while failure results in a structure that, in its focus on futility and unrewarded effort, better resembles minimalist structure or even anti-structure.

Several more complex examples of narrative structure in games with branching narrative can be seen in *Wing Commander IV*. This game deals with the story of a society that has survived three decades of war, and must adapt to peace; the same conflict is

reflected in Blair, the player's character, who spent his entire adult life fighting in the war, and must also adapt. It is a classically structured story, with the player's adversary, Tolwyn, offering one solution (further militarisation to prepare for future conflicts) to society, and the player's allies offering the other solution (demilitarisation, harmony rather than order). The winning path concludes this story exactly as one might expect in a classically structured film – Blair stops Tolwyn and the militarisation of society, and in doing so discovers inner peace, allowing him to sort out his own future. However, as was mentioned earlier, this story allows for an alternative form of victory – Blair might stop Tolwyn, but in the process of doing so adopt Tolwyn's ideology, ultimately defeating Tolwyn only to replace him. It is a bitter ending that has more in common with minimalist and anti-structure stories than with classically structured stories where, even in a tragic ending, the hero at least understands his failure, though at the same time, it remains classically structured to a certain degree – on this narrative path, Blair still has a coherent character arc, with this ending being its logical conclusion. More anti-structuralist are the failing endings, where (depending on the particular circumstances) Blair is either killed in combat, executed as a traitor, or dismissed from the military.

In general, then, branching narrative offers as many possibilities for classically structured narrative as it does for minimalist structures and anti-structures. However, it is difficult to think of a game with branching narrative where the winning path is anything other than classically structured. This may perhaps be the reason why, as we saw earlier on, players find it easy to distinguish a game's primary winning path from the other paths through the game. It may indeed be a two-way connection, with game designers like Jensen keeping the main (or, in some cases, only) path through the game classically

structured in order to allow the players to recognise more easily which path is the correct one. Yet, this does not mean that narrative branches are unnecessary or undesirable from a player's point of view – as Rouse notes, branching narrative is highly rewarding for players and developers, improving the gameplay and the popularity of the game[151].

Depending on the nature of the branching, games with branching narrative can achieve an even higher level of subjectivity than usual. This is particularly true for games such as *Wing Commander III* and *Wing Commander IV*, where much of the storyline branching takes place within cutscenes; although the player's character is visible on the screen (unlike their gameplay sequences, which are experienced from a first-person view), the fact that the player chooses Blair's reactions in so many situations allows the player to identify further with Blair – and indeed, in *Wing Commander IV*, where the player's actions have such a great impact on the outcome of Blair's personal story, it could be argued that the player to a certain degree creates Blair. Although the player is in fact merely choosing from possibilities provided by the designers, there is still a high degree of customisation here. However, although this tendency towards greater subjectivity exists, it is not a necessity in branching narrative games. An example of a lower than usual level of subjectivity in such a game would be *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. In this game, a third-person view, combined with a strongly-defined character that frequently comments on his situation in a manner not dissimilar to that seen in *The Secret of Monkey Island* (although without the implicit awareness of the player's existence) result in a relatively low level of subjectivity – rather than actually being Indiana Jones, the player merely controls him.

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[151] Richard Rouse III, op. cit., p. 232.

Games with branching narrative have certain limitations imposed on narration, and particularly diegetic narration. These limitations can be more or less obvious depending on the mimetic techniques used to present the narrative. Returning again to *Wing Commander IV*, this game's use of expensive live-action video meant that it would have been logistically impossible for each cutscene to be affected by the player's choices at all the previous branching points in the narrative. Consequently, most scenes are almost completely independent of the player's narrative choices – Blair might offend one of his friends in one scene, and there will be no evidence that this incident had even occurred in the subsequent scene. The game solves this by ensuring that the effect of such decisions on the player's part is felt within the gameplay sections – each of the main characters has a morale level, and if a pilot's morale reaches a sufficiently low point, their mission performance is markedly reduced. On the other hand, games utilising cheaper techniques to present the narrative can be much more sophisticated in that regard. In *Maniac Mansion* (1987), where a combination of text and cartoon-style graphics put together on the screen in real-time was used, the player was able to choose the characters that she would use to complete the game. Two characters had to be chosen (in addition to a the team's leader, who was always the same character) out of a total of six, and thus there was a significant number of combinations. Each character had different skills, and consequently, even though the choice of characters at the start of the game was the only really significant branching point in the game, there were nonetheless many different paths through the game available to the player, with somewhat different endings each time.

Like the string of pearls model, the branching narrative model appears to be useable in virtually all types of narrative games, ranging from strategy games like *StarCraft: Brood War* to adventure games like *Maniac Mansion* and flight simulations like *Wing Commander*. However, the financial drawbacks of the model also mean that this model, at least for the time being, is essentially impossible to implement in a pure form. Consequently, there are few games of any type that use features of this model in any extensive manner. More often, narrative branching is limited to a few branches sprinkled throughout the game, that (as is the case in *StarCraft: Brood War*) have no impact on the conclusion of the story. Another interesting problem for the branching narrative model emerges when looking at game series that, over time, form a grand narrative consisting of a number of independent but diegetically linked games. In such a situation, the game ending that had only implicitly been the 'ideal' ending that the player should be striving for, must become explicitly official as the correct ending in order to allow the sequel to carry the story onwards without the weight of the previous game's choices bearing down on it. In the *WarCraft* series of real-time strategy games, for example, *WarCraft* (1994) allowed the player to select one of two sides, the Orcs and the humans, in a war. The end of the game was thus dramatically different depending on which side the player had chosen. The sequel, *WarCraft II* (1995), also allowed the player to choose one of two sides (once again, the Orcs and the human-led alliance), but in order to do so it had to assume that the Orcs had won the war presented in the first game, and were now invading a different landmass. Finally, *WarCraft III* (2002), begun with the assumption that parts, but not the entirety, of both of the previous game's campaigns had occurred. *WarCraft III* also went on to abandon the branching structure the previous games had offered –

although it still allowed the player to play with multiple factions, the four campaigns this time were presented in a linear fashion, each continuing the previous one. As each game had included a more pronounced narrative than the previous game, the *WarCraft* series seems to support the argument that strong narrative is easier to implement in a more linear game.

To summarise, the branching narrative model is one that seeks to break up the linearity of the string of pearls style of narrative by allowing the player to actively influence the flow of the story and gameplay. Sometimes, the player can make the game easier or harder by choosing one path over another; at other times, the choice of path, rather than affecting difficulty, affects the story more directly, even going as far as to allow the player to conclude the game in more than one way. This added narrative complexity is an expensive proposition, with the development of a branching story costing more than it would cost to develop the same story in a linear form. The story itself is also somewhat weakened by the limits imposed on diegetic narration, and temporal continuity between a game and its sequel can also be problematic. Consequently, a game that would more fully implement the branching narrative model, offering the player choices at every significant point of the story, is not likely to be possible, and most games only use narrative branching to a small degree.

Yet, even if narrative branching can only be used in a limited capacity, it still adds another dimension to the interactions present within games. At the same time, narrative branching renders narration somewhat problematic, with the difficulty of continuous diegetic narration sometimes reducing the impact that the narrative can have on the player. The branching narrative model does not, as Rouse seems to imply, only improve a

game's storytelling capabilities. However, contrary to Jensen, this model also does not result solely in frustration and wasted time. Just like the other models of video game narrative, the branching narrative model carries with it both benefits and problems.

The branching narrative model is just one way of developing more complex narrative that offers the player more control. Another option is the amusement park model, which we will now discuss.

The amusement park model

If the branching narrative model is about narrative complexity unfolding over time, the amusement park model is about narrative complexity unfolding spatially. Rather than having new narrative branches appear as the player proceeds through the game, this model allows the player to access different narrative strands by exploring the game world and, basically, finding the right places. Games within this model often place so much emphasis on the player's choices that the theoretical boundary between the amusement park and the building blocks model is a rather vague one – after all, in both cases, the game's narrative is in some way generated by the player's choices (indeed, as Rouse argues, providing the player with some authorial abilities is the main reason for having non-linearity in games in the first place[152]). However, the narrative of the amusement park model contains a much larger element authored by the game designers, whereas the building blocks model describes games where the narrative is almost entirely generated by the player's actions. At any rate, we will explore the precise difference between these two models in the next section of the thesis. For now, the focus will be on the amusement park model.

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[152] Ibid., pp. 129-130.

There seems to be very little theoretical work done on games of this type. This may be because this model seems to be linked to role-playing games – a form of game that often requires much larger amounts of time for completion than most other narrative games. Not all games that classify into the role-playing category necessarily belong to the amusement park model, but they do nonetheless fit better into this model than most other games, due to their emphasis on the development of individual characters within huge worlds offering innumerable possibilities of interaction[153]. Most other narrative game forms fit this model much less comfortably. For example, it is difficult to see how adventure games, with their emphasis on a strong (often linear) narrative, could work in the amusement park model – considering the expensive nature of games with branching narrative, one might speculate that the costs of developing a game where the player has not one but many strong narratives to choose from would be very high indeed. On the other hand, strategy games such as *Civilisation*, insofar as they have narrative, will usually better fit within the building blocks model. At the same time, the role-playing element can often be tacked onto other game forms, resulting in something more capable of utilising this model – *Wing Commander: Privateer* (1993), for example, is a space/flight simulation containing role-playing elements, with the player being free to explore the universe in search for opportunities to earn money and property, rather than having to play a series of missions.

Richard Rouse, who has the advantage of having actually designed such a game (*Odyssey: The Legend of Nemesis* (1995)), writes that the gameplay within this type of games is about selection – the player might at a given time have multiple challenges to

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[153] Mark Saltzman (ed.), op. cit., pp. 2-3.

choose from, and does not ever need to complete all of them[154]. The emphasis, then, is on freedom to explore the game space, and the freedom to choose one's activities. Indeed, this emphasis is to a certain degree reflected by the additional material that one receives when purchasing the game. Where normally one might get a manual describing the story and the opponents, *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* provides the player only with the most cursory description of the game world and the gameplay – but the player also gets a poster-sized map, offering a great deal of information on the geography of the game world.

This model best fits games where the player controls only one character, or one of his characters is the clear leader of the group, with whom the player is supposed to identify. Furthermore, this character is often (though not always) defined to a large degree by the player, suggesting that the freedom of choice so important in this kind of game begins even before the player commences the game. For example, in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, the first thing the player must do upon starting the game is to define her character in practically every aspect – name, sex, race, face, abilities, strengths and weaknesses. Depending on the game, it may be possible for this character to develop over time, improving attributes such as strength and agility or gaining wealth and equipment. This sort of character improvement is directly related to the role-playing game[155], and is one of the reasons why role-playing games often use this model – by offering players a choice of subplots to pursue, the game allows them to develop their characters in specific ways.

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[154] Richard Rouse III, op. cit., pp. 126-127.
[155] Mark Saltzman (ed.), op. cit., pp. 2-3.

In general, the amusement park model is not usually fully implemented, because, as Poole notes, total non-linearity can lead to non-urgency – if every subplot is entirely optional, there is no necessity to pursue any particular plot[156]. For this reason, games of this type, apart from having a number of optional sub-plots, usually also have one main plot that, depending on the game, may be more or less linear. Thus, in *Ultima VI* (1990), the player's alter ego is summoned into the world of Britannia to combat the gargoyles that have apparently invaded this world. The player may choose to pursue a number of different sub-plots, but all of them are in some way related to the plot – *Ultima VI* is a meticulously designed network of sub-plots that together form the overarching story. The world of *Ultima VI* also offers enough space and possibilities to de-emphasise the pursuit of the overarching story, but ultimately it is virtually a necessity to start pursuing this story, suggesting that *Ultima VI* is a hybrid combining features of both the string of pearls and amusement park models, with a significant amount of emphasis on the characteristics of the former – except that here, there's not much string, and the pearls are quite large.

Meanwhile, one example of a game that would be closer to the amusement park model, is *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*. Here, the sheer number of different sub-plots available to the player means that the pursuit of the main story is utterly unnecessary – it is possible to play this game for tens of hours without even commencing the main story. Indeed, where *Ultima VI* disables the save-game feature if the player ever does anything that would make the completion of the main plot impossible, *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* merely warns the player, and then allows him/her to continue playing.

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[156] Steven Poole, op. cit., p. 101.

Even closer to a pure implementation of the amusement park model, and indeed hovering somewhere between this model and the building blocks rather than the string of pearls model, is *Pirates!* (1987). Set in the 16th and 17th century Caribbean (with the player being able to choose from several more specific time periods within these two centuries), the game's main plot (to locate the player character's lost family members) is so thoroughly optional that it is indeed unclear whether it can be even considered the main plot. Certainly, the other options that the player can pursue (to rise in rank by serving a particular nation, to gain wealth, and even to get married), combined with an imposed time limit (where in other games, the player's character improves, in *Pirates!* his skills are gradually worn down by age and old wounds) force the player to make hard choices about what he will do in any *Pirates!* career.

How, then, do linear story structures work within the amusement park model? In general, it seems as though the classical structure that can work within both the string of pearls and branching narrative models at least partially fails within the amusement park model. Some of its aspects, such as the focus on external conflict, linear time and consistent reality, as well as the presence of an active (and usually single) protagonist, continue to function within amusement park games. Thus, even if the player's character is different every time she plays *Pirates!* or *Ultima VI*, the character is still an active protagonist, and even if she leads a group of adventurers, one character can usually be identified as the main protagonist. Similarly, even though the player character *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* changes dramatically over time, this change does not necessarily come with internal conflict, and at any rate is not likely to generate sufficient internal

conflict for it to become more significant than the external conflicts prevalent within the game.

However, beyond these characteristics, the classical structure gives way to the minimalist structure and the anti-structure. Thus, even though much of the story in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* is causally linked, coincidence also plays a large part. As described earlier, many of the most dangerous situations that the player character might face are random encounters, with the opponent being generated by the game when the player enters a particular part of the game world. The idea of the closed ending is also questioned within the amusement park model, albeit not in the same way that occurs in linear media utilising the minimalist structure – whereas a film's ending may be open in the sense that it can be interpreted by the audience in many ways, the ending of *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* avoids closure by not being set – the player can simply play the game ad infinitum. Therefore, it is the player that determines when the game's story ends. This lack of closure is not always the case, however – games in the *Ultima* series end when the player resolves the primary plot, and *Pirates!* ends when the player's character retires. In the latter case, the player may choose to retire at any point during the game, but sooner or later it becomes inevitable, with the game becoming increasingly difficult as the player's character weakens with age. Thus, amusement park games may, but do not need to, adhere to the concept of the closed ending. In this aspect, then, games following this model much closer resemble the emergent narratives of the building blocks model than the structured narratives of linear media.

The amusement park model also serves to strengthen the subjectivity of the gaming experience. This subjectivity may be strengthened through the use of perceptual

subjectivity, like in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*. Perhaps more important, however, is the fact that the player so often gets to define her character, or at least determine the character's development during the game. This control over the character's creation and development helps the player to further identify with the game character as an extension of him/herself, even if the character is always looked upon from a third-person point of view (as is the case, for example, in *Ultima VI*). Diegetic narration, on the other hand, in some ways becomes much harder to implement in games of this type – as the player explores the world of the game, there is little room for such diegetic devices as voiceovers or textual descriptions of the game world. This can vary a great deal depending on the period when the game was developed – *Pirates!*, having been developed in 1987, still uses text descriptions a great deal, and thus it relies on diegetic narration a lot more than later games. Indeed, even modern games of this type often use text a lot more than games using the other models – in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, characters greet the player character vocally when the player moves within a certain distance of them, but once the player chooses to begin a conversation, the rest of the interaction is done entirely in text, substituting diegetic narration for mimetic narration. The use of text allows the game to reduce the amount of expensive materials that need to be developed in order to create the game – as we had discussed earlier, games using this complex model of narrative can become very expensive. Beyond the use of text as a cost-cutting measure, however, textual diegetic narration is also occasionally used in a more unusual fashion – in *Ultima VI*, whenever the player found a book within the game world, he was able to open it and read it (although these books rarely had more than few short pages of text). While this kind of narration could be used in almost any type of game, it

becomes especially useful in the context of amusement park games, where diegetic books serve as a cost-effective fashion of presenting the player with information about the game world.

To summarise, then, the amusement park model of video game narrative allows a way of complicating the narrative possibilities of a game in a manner entirely different to that of the branching narrative model, by emphasising the player's selection of the narrative strand to pursue rather than the selection of a course of action within a particular narrative plot. This model of video game narrative is useful primarily in games that contain at least some elements of the role-playing game form. Furthermore, the stronger a game's narrative becomes, the more aspects the game needs to borrow from the string of pearls model. It is also well worth noting that this can be a three-way mixture, with elements of all three models being used in one game – *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, for example, features not only selectable sub-plots but also narrative branches within these sub-plots. However, much like the branching narrative model, the amusement park model carries with it higher costs than exist in linear games. This forces games within this model to occasionally resort to the simplification of both diegetic and mimetic narration, while simultaneously compensating for this simplification by using narrative techniques such as the presentation of textual sources from within the game world. The end result, then, is narration that is no less complex than the narration in other types of games.

There is one final model of video game narrative that needs to be briefly discussed before this thesis is concluded; this is the building blocks model.

The building blocks model

If the three models discussed above describe video games as storytelling systems, the building blocks model of video game narrative describes video games as story creation systems. Narrative video games can be divided into the fully-fledged narrative games described above, and pseudo-narrative games where the game designers, rather than implementing a narrative for the player to experience, implement a system of parts that come together to form a story in the hands of the player.

This thesis has focussed on an examination of pre-designed video game narrative, and a detailed examination of games where the player generates the story will not fit in here. However, a few words need to be said here about this model of narrative, partially to simply acknowledge its existence, and partially to define the border between the player's narrative and the author's narrative. This is an issue that had briefly surfaced in the previous section, as some games within the amusement park model of game narrative come quite close to allowing the player to generate their own story, blurring the boundaries between that model and the building blocks model.

What, then, is the building blocks model of narrative? This is a model that functions within games where a story exists primarily within the mind of the player and (if the player so chooses) in discussion after wards – unlike purely non-narrative games, however, some kind of narrative is implicit within the game. Game designer Sid Meier, describing his game *Civilization*, notes that the basic difference between the story in *Civilization* and the stories in more narrative games is that whereas usually the game designers make all the important decisions and leave the player to make small decisions as he plays the game, in *Civilization* and other games like it, it is the designers that make

the small decisions, and the player that makes all the important decisions[157]. This kind of game thus resembles a set of building blocks that the player plays with, putting them together in whatever fashion seems interesting.

Another example of a game using the building blocks would be *The Sims* (2000), where the player creates and controls a family of people, in the process creating their story[158]. The common characteristic between *Civilization* and *The Sims* appears to be the fact that in both cases, the player doesn't play from a subjective point of view, instead presiding over the game world as a kind of god.

In both cases, then, the fact that the player is not taking on the role of a character within the story, and has control over the story, makes it quite clear that it is the player's story that is being created, rather than the designer's story or even a common effort between them. In other cases, however, the distinction between the player's narrative and the game designer's narrative becomes much fuzzier – particularly so when it comes to massively multiplayer online role-playing games. This type of game is in many ways identical to the games that use the amusement park model – indeed, *Ultima Online* (1997) is an example of a MMORPG adaptation of the *Ultima* series of games that operate within the amusement park model. The difference, however, is that where there is only one player in a game like *Ultima VI*, there are thousands of players in *Ultima Online*, and the game's story – or rather, stories – are the result primarily of the interaction between the players.

It thus becomes difficult to tell who exactly the author of the story is. Given that the game designers remain involved in the daily running of the game, are they still creating

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[157] Sid Meier, in Richard Rouse III, op. cit., pp. 39-40.
[158] Will Wright, in ibid., pp. 464-465.

the story? Or is it a communal effort? These are questions that are well worth exploring. Indeed, there is much still to be learned about the characteristics of building blocks games in general. Such investigations, however, are beyond the scope of this thesis – for now, it must suffice to say that building blocks games go far beyond the degree of co-authorship offered to the player in ordinary games.

5. Conclusions

This thesis covers only a few main aspects of video game narrative. Hopefully, however, it has managed to lay the groundwork for further study of narrative in video games.

Above all, it can be hoped that this work has demonstrated the benefits of moving beyond the question of whether computer games should have narrative in the first place. This question, which was explored in the first part of this thesis, has thus far been a staple topic of the academic discussions around video games. A number of different positions were explored. The first of these was Markku Eskelinen's claim that video game narrative, where it exists, should not and does not need to be studied because it is only an uninteresting decoration tacked onto the games. Subsequently, a number of pro-narrative positions were explored, most notably Janet Murray's enthusiastic speculations about narrative games being the future of the medium. Both of these positions are problematic at best; far more useful is Jesper Juul's exploration of the difficulties associated with the fusion of gameplay and narrative in computer games, as it offers an effective starting point for a deeper exploration of video game narrative.

This thesis, it is worth stressing, is not trying to argue that video games with narrative are more worthy of academic study than non-narrative games, or that narrative is the most important aspect within narrative games – in short, narrative video games are neither the best possible future development of this new medium as Murray suggests, nor the worst problem with current video games, as Eskelinen argues. Indeed, given the overwhelming use and diversity of narrative and non-narrative video games, it seems as though it may be time to abandon not only the question of whether video games should

have narrative, but also the idea of video games as a single medium. Studying video games with the presumption that they are a diverse group of media would perhaps put an end to the idea that games 'should' be one thing or another. An academic studying the game of chess would not presume to argue that the game of poker needs to be more like chess – how is it, then, that academics studying *Tetris* or other non-narrative games presume that all video games should be like their object of study?

The next section of this thesis discussed the comparison of video games with drama. Although this comparison seems to indicate that the experience of playing video games is not entirely like drama, there are definitely several similarities, especially when it comes to issues of subjectivity. The degree of subjectivity offered by many video games can only be matched by the experience of taking part in a dramatic performance. On the other hand, where drama according to Brenda Laurel has a tendency towards intensification of the story, depicting the most significant incidents and glossing over the rest, video games are much harder to nail down on this issue – both extensifying and intensifying games seem to exist. The same problem comes up in relation to the unity of structure that exists in theatre according to Laurel – although similar unity *can* exist in computer games, it usually doesn't, with games tending more towards an episodic structure.

Another issue considered in this part of the thesis was the problematic nature of narration, both diegetic and mimetic, inside video games. In general, it appears as though video games utilise diegetic narration even less than theatre and films do, primarily because the interactive nature of the video game makes it difficult for the game designers to predict what the narrator and the player should know at any given point. On the other hand, while mimetic narration has some limits imposed on it too, it also adds an

interesting feature to video games – it allows the player to take part in the narration of the story to a certain degree.

The subsequent section in this thesis dealt with the structure of video game narrative. First, the three narrative structures prevalent in linear narrative (the classical structure, minimalist structure, and the anti-structure, as described by Robert McKee) were explored and compared to what one might find in video games. In general, it would appear as though the classical structure is the most common one in video games as well, but, unlike in other media, a purely classical structure doesn't seem to happen too often in video games, with some aspects usually being borrowed from the minimalist structure or the anti-structure.

The findings in terms of linear structure in video games were then applied in an examination of the three main models of video game narrative structure – the string of pearls, branching narrative, and amusement park models. Although these models (and particularly the latter two) are non-linear, once a game is completed its story becomes linear in retrospection, making the cross-analysis of the three models of video game narrative and the three linear narrative structures quite worthwhile. The examination of the three video game narrative models was further augmented with a look at the function of subjectivity, narration and genre within each of the models. Finally, a brief look was taken at a fourth model of video game narrative; this last one, the building blocks model, is quite different from the other three models because it encompasses games where the player creates the story, instead of merely experiencing someone else's creation.

The findings within this thesis thus illustrate several different areas of video games and their narrative. However, they also identify a number of areas that have yet to be

explored in detail. First and foremost among these is the building blocks model of narrative, which needs to be described and analysed in order to better understand pseudo-narrative computer games that, rather than providing the player with a story, provide him/her with a story-writing tool instead.

Another question that would be well worth looking into is that of genre. How exactly does genre and narrative intersect? Can any genre of video game incorporate narrative, or are there any specifically non-narrative genres? These are all areas of computer game narrative that need to be examined. Indeed, even then, there will still be much to be studied – gameplay, for example, needs to be examined from points of view other than narrative.

Nonetheless, a great deal of work related to computer game narrative has already been completed, and this thesis contributes further to the exploration within this area. It is clear enough at this stage that narration within video games is indeed a problematic process. This process, however, it is not more problematic than narration in other media – the restrictions imposed by the video game form do not cripple narration in games, but rather define it, in the same way that the primacy of diegetic narration in literature does not cripple narration in books. The restrictions imposed on some aspects of narration in video games, at any rate, are offset by an increase in possibilities for other aspects of narration. Thus, where films presented entirely in the subjective first-person view are rare, games presented in the first-person view are more than commonplace. Similarly, branching narrative, while its use is limited by its cost and work-intensiveness, is nonetheless fairly standard in computer games; on the other hand, films or books that use such devices are rare enough to be considered experimental.

The specificity of video game narration in comparison to other types of narration is quite clear, with this thesis offering further insights into the particular differences between narration in video games and other narrative media. One may hope that this unique form of narration will be explored in the future on its own terms, with the additional possibilities offered by the interactivity of the video game being given as much weight as the restrictions resulting from this interactivity.

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