Game Narrative: An Alternate Genealogy.

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Introduction

One of the most rewarding, and challenging aspects of analysing and understanding digital games is the incredible variety of artefacts this class of media objects covers. Elsewhere (Calleja, 2011) I have argued that there is, in fact, no stable category of objects that we call games, but, following Wittgenstein (1953), a sprawling family of members which share some commonalities, without a single universal element that is common to all and can thus be said to essentially define them. This also means that games, unlike most media, have a range of varied genealogies they have developed from.

When we turn our attention to an inquiry of narrative within games, the tendency within academia and industry has been to approach the subject from the perspective of literature and film, assuming that the narrative aspect of games is a continuation of the narrative development found in these two media. Indeed, a common starting point for the discussion on game narratives has been classical narratology. This is an important first step and an obvious place to start our inquiry of game narratives. One of the better papers that takes this approach is Aarseth's *A Narrative Theory of Games* (2012).

This paper will argue that exploring this single genealogy of the confluence of story and games is missing another genealogy which is crucial to understanding the story aspects of digital games: play and imagination. I will argue that the doll-house is as important a pre-cursor to game narratives as the literary work or the movie. Unfortunately, the function of the doll-house in narrative generation has not received the depth of theoretical treatment that the printed book or filmic medium have, but this does not make it any less important to our understanding of game narrative.

Narrative Telling

The canonical authors within classical Narratology have many differences in the way they conceptualise narrative, but there is agreement on one fundamental principle: narrative is a re-telling of a sequence of real or fictional events that the author structures and makes manifest to listeners, readers or viewers through some form of material instantiation: the spoken word, printed signs, images and sound on screen etc. Chatman (1978) calls these two branches of narrative structure story and discourse, respectively. Classic narratologists such as Chatman (1978), Genette

(1980), Prince (1982) and Metz (1974) among many others, build their work on this binary view of narrative.

It is important to note that authors like Genette (1980), Prince (1982) and Metz (1974) have been very clear in the domains to which they designed their models to be applied. Genette and Prince proposed models of narrative that were intended to be used exclusively in the case of literary narrative, while Metz's narrative model was created specifically for film. Any analytical model that is thorough enough to yield rich analysis needs to account for the specific qualities of the medium it is meant to shed light on.

The influence of Sauserrian linguistics and semiotics on these narratological thinkers is fairly evident. This model relies heavily on the stability of this binary structure, with the "objective" story acting as a stable reservoir of chronologically ordered events that the author picks, moulds, structures and finally encodes for consumption by her audience. But this conception of narrative has, like the structuralist binary of signified and signifier it is modelled upon, come under fire by post-structuralist authors that question the stability of both the binary structure and the signified/story part of the equation. Walsh (2007), for example, has argued that story only occurs when it is configured through discourse. There is no stable and objective series of events that constitute the story in both fictional and non-fictional settings. In the realm of fiction, story comes into being when the creator, or group of creators, formulate the events, characters and worlds they eventually shape and structure through inscription in their chosen medium. Thus these events need manifestation before they can exist. What the author does is edit and re-arrange the internal or private manifestation of these events in the often recursive process of arriving at the final text. Often though, the events, places and characters come into being in the very act of creation. They do not come from some stable, parallel reality. In other words, one could argue that there is, in fact, nothing but multiple layers of manifestation/discourse of narrative. But let us get back to the main argument of this paper.

Let us side-step the whole critique of the established narratological canon here, and instead focus on the utility and applicability of these authors to game narrative. For many theorists in Game Studies the formulation of narrative as a re-telling, following classical narratolgists is taken as a given. Theorists like Juul (2001), Eskelinen (2004), Schut (2003), Lindley (2002) and Aarseth (2012) among others implicitly or explicitly start from the assumption that classical narratological models are applicable to games and, at best, proceed to modify these models to fit games. These theorists espouse a view of game narrative as a form of re-telling and thus focus their analysis on story elements in the game that have been pre-scripted and inserted by the game designers for the player's consumption. Elsewhere (Calleja, 2011) I have described this form of game narrative as "scripted narrative" to account for the fact these sequences of story have been pre-packed for consumption and involve no creative input from the part of the player in their formation. This form of narrative can take many forms including: cut-scenes, quick-time events, verbal text, a narrator's voice over, items and characters in the world that communicate the story to the player

and so on. These sections of scripted narrative serve to communicate the designer's intended story as well as the various game-goals without making the latter exercise an overly dry and functional affair. The function, utility and impact of scripted narrative varies drastically depending on the genre of game in question (Myers, 2003).

Espen Aarseth (2012) takes classical narratology as a point of departure to formulate his own, four dimensional model of game narrative. His model takes the four constituent elements of narratives: World, Objects, Agents and Events and plots these on a matrix ranging from the "narrative pole" on one end to the "ludic pole" on the other. Each of the constituent elements is then cross referenced with the narrative to ludic continuum, to create a matrix of relations that is meant to express the nature of a game that contains narrative elements. Aarseth is careful to point out that not all games have narrative elements, but that some of the objects we nominally refer to as games are amalgams of games and narratives. It is the latter class of objects that Aarseth is interested in and makes his model applicable to. A game such as *Minecraft* is a "pure game" and thus plots it at the bottom of the matrix with the following properties: open world (the least narrative-rich of Aarseth's forms of ludo-narrative worlds), Objects are "inventable" (again the least narrative-rich of the object categories), Agents are "Bots with no individual identity" and Events are tagged as "No kernels". On the opposite end of the table is *War and Peace,* an example of a text which is pure story. The latter has an "inaccessible world", "non-interactable objects", "deep, rich, round characters" and events which are "fully plotted".

In each of the categories he lists, Aarseth attributes narrative richness to authorial determination. Making your own objects in the game world creates a less narratively rich experience. Similarly open game worlds are less narratively rich than ones, which have more constrained spaces such as linear corridors because the designer has little control over where the player goes. Aarseth is here working under the assumption that because in non-ergodic media narrative flowed from the author to the reader or audience, games invariably need to reproduce this structure in order to reproduce narrative richness.

While Aarseth's claims to offer a robust conceptualization of game narrative, he instead creates a typology, which plots the border between games and literary works. In so doing Aarseth merely takes classical narratology as a cookie cutter, lays it on a subset of the game family and claims that everything which falls outside of its boundary is "game" and whatever falls within it is "narrative". This proves his assertion that what we call games are amalgams of games and classical conceptions of narrative, but it fails to give an in-depth understanding of how this marriage between these two classes of media objects changes both the respective media and our conceptualization thereof.

Aarseth's approach echoes earlier arguments in the same vein made by Eskelinen (2004) when he argues that:

> Most naïve comparisons between narratives and games usually result from too narrow, broad or feeble definitions of the former: usually it comes down to discovering "plots" and "characters" in both modes – games and narratives. However we should know that's not good enough, as we can find those events and existents in drama as well, which is clearly its own mode. The minimal definition of narrative derived from Gerald Prince and Gerard Genette states basically that there must be two things or components to constitute a narrative: a temporal sequence of events (a plot, if you want to water down the concept) and a narrative situation (with both narrators and narrates for starters). I think we can safely say we can't find narrative situations within games (37).

Eskelinen, like Aarseth, is working under the assumption that for something to have narrative qualities it needs to adhere to a conceptualization of narrative formulated for non-ergodic media. While it is wise to not re-invent the wheel and build on theories that have been established in other fields, we need to be mindful about the degree of applicability these theories have for our own medium, which aside from having a vast variety within it's wide ranging umbrella, is radically different in the way it is structured and used, than non-ergodic media. This is all aside from the fact that, even within disciplines like literary theory, the dominance of the canonical narratological texts that Eskelinen and Aarseth quote have been heavily contested in their applicability to several forms of literary text.

Within the game industry, the same problem exists. The majority of mainstream game designers and writers are stuck in this literary/filmic conception of narrative and are thus trying to shoehorn this conception into games. This has resulted in an uncomfortable marriage of interactivity and narrative, as designers scramble to make players care about stories they have come up with, while players stretch and pull the game system and game world for their own experimental pleasure.

A recent Game Developer Conference talk by Richard Rouse and Tom Abernathy (2014), for example, focused entirely on debunking the commonly held idea within the game industry that the three-act structure is applicable to games. Their conclusion, following a passionate, hour-long lecture, is that games, have much more complex structures than the classic three-act structure can cater for. Whilst I wholeheartedly agree with Rouse and Abernathy, it is somewhat worrying that such a self-evident point needs to be made by industry veterans at the prime annual event for developers. Even then, the lecture made it clear that the conception that Rouse and Abernathy have of game narrative is of narrative as the re-telling of events they create.

An Alternate Past

The efforts described by the above theorists and designers tackle narrative from the perspective of the literary-filmic genealogy. Here, story is determined and *told* by the author/designer and delivered to the player. An alternative genealogy can be found in story *generated* by the player during the moment of play. The latter

genealogy draws on various forms of narrativised play including toy-play, role-playing and shared fantasy.

In *Man, Play and Games* Caillois (1961) outlines four categories of play: agon (competition), luck (alea), mimicry (acting or role-playing) and ilinx (dizziness/vertigo) plotted on a matrix against a continuum ranging from paidia (free-form play) and ludus (rule-based games). At it's most extreme paidia represents free-form play, unrestrictured by rules. At the other end of the continuum ludus represents play activities (or games) that are fully determined by their rules. The closest Caillois gets to discussing story generation during play is in his description of mimicry as a form of role-playing activity. Although only an indirect reference to story generation, the act of playing a role implies events enacted by a character within a fictional world and thus a generated narrative. If we turn to his predecessor, Johan Huizinga, we similarly find no reference to the intimate relationship between play and story generation. This is rather unfortunate as both authors, treated as part of the emerging canon of Game Studies, have missed a crucial element of certain forms of play that project either the playing subject or the object(s) played with as props for the generation of imaginings that, when strung together, and taken in the context of an imagined world constitute the generation of an on-going narrative.

The props for such imaginings, to use Kendall Walton's (1990) term, can vary from designed toys to elements found in nature or constructed for the specific purpose of aiding the imagination, collective or individual, to project the story-world featured in the act of play. Some toys are designed specifically to afford the generation of an on-going story. The doll-house is a great example of this activity and one which highlights the gap in Caillois' typology of play. Including the doll-house under the heading of mimicry misses out on all other aspects of story-generation aside from the potential for playing the role of one or more of the dolls in question.

Mary-Laure Ryan (2009) has leveraged Caillois' work to make a distinction between *"narrative games" (45)* and "*playable stories".* The former are games like *Half-Life* or *Grand Theft Auto* where "the story is meant to enhance gameplay" (45) while the latter are games like *The Sims* where "the gameplay is meant to produce a story" (45). She identifies narrative games with ludus and story games with paidia. While the identification of these two modes of narrative structures in games is useful, the equation of rules with a more determinate form of play and paidia with a more generative one underestimates the role of rules in the generation of narrative.

Table-top role-playing games (RPGs) are great examples of the way in which toy-play combines with role-playing and ludus-heavy rule-systems to generate narrative. In an RPG session players interact with each other and the story-world from the perspective of themselves as individuals, or the characters they are playing, often using miniatures and drawings that represent the space they are in. These interactions are modulated by the rule-system of the particular RPG they are playing. This rule-system acts as a reality engine for the players and the game master (GM). Elements of story are thus created through four sources: utterances from the GM

about the state of the story-world and delivered as first person speech from characters they meet; utterances from the players in-character to each other and the GM; utterances from the players out-of-character to each other and the GM declaring what actions their character is doing; and the interaction with the rule-system. The latter is a crucial part of the RPG situation as it asserts a reality status that is beyond the subjective imagination of the players of the GM. It creates a sense of reality through it's quasi-objective existence (quasi since rules are always negotiable and contestable) that grounds free-roaming imagination to a reality independent of individual wants, desires and opinions. The interaction with the game rules generates imaginings that constitute the building blocks of the generated story (Calleja 2011). If I declare that my character is going to try and sneak past a cruel dormitory warden that is slowly dozing off in the corridor leaving to the exit, I will be asked to roll a Stealth check. In a percentile based system where 1% is a critical success and 100% is a fumbling blunder, my character has a Stealth ability of 70%. I'm confident she'll make it past, roll the dice and to my horror see a 99 result. This immediately creates a series of images in anyone watching that understands the system and has heard me declare my action that signify my making a bunch of noise, banging into a piece of furniture and so on. It is up to the GM to interpret the die roll in a narrative manner and communicate this to us the players. But this interpretation, itself generated from the game's rule-system, is partially unnecessary since the rule-system makes it clear that I have done the opposite of what I set out to do.

Although a simple example, I hope to have shown how rules are not at odds with narrative but that rules *generate* narrative. Caillois' ludus and paidia distinction simply does not map well to Ryan's narrative game and playable story distinction, since one of the main reasons why the playable story is actually able to generate story is through interaction with the rule-system: the defining characteristic of ludus.

Story Generation and Digital Games

So far we have discussed story generation in the context of analogue games. In the case of the latter the generation of story is clearly dependant on the imagination. The process of animating the string of imaginings that constitute the generated story is more evident in the case of analogue games than in the digital game situation, since in the case of the former we need to animate the utterances of others or inanimate props ourselves. But this does not mean that similar processes are not happening in the case of digital games. The representations we encounter on the screen are still just props (Walton, 1990) that we need to invest with our imagination in order to interpret meaningfully as story-worlds we can inhabit and exert our agency in. Sartre (1995) calls the process of investment of a perceivable analogue with the imagination as "synthesis". Sartre (1967) and later, Iser (1991) have both commented on the importance of considering the role of the imagination to complete the creative act started by the author or designer:

> When a work is produced, the creative act is only an incomplete, abstract impulse; if the author existed all on his own, he could write as much as he

> liked but his work would never see the light of day as an object, and he would have to lay down his pen or despair. The process of writing, however, includes as a dialectic correlative the process of reading, and these two interdependent acts require two differently active people. The combined efforts of author and reader bring into being the concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind. Art exists only for and through other people (Sartre, 1967, 27).

The degree of imaginative "work" we need to invest varies according to the mode of representation the game uses. More abstract visual styles tend to require more imaginative input from our part. *The Last of Us,* for example, delivers a more fully determined world for me to perceive and consume, thus requiring less imaginative than, for example, *Minecraft.* The latter, in turn, requires less imaginative work than a text and ASCII based game such as *A Dark Room.*

This process of synthesis between perception and imagination is at the heart of story generation, not only in games, but in all media. I would argue that this is, in fact, the most important common denominator in narrative across media. The formal properties of each narrative medium determine the ways in which creators working with that medium are able to structure the imagination of their audiences into narrative sequences. In some cases creators have a tight control on those strings of imaginings, while in other media they provide the basic elements that constitute narrative: world, objects, characters and events, and let their audiences combine these in sequences that cannot be pre-determined. Narrative is not only reserved to those media objects that allow their creators to tightly determine the sequence of imaginings they engender. This is merely a bias that exists in the narrative of some media forms. Games can vary greatly on this continuum of authorial control. They combine possibilities for narrative structures at both ends of the spectrum. Certain games even afford both of these forms of authorial control in the same story-world, leaving it to the player to decide whether they want to have their imagination moulded by the designer's will or whether they want to construct their own sequence of narrative imagining.

Whatever the case it is helpful to keep in mind that the building blocks of narrative stem from the imagination and it is here that we should start our inquiry of the phenomenon, rather than get stuck in conceptions of narrative intended for media that share only a limited set of characteristics with games.

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