Interactive narrative in the form of new media

Defining Role Playing Games

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RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza los requisitos de una historia y cómo los *role playing games* cumplen con estos requisitos. El artículo toma en consideración las teorías sobre formas narrativas tradicionales —como la novela—, al igual que las teorías contemporáneas que analizan la narración en los multimedios. Estas teorías sugieren que los estos "juegos" deben considerarse como narrativas interactivas y no simplemente como juegos. El artículo, además, ofrece implicaciones pedagógicas sobre la existencia de este nuevo modo de narración.

Descriptores: narración interactiva, multimedios, juegos de rol, juegos de videos

ABSTRACT

This article looks at the requirements of a story and how role playing games fit these requirements. It considers theories regarding traditional forms of storytelling, such as novels, as well as more contemporary forms of stories as represented through new media formats. It suggests that role playing games be considered as interactive narratives, instead of simply as 'games'. It also offers possible pedagogical implications for this new form of narrative.

Keywords: Interactive narrative, multimedia, role playing games, video games

Throughout their short history, video games have been seen as nothing more than a means of entertainment at best. Some have claimed games to be "satanic tools that enslave children" (Davis, n.d.) It is only as of late that video games have begun to be taken seriously by the academic community, and scholars and teachers alike are begin-

ning to look at games as instructional tools, works of art, and means of self-expression and representation. In the quest to discover how massive multiplayer online games allow players to explore otherwise hidden parts of their persona, and how first person shooters integrate physics into their designs, there is one aspect of games that has been seemingly neglected: narrative. In all the scholarly ludologic rush to study games simply as games, an approach closely resembling deconstructionism —an almost obsolete approach to literature which looks at texts simply as text— the academic study of game aspects other than 'rules' and 'addiction' is not as substantial as perhaps it could be, and the study of the narrative aspects is all but nonexistent. There are several terms, such as 'simulations', 'interactive representations', and 'narratives', which have been awarded to video games. However, just as not all games are not simulations or representations, not all games can be considered as narrative. Certainly, racing games, fighting games, sports games, and MMORPGs should not be seen as narratives, as that element is almost nonexistent —their narratives, if any, are never more than an excuse to get the interaction between gamer and game started. However, even the most dedicated ludologist must accept that all role playing games, and perhaps many adventure, tactics, and strategy games, are narratives.

Role playing games are story-driven interactive adventures, in which the player takes control of a character or several characters and embarks on mystical quests to save a princess, slay an evil wizard, dragon, or demon, or to save the world from destruction. After this description, due to several preconceived notions of what video games are, many might imagine a cartoon character running from the left side of the screen to the right, destroying anything in the way with a sword or laser gun. This is not what role playing games are. A role playing game can be best described as an interactive novel. They usually take place in a lush detailed world made up of continents with towns inhabited by characters who have an in-game life. Some characters milk cows, others forge weapons, others are mercenaries, some are thieves, and others sit around and govern. The player is able to interact with all of these different personas at any given time in the game.

The player, as the main character, may have the mission to save the world from Dark Dragon, but it's not as easy as picking up the controller and having a heroic character walking into the castle and defeating the final monster in less than an hour. In role playing games, players have to fight monsters and armies, but they also have to solve puz-

zles, talk to people in order to obtain information, explore enormous worlds, read over 1000 pages worth of text, and listen to over an hour of in game spoken dialogue. This means that the player must engage not only with game mechanics, but with the story as well, all so that the main character can save the world and the player can see the ending sequence where the world is saved and light triumphs over darkness, or where the world is destroyed and darkness wins over light.

Gordal (2003) states that "a story is a sequence of events focused by one (a few) living being(s); these events are based on simulation of experiences in which there is a constant interaction of perceptions, emotions, cognitions, and actions." This definition of 'story' can be applied not only to a published text narrative, like *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950), or to literary classics, like *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876). This one includes new media representations of narratives, such as movies, televised shows, and video games that fulfill the requirements stated above. This does not mean that all video games are stories. While games like *Doom* (id Software, 1993) and *Street Fighter 3* (Capcom, 1997) may have some markings of stories, the main focus of these games is not character development or plot, but control, interaction, game rules, competition, and presentation. Role playing games, however, do fulfill the requirements of a story. This is something that is accepted not only at a theoretical or practical level, but that is even accepted by popular vote. This is evident when gamers are asked about the games they play; someone currently working their way through a role playing game will comment on how good the story is and how well developed the characters are, while someone who is constantly engaged in playing first person shooters will comment on how the controls of the game are and about the visuals of the game. Games like *Doom* and *Street Fighter 3* lack several elements of character emotions and, specially, a coherent sequence of events. Games like *Street Fighter 3* offer a sequence of events which never goes beyond "go to the next stage and win the next fight", and while this may qualify as narrative if the term is used very loosely, it certainly does not make for a particularly interesting or engaging narrative. Games like *Atellier Iris* (Gust, 2005) or *Final Fantasy 6* (Square Co., 1994), on the other hand, fulfill all the requirements of a story. They have a sequence of events, which focus on a few living beings, in these cases Klein and Lita (*Atelier Iris*) or Terra and Kefka (*Final Fantasy 6*). These games have a simulation of experiences, in which the characters travel on epic adventures that could rival Homer's *Odyssey*, there is constant interaction, the charac-

ters show emotions, which are then transferred to the player, and there is cognition, as the player has to engage in a learning process to understand the mechanics of the game, the world, the cultural subtleties of the characters living in said world, and the purpose of the actions of the characters. Gordal (2003) also states that:

> Human motivations exist in a nested hierarchy. There are high order goals, like those folktale motifs of getting married or becoming a king, and high-order existential goals, such as survival. High order goals may presuppose lower order goals, like courting or fighting dragons; the last may presuppose getting a good weapon, a magic sword, or a laser gun. Such goals presuppose that you eat and sleep.

These motivations and goals, which presuppose other lower-level goals, can be found in any story. In *The Wheel of Time*, a novel by Robert Jordan (1990), young Rand 'al Thor is the reincarnation of an ancient hero called The Dragon, and Rand's high order goal in the story is to vanquish the evil Shai' Tan, The Dark One. To do this, Rand must engage in a series of lower-order goals, such as learning how to use the sword and how to weave magic. To achieve these, Rand must first find a teacher, which means he has to leave his village and travel the world. This hierarchy of orders can also be seen in real life. When a person has the high order goal of obtaining a bachelor's degree, that person must engage on lower-level goals, such as passing courses. Within the lower-level goals, the individual has to achieve the goals of attending class, answering tests, and writing reports. All of these goals lead to events, which make up a person's life story.

Story-driven video games, mainly role playing games, also have this hierarchy of goals. In *Suikoden V* (Konami, 2006), Prince, or Hero V, as he is called in most video game magazines, as the player chooses the name of the character and he has no default name, must save his kingdom from the Godwin family, which has usurped the throne. To do this, Prince must gather an army to follow him and battle the Godwins. However, to accomplish this task, Prince needs to obtain a base and wander the continent talking to gang leaders, town majors, and army generals, persuading them to join his cause. According to Gordal, "the representation may focus on high-order goals and motivations because such goals are emotionally very activating." This means that stories are not, or should not be, about waking up and having an ordinary day at work, then going home to watch television. Stories are, or should be,

about saving a kingdom from an evil emperor, discovering the pros and cons of a newly acquired lifestyle, or surviving as an outcast after an exile. However, stories are not entirely about high-order goals, they are just what should receive the greater focus. Just as it is with written stories and life stories, "a game may provide initial motivation to crush an evil empire, and this will provide motivation for the lower-order process" (Gordal, 2003). This order hierarchy lends itself to create what is called the canonical story, meaning "a story with one (or a few) focusing characters that unfolds itself in a linear, progressive time" (Frasca, 2003).

Linearity and interactivity

Although some scholars argue that video games are interactive simulations of real life, Crawford (2003) states in his paper entitled *Interactive Storytelling* that they are not interactive simulations of reality, but linear stories. He categorizes video games, which he calls interactive attempts, as 1) non-interactive stories with a face of interactivity, 2) adventure games dressed up as stories, 3) computer games with stories, 4) branching story-trees, and 5) world simulators. Certainly, these categories apply only to games with narrative aspects, and excludes sports and fighting games. Non-interactive stories are, according to Crawford, games that have a linear plot and an interface. This applies to many, but not all, role playing games. A good example of Crawford's 'non-interactive story' is *Magna Carta: Tears of Blood* (Softmax, 2005). In *Magna Carta*, the player follows the adventures of Calintz, leader of the Tears of Blood mercenary band. The game's story is mostly linear, with the exceptions of a few side-quests, short adventures that are not required to complete the story, such as a quest to find out about the past of a character. All role playing games have these optional side-quests, whether they are to find out about a character's past, which allows for character development, to find a legendary relic, or to discover a hidden character. These side-quests give the gamer options that allow for a certain degree of interactivity and decision making. Adventure games are those that give the player a high-order goal and set the character loose in a world in order to achieve it. Of course, the player must achieve a series of lower-order goals beforehand. An example of this is *Zelda: Wind Wakers* (Nintendo, 2003). In *Wind Wakers*, Link sets out to rescue Princess Zelda from the evil wizard Gannon, and save the world in the process. To do this, he needs to acquire the jewel of Din. To get it, he has to obtain legendary weapons,

but to get those, Link needs to complete quests, interact with people, and explore an interactive world. Computer games with stories involve games like *Medal of Honor* (Dreamworks Interactive, 1999), which show the player some text as an introduction, then the game begins. In *Medal of Honor*, a first-person army-type shooter, the player wonders around several maps, achieving goals and finding exit points. The story is only alluded to after every few stages. However, in this game there are no people to interact with beyond the usual enemy encounter. Although it has a higher-order goal (win the war) lower order goals never go beyond "reach the end of the stage" or "find and capture the enemy commander". These games should not be seen as stories. There are very few true branching-tree style games in the market. *Morrowind* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2002) is one of such games. It gives the player a higher-end goal, to defeat the evil sorcerer and save the world, and several lower-order goals, which take the forms of 'quests'. In order to move forward with the story, the player has to achieve certain tasks given to him by a commanding officer or leading guild member. However, the player has the choice of following the story, exploring the world, or doing virtually anything else allowed within the game world. Although the choices of what to do are certainly limited (the player cannot rape a person or destroy a town), these games give the player a certain degree of freedom that other games do not. Similarly, games with multiple endings, like *Star Ocean: Second Story* (Tri-Ace, 1998), which has 88 endings, fit this category. Finally, there are world simulators. In these games the player takes the role of God, and develops a civilization out of a few resources by commanding people to build edifices, gathering water and firewood, and engaging in other tasks. Games like *Civilization* (Micro Prose, 1991) and *Ages of Empire* (Ensemble Studios, 1997) allow the player to engage in nation-building enterprises, which refer back to historical times, while games like *Starcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 1998) allow the player to experience a more futuristic, fictional world.

Crawford (2003) suggests that video games are not interactive narratives or simulations, but instead that they are non-interactive stories. However, this is something that can be argued against. Interactivity commonly involves new media art technologies and user interfaces. All video games have graphical user interfaces (GUIs), and by engaging in the use of these GUIs the player interacts with the game. In *Kingdom Hearts* (Square Co., 2002), what Crawford would probably lable as an adventure game with a story, the player controls young

Zora, Goofy, and Donald Duck. The player then embarks on a quest to find the Kingdom Keys and defeat the Heartless, who are polutting the worlds of the Disney Kingdom. Although this game is, by definition, an adventure role playing game, it has several elements of a traditional role playing game, as well as branching story-trees. The player has several choices of whether or not to engage in a number of events, which have the potential to alter the final outcome of the game. However, if the player does not take up the controller and controls Zora, Goofy, and Donald throughout the various worlds which make up the Disney Kingdom, nothing will happen. If the player decides to not interact with the artificial intelligence characters within the game, the story will not progress. Johnson states that "The interactive nature of games means that they will inevitably require more decision making than passive forms like television or film" (2005). Throughout his book *Everything Bad is Good For You*, Johnson argues that video games are indeed partially interactive. He says that at the beginning of the game the player has very little control over the narrative, but that as the game develops, he tells the reader, "you are more in control of the narrative now [that the game has started], but your supply of information about the narrative is only partial, and so, playing these games is all about filling the information gap." Although there are certain goals to be achieved, they are not explicitly pointed out all the time. James Paul Gee, one of the pioneering video game scholars, agrees with Johnson in regards to the interactive nature of games. In his book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2003), Gee states that "Video games are an immensely entertaining and attractive interactive technology built around identities". Gee (2003) also states that:

> Narratives in video games with rich stories function quite differently than they work in books or movies. A book or movie can tell its story from first episode to last or it can begin in the middle of the action and only later get to the initial events in the story. In either case, the reader or viewer knows someone else (the author) has determined the order in which events in the story will be encountered. This "author" (which of course can be multiple people) also determines the sources through which the reader or viewer gains crucial information. For example, a crucial piece of information may be in a conversation between two lovers rather than in a hidden diary. In a video game, on the other hand, some players will get such information one way and others in another way (p. 81).

Implications

What this implies is that there are several ways of reaching a final goal. In all video game narratives there is a beginning and an end, but the way to get to the end may differ from player to player. Although these narratives certainly have a linear element in the form of certain key events that will take place no matter how the game is played, they are deeply interactive, not only in the sense that they are controlled by a player through a graphical user interface, but also in that there are different paths to take and different ways to do things. Some games even have different outcomes depending on how the player behaves, with games like *Star Ocean 2* (Tri-Ace, 1998) having up to 108 different endings, and games like *Fable* (Lionhead Studios, 2005) having the world change and evolve according to the player's actions. All of these elements of interactivity mixed with the linear aspects of narratives would make video games semi-interactive narratives. The player then, instead of reading through a book's linear story, plays through a game's semi-linear story.

In the end, role playing games are both interactive and narrative in nature. These interactive narratives engage the player in reading of text and listening to character conversation in order to advance further into the game to achieve the higher order goal. They stimulate the player by showing them goals of a high order, and allow them to take on the role of a fictional character. This shifting of roles from a normal person to a normal person in control of an extraordinary character allows the player to project some of their personal traits and behavioral patterns into the game, which allow for simulation of the self in a fictional world.

Even though role playing games are interactive narratives, some might still be willing to see them as a simple means of entertainment, void of any real content whatsoever. Examples of content in video games can be found in role playing-strategy history simulators, such as *Civilization* (Micro Prose, 1991), which impart information about cultures from all over the world and from all time periods. Another example can be found in *Rise of the Nations* (Bug Huge Games, 2003), a game which revolves around the rise and fall of great European nations. Some of the missions in the game are taken straight from history. In one of the missions, the player takes the role of a commanding officer in the Hundred Years' War, and in another mission the player assumes

the role of Alfred the Great. Some might still argue that taking the role of a commander and sending troops off to face the enemy in a historical setting does not count as content, but as Gee (2003) states:

> The problem of content is based on common attitudes towards school, schooling, learning, and knowledge. The common idea is this: Important knowledge is content in the sense of information rooted in, or at least related to, intellectual domains or academic disciplines like physics, history, art, or literature. Works that do not involve such learning is "meaningless". Activities that are entertaining but in themselves do not involve such learning is just "meaningless play". Video games, of course, fall under this category.

And then there is the question of whether video games have any content that could be related to any of these academic disciplines. The loading screen that players see in *Rise of the Nations* (Big Huge Games, 2003) as they prepare to take on the role of Alfred the Great says:

> Eight hundred years after Bodicia rebelled against the Romans, Britain was savaged by repeated Viking attacks. Alfred King of Wessex has been paying tribute to stave off raiders, but in 878 the Vikings prepare for conquest. After a defeat, Alfred retreats to rebuild his forces and drive the Vikings away.

These short excerpts from the game, as well as the other introductions from the missions, are historically accurate; the player is learning a bit about the history of England. Similarly, Role Playing Games like *Valkyrie Profile 2* (Tri-Ace, 2006), *God of War* (Sony Computer Entertainment of America, 2005), and *Suikoden* (Konami, 1995) draw on elements from Norse, Greek, and Japanese mythology and literature respectively. At the same time, games like *Chrono Trigger* (Square Co., 1995) and *Deus Ex* (Ion Storm, 2000) put into practice several ideas from Hugg Everett's many worlds interpretation of quantum theory. Johnson states that "Sometimes these (video game simulations) have to do with mass and velocity, and sometimes with collective behavior." This means that video games can impart content regarding history and mythology, disciplines directly related to the humanities, but also give practical simulated experiences into the workings of theoretical constructs from natural sciences or offer insight on behavioral patterns related to the social sciences.

Educational implications

Role playing games are not just games or a means of entertainment; they are interactive narratives —cultural devices that allow for the exploration of a myriad of topics. It is in the diversity of topics they allow to explore, as well as in their narrative nature, that role playing games find their pedagogical worth. Since the dawn of time stories have been used to teach. In the modern language classroom stories also take the center stage. Short stories and novels have always been used to teach about behavior, empathy, right and wrong, and moral issues, as well as how to summarize, analyze characters, or learn about elements of literature. Story readings often lead to written responses that revolve around associating the story to personal experience and offering and supporting opinions about the story. In some classrooms they are even used to teach about cultural sensitivity. Just as stories in print have been used in language classrooms the world over, video games can also be used in the same manner. Open world role playing games, such as M*orrowind,* can be used to teach about morals and right or wrong. Personality simulators, such as *The Sims*, can be used to teach about human behavior, while strategy games can be used to teach macro and micro management skills. At the same time, the stories in these games can be discussed in the language classroom in the same manner as traditional narratives have been so far. When given the chance, students often prefer to play through and summarize a role playing game than read a novel and do the same. This is because even though role playing games have more dialogue than most novels currently in stores, they often rely on topics that are more attuned with today's youth. Furthermore, the constantly changing visuals offered in role playing games captivate students' already limited attention spans far more than static letters on a page do. In addition, students who are learning a second or foreign language will benefit from the exposure to the written and spoken communication presented in role playing games. Second and foreign language teachers could ask their students to present oral reports based on certain aspects of their chosen games. In the end, the educational possibilities of interactive narratives are almost endless.

This essay does not attempt to glorify role playing games, to state that all video games are interactive narratives, or to suggest that all games can be used in an educational context. What it does is to bring to light a fact that has been ignored by scholars currently looking at video games-role playing games as interactive narratives and their amaz-

ing educational potential when used in a language classroom context. Certainly, overly violent video games like *Grand Theft Auto 4* or games that are completely devoid of any narrative, like *Arcana Heart,* should be avoided in a classroom context. However, when there are so many role playing games with excellent narratives out, why should educators not use them in order to capture students' attention? And more importantly, if playing video games is one of the dominant hobbies of today's youth, shouldn't educators keep up to date with their students' interests?

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