

**FirstPerson**  
New Media as  
Story, Performance, and Game

Edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan

Designed by Michael Crumpton

The MIT Press

Cambridge, Massachusetts

London, England

© 2004 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher.

This book was set in Adobe Chapparral and ITC Officina by Michael Crumpton and was printed and bound in the United States of America.

---

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
First person : new media as story, performance, and game /  
edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-262-23232-4 (hard : alk. paper)

I. Wardrip-Fruin, Noah. II. Harrigan, Pat.

GV1469.17.S63F57 2003

794.8—dc21

2003048784

71 **III. Critical Simulation**

73 Simon Penny: *Representation, Enaction, and the Ethics of Simulation*

73 Response by Eugene Thacker

75 From N. Katherine Hayles's Online Response

85 Gonzalo Frasca: *Videogames of the Oppressed: Critical Thinking, Education, Tolerance, and Other Trivial Issues*

85 Response by Mizuko Ito

88 From Eric Zimmerman's Online Response

95 Phoebe Sengers: *Schizophrenia and Narrative in Artificial Agents*

95 Response by Lucy Suchman: *Methods and Madness*

98 From Michael Mateas's Online Response

117 **IV. Game Theories**

118 Henry Jenkins: *Game Design as Narrative Architecture*

118 Response by Jon McKenzie

120 From Markku Eskelinen's Online Response

131 Jesper Juul: *Introduction to Game Time*

131 Response by Mizuko Ito

133 From Celia Pearce's Online Response

143 Celia Pearce: *Towards a Game Theory of Game*

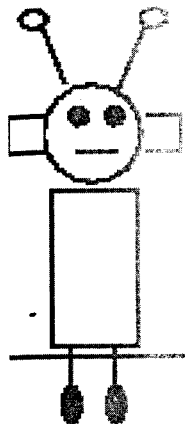
143 Response by Mary Flanagan

145 From Mark Bernstein's Online Response: "And Back Again"

154 Eric Zimmerman: *Narrative, Interactivity, Play, and Games: Four Naughty Concepts in Need of Discipline*

154 Response by Chris Crawford

155 From Jesper Juul's Online Response: *Unruly Games*



## Game Theories

In his 1974 *Computer Lib/Dream Machines*, Ted Nelson argued that human-computer interaction design was more properly viewed as an analogue of moviemaking than of engineering. A year later, the first personal computer kit became available for purchase, and it was not long before computers conceived of as entertainment devices — rather than as work tools — began appearing in U.S. homes and local arcades.

Now, like moviemaking before it, computer-based entertainment — even the oft-maligned computer game — is beginning to receive scholarly attention and to be viewed as something other than a public nuisance. At the same time, computer games are themselves in a period of considerable development and redefinition. Identifiable genres (first-person shooters, god-games, massively multiplayer online role-playing games [MMORPGs]) are emerging and entering the public awareness; the channels of game interaction (PCs, consoles, handhelds, cell phones, PDAs) are multiplying; and as new artistic and marketing methods arise and the first generations of computer gamers come of age, games are reaching and being developed for an ever-broadening demographic.

Although the four authors presented here emerge from different backgrounds and are at home in different communities, all of their work is grounded in the specifics of actual games (rather than theories of games-in-the-abstract) and each author opens discussion with both scholars and game developers. Further, a point of focus for each essayist is the game/story question that runs through this volume.

MIT professor Henry Jenkins directly addresses the game/story formulation. Well-known for his work with comparative media studies, Jenkins describes a middle ground between narratologists and ludologists, while also focusing attention on the dynamics of space, which he believes neither camp fully appreciates. Jesper Juul, on the other hand, is identified with ludology. His topic here, the operation of time in games, is one that he has previously utilized to differentiate between games and narratives. This essay moves further than the basic distinction, beginning to lay the groundwork for a comprehensive understanding of game time. Celia Pearce, a familiar figure in the game development and location-based entertainment communities, furthers the argument for a native discipline of game theory, while also introducing six “operators” for understanding the role of narrative in games. These operators structure her analysis of the author/audience dynamics that emerge in game forms like MMORPGs and user-modifiable simulations. Finally, Eric Zimmerman, a game designer and theorist, takes to task four terms that unacceptably run amok in the new media field (not to mention this volume!): narrative, interactivity, play, and games. In disciplining these terms, he reformulates the game/story discussion as well, opening up new areas of investigation for those interested in progressive game design and game theory.

### Reference

Nelson, Ted (1974). *Computer Lib / Dream Machines*. 1st edition: self-published, 1974. 2nd edition: Redmond, WA: Tempus Books/Microsoft Press, 1987.

# Game Design as Narrative Architecture

Henry Jenkins

The relationship between games and story remains a divisive question among game fans, designers, and scholars alike. At a recent academic Games Studies conference, for example, a blood feud threatened to erupt between the self-proclaimed ludologists, who wanted to see the focus shift onto the mechanics of game play, and the narratologists, who were interested in studying games alongside other storytelling media.<sup>1</sup> Consider some recent statements made on this issue:

Interactivity is almost the opposite of narrative; narrative flows under the direction of the author, while interactivity depends on the player for motive power. (Adams 1999)

There is a direct, immediate conflict between the demands of a story and the demands of a game. Divergence from a

story's path is likely to make for a less satisfying story; restricting a player's freedom of action is likely to make for a less satisfying game. (Costikyan 2000, 44-53)

Computer games are not narratives... Rather the narrative tends to be isolated from or even work against the computer-game-ness of the game. (Juul 1998)<sup>2</sup>

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. (Eskelinen 2001)

I find myself responding to this perspective with mixed feelings. On the one hand, I understand what these writers are arguing against — various attempts to map traditional narrative structures ("hypertext," "Interactive Cinema," "nonlinear narrative") onto games at the expense of an attention to their specificity as an emerging mode of entertainment. You say "narrative" to the average gamer and what they are apt to imagine is something on the order of a choose-your-own

---

## Response by Jon McKenzie

The model of creativity often associated with digital media is not that of originality and uniqueness but recombination and multiplicity, a model hardwired to the computer's uncanny ability to copy and combine images, sounds, texts, and other materials from an endless array of sources. Indeed, in different though related ways, both digital media and poststructuralist theory teach us that it is impossible to create and study the new without drawing at times on forms and processes taken from what is already around us. From this perspective, no genre, work, or field is unique and self-contained: each is a specific yet fuzzy combination of other things that are themselves diverse and nonunique. In short, what makes something "unique" is

not so much its make-up but its "mix-up."

For practical, conceptual, and institutional reasons, any formation of a field of "ludology" may inevitably involve arguing for that field's uniqueness and originality, its clear-cut distinction from other fields: thus, "games are not narratives, not films, not plays, etc." Yet I'm willing to gamble that if a formal discipline of ludology ever does emerge, it will sooner or later discover what other disciplines have learned: discoveries are triggered by the oddest (and oldest) of sources.

As Henry Jenkins suggests, games are indeed not narratives, not films, not plays — but they're also not-not-narratives, not-not-films, not-not-plays. Games share traits with other forms of cultural production,

adventure book, a form noted for its lifelessness and mechanical exposition rather than enthralling entertainment, thematic sophistication, or character complexity. And game industry executives are perhaps justly skeptical that they have much to learn from the resolutely unpopular (and often overtly antipopular) aesthetics promoted by hypertext theorists. The application of film theory to games can seem heavy-handed and literal-minded, often failing to recognize the profound differences between the two media. Yet, at the same time, there is a tremendous amount that game designers and critics could learn through making meaningful comparisons with other storytelling media. One gets rid of narrative as a framework for thinking about games only at one's own risk. In this short piece, I hope to offer a middle-ground position between the ludologists and the narratologists, one that respects the particularity of this emerging medium — examining games less as stories than as spaces ripe with narrative possibility.

Let's start at some points where we might all agree:

1. Not all games tell stories. Games may be an abstract, expressive, and experiential form, closer to music or modern dance than to cinema. Some ballets (*The Nutcracker* for example) tell stories, but storytelling isn't

although reducing them to any one of these comes at a certain cost. Jenkins rightly contends that game designers should therefore seek to expand the forms and processes from which to draw, rather than reduce them. He is also right to point out that some ludologists are themselves much too quick to reduce narrative to overly simplistic models (e.g., strictly linear structures). Most importantly, his exploration of spatially oriented narrative forms provides provocative approaches to contemporary game design. At the same time, however, Jenkins's stated goal to offer a "middle ground" between ludologists and narratologists remains slanted toward the narratological end of things. This is indicated in his essay's title, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture." A more playful

## IV. Game Theories

an intrinsic or defining feature of dance. Similarly, many of my own favorite games — *Tetris*, *Blix*, *Snood* — are simple graphic games that do not lend themselves very well to narrative exposition.<sup>3</sup> To understand such games, we need other terms and concepts beyond narrative, including interface design and expressive movement for starters. The last thing we want to do is to reign in the creative experimentation that needs to occur in the earlier years of a medium's development.

2. Many games *do* have narrative aspirations. Minimally, they want to tap the emotional residue of previous narrative experiences. Often, they depend on our familiarity with the roles and goals of genre entertainment to orient us to the action, and in many cases, game designers want to create a series of narrative experiences for the player. Given those narrative aspirations, it seems reasonable to suggest that some understanding of how games relate to narrative is necessary before we understand the aesthetics of game design or the nature of contemporary game culture.

3. Narrative analysis need not be prescriptive, even if some narratologists — Janet Murray is the most oft-cited example — do seem to be advocating for games to pursue particular narrative forms. There is not one

ludologist might have offered a response titled "Narrative Architecture as Game Design." Johan Huizinga, after all, analyzed law, war, poetry, and philosophy "as" play, and across diverse cultural traditions storytelling has complex agonistic dimensions.

Another middle ground for ludology might be "experience design," a notion and practice that runs in different ways from Brenda Laurel to Donald Norman to Eric Zimmerman. Experience design refers to the generation and shaping of actions, emotions, and thoughts. How one operates a kitchen appliance, takes in a sophisticated science exhibition, or becomes enmeshed in a role-playing game — or for that matter shops in a store, reads a novel, or visits a polling booth — all this

## Game Design as Narrative Architecture

### Henry Jenkins

## FIRSTPERSON

future of games. The goal should be to foster diversification of genres, aesthetics, and audiences, to open gamers to the broadest possible range of experiences. The past few years have been ones of enormous creative experimentation and innovation within the games industry, as might be represented by a list of some of the groundbreaking titles. *The Sims*, *Black and White*, *Majestic*, *Shenmue*; each represents profoundly different concepts of what makes for compelling game play. A discussion of the narrative potentials of games need not imply a privileging of storytelling over all the other possible things games can do, even if we might suggest that if game designers are going to tell stories, they should tell them well. In order to do that, game designers, who are most often schooled in computer science or graphic design, need to be retooled in the basic vocabulary of narrative theory.

120

4. The experience of playing games can never be simply reduced to the experience of a story. Many other factors that have little or nothing to do with storytelling per se contribute to the development of great games and we need to significantly broaden our critical vocabulary for talking about games to deal more fully with those other topics. Here, the ludologist's insistence that game scholars focus more attention on the mechanics of game play seems totally in order.

can be approached in terms of experience design. How are interactions organized and solicited? How does one event flow into another? How does the overall experience "hang together"? Although Laurel theorizes experience design using the model of Aristotelian theater (arguing that it has been shaping audiences' experience for centuries), there are in practice an almost unlimited set of performative models to draw upon: sports, rituals, sagas, popular entertainments, novels, jokes, and so on.

Perhaps what's really at stake in ludology is less the right model and more a sense of tone and attitude — a willingness to mix it up, to entertain many possibilities, to play with lots of different models.

5. If some games tell stories, they are unlikely to tell them in the same ways that other media tell stories. Stories are not empty content that can be ported from one media pipeline to another. One would be hard-pressed, for example, to translate the internal dialogue of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* into a compelling cinematic experience, and the tight control over viewer experience that Hitchcock achieves in his suspense films would be directly antithetical to the aesthetics of good game design. We must, therefore, be attentive to the particularity of games as a medium, specifically what distinguishes them from other narrative traditions. Yet, in order to do so requires precise comparisons — not the mapping of old models onto games but a testing of those models against existing games to determine what features they share with other media and how they differ.

Much of the writing in the ludologist tradition is unduly polemical: they are so busy trying to pull game designers out of their "cinema envy" or define a field where no hypertext theorist dares to venture that they are prematurely dismissing the use value of narrative for understanding their desired object of study. For my money, a series of conceptual blind spots prevent them from developing a full understanding of the interplay between narrative and games.

First, the discussion operates with too narrow a

---

### From Markku Eskelinen's Online Response

For some reason Henry Jenkins doesn't define the contested concepts (narratives, stories, and games) so central to his argumentation. That's certainly an effective way of building a middle ground (or a periphery), but perhaps not the most convincing one. [...]

Jenkins also misrepresents a dispute (on the usefulness of narratology), important parts of which he seems to be unaware of. It has its roots both in Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext* (which deals extensively with the relationship between stories and games, showing elementary differences in communicative structures of narratives and adventure games) and Gonzalo Frasca's introduction of *ludology* to computer game studies. A