

# The Player's Role

## Understanding agency in digital game narratives

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### ABSTRACT

Critics of games' narrative ability fail to recognize that narrative impact in games is established differently than in traditional media. This paper demonstrates how agency and avatar relationships affect game narratives. Understanding these relationships may lead to improved understanding of the medium's limitations or allow games to take on new types of narratives.

### Categories and Subject Descriptors

H5.4 [Hypertext/Hypermedia]: Theory. I7.2 [Document Preparation]: hypertext/hypermedia

### General Terms

Documentation, Design, Human Factors,

### Keywords

Hypertext, narrative, games, agency, avatar

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Film critic Roger Ebert famously argued [6] that "video games can never be art." Games have an objective, he says, which distracts from their ability to arouse emotion or beauty. Games' artificial constraints prevent them from inciting such powerful emotions as books and film. This approach fails to recognize that games tell stories and evoke emotion through different means than traditional media.

This paper seeks to suggest ways in which the narrative practices of games might differ from other media. Perhaps we have been making false comparisons all along.

### 2. DEFINITIONS

Narrative is " 'recounted story', a 'narrative text' a 'text' carrying a 'narrative'" [13]. By this definition, all

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stories and accounts are delivered through narrative.

A game is "a rule-based formal system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable" [11]. This paper focuses on narrative as it is told through digital games.

Though I focus on digital games and use "games" throughout the paper as shorthand for "digital games," some of these ideas might apply to non-digital narrative games (those games, however, tend to apply narrative practices in slightly different ways, and therefore require proper research in their own right).

Let me be clear that I do not argue that games are inherently narrative or intrinsically artistic. Nor, when discussing narrative, do I mean to discuss the metanarrative that occurs when two players engage in a game of chess. This paper focuses only on a subset of digital games that seek to recount an intrinsic narrative—games whose narrative can be said to be deliberate content within the game.

### 3. STORIES IN TRADITIONAL MEDIA

Narrative has endured for millennia through the traditional practice of a narrator recounting events to an audience. Communication is generally one-sided. The audience endures the story, and must either accept or reject the author's account. The pleasure from the narrative experience is rooted in self-comparison and judgment: in romance or melodrama, perhaps we imagine the story events happening to us. In tragedy, we might derive pleasure from the catharsis of the pity or fear we feel for the protagonist [3]. Perhaps we also delight in esteeming ourselves devoid of the hero's tragic flaw.

Our identification with an element of the story—usually the protagonist, but possibly also other characters—creates emotional impact. We experience empathy for our hero, though sometimes we experience distrust or moral superiority as well. Empathizing with the protagonist, we laugh at her jokes, rejoice at her success, and cry at her loss. Perhaps we connect with her because we see characteristics of ourselves in her and can imagine how we would feel or behave in her place. If we disagree with her actions, we may or may not forgive her, but

either way we will understand her motives and then judge her accordingly.

We are not responsible for the protagonist's actions. They are not *our* actions. Nor do we tend to feel doubt or frustration in situations where the protagonist does, because we did not make her decisions ourselves. Our relationship to the protagonist is felt at a certain level of remove.

Though we may suspend disbelief and enter the perfluent dream of fictional worlds [8], we only observe events; we don't actually take part in them. The reader's pleasure is that of a voyeur; the player's pleasure comes from influence [1].

#### 4. GAMES ARE DIFFERENT

Several factors differentiate games from other modes of storytelling, but perhaps the most important is that games provide the player with agency. Drawing on the work of Janet Murray [17], Michael Mateas describes agency [14] thus:

*Agency is the feeling of empowerment that comes from being able to take actions in the world whose effects relate to the player's intention. This is not mere interface activity. If there are many buttons and knobs for the player to twiddle, but all this twiddling has little effect on the experience, there is no agency. Furthermore, the effect must relate to the player intention. If, in manipulating the interface elements, the player does have an effect on the world, but they are not the effects that the player intended (perhaps the player was randomly trying things because they didn't know what to do, or perhaps the player thought that an action would have one effect, but it instead had another), then there is no agency.*

The idea of agency in electronic literature has led to much debate over ideas of authorship and control [4][12]. Many forms of hypertext literature allow the reader to choose the order of story events or perhaps to choose one of a few predefined outcomes. The reader chiefly influences the story's plot or presentation; she does not change the story itself.

In electronic literature, choices may involve a sense of "missing out" on a path the reader did not take, but if a character dies, she does not blame herself for killing the character. In Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story*, we might empathize with Peter, the narrator who may have seen his son die [10], but we do not share his guilt. Hypertexts that do highlight the reader's agency and influence, have also tended to have a distinct objective, and the appearance of an objective which leads to the player's vested interest in the outcome, thus categorizing the work as a game.

Games depend on the reader's awareness of her own agency. Because of the constraints and rules, understanding the limits of what a player is allowed to do within a game world is essential to understanding the game and creating the expectations upon which agency depends. If the player does not understand the games' constraints, she cannot have realistic expectations about how her own influence will affect the storyworld.

Players can only successfully project themselves into the storyworld if the interface behaves in expected ways and if they become fluent enough with the game's control systems to enter a perfluent dream, much like a reader. Some of these ideas carry over to reading: after all, a reader cannot become immersed in story if she struggles with the mechanical operations of a book. The control systems of a game, however, penetrate into the storyworld itself where the mechanical operations of turning a page do not.

The player must be able to directly affect the storyworld in expected ways not only through interface operation, but also through decisions having intended consequences within the storyworld. This agency and the awareness of that agency is essential to creating and enjoying narratives within games [18].

#### 5. FOSTERED CONNECTION WITH THE AVATAR

A player's sense of agency serves not only as a connection to the storyworld, but it creates a deeper relationship between the player and avatar. The reader's ability to manipulate the storyworld obscures the distinction between the player and avatar.

Extensive use of second-person in digital games seeks to draw players into the storyworld through a deep connection with the avatar. Even the earliest narrative games, text-based adventure games (now the predecessors of the text-based Interactive Fiction genre) like *Adventure* [5] and *Zork* [2], connected the player to the avatar in this manner. In *Zork*, upon entering a dark area

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It is pitch black. You are likely to be
eaten by a grue.
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If the player continues into the dark area

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Oh no! You have walked into the slavering
fangs of a lurking grue!
**** You have died. ****
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In this situation, the avatar has failed; the player made a bad decision. The player knows this, and thus is responsible for the avatar's demise. In most cases, the player does not have the luxury of dissociating from the avatar or disagreeing with its actions, because the avatar is entirely controlled by the player; its actions are really the player's.

The games' ambiguous use of the second person "you" further fosters the player-avatar relationship. When "you have walked into the fangs of a slavering grue," it is unclear whether the game means "you, the avatar, have been eaten by a grue" or "you, the player, have led the avatar to its demise by steering it into the jaws of a grue." The ambiguity actually brings the player closer to the avatar through a sense of responsibility for the avatar's actions.

Games also use death animations to encourage guilt for the avatar's fate and a sense of responsibility for the outcome of

the game. Death animations inform players that they have failed in their objectives. Over the years, these animations have become increasingly graphic. An underwater death in *Super Mario Bros. 3* [15] led to Mario falling off the screen in a shrugging pose. A decade later, in *Super Mario 64* [16], our hero grabs his throat and kicks as he gasps for air, then his lifeless body floats, slumped, toward the surface. *You* have killed Mario, and watching our hero drown is meant to make you feel guilt over the avatar's fate.

## 6. IMPACT ON THE PLAYER

The player-avatar connection has serious implications within the narrative framework of games and in creating deeper emotional experiences within their narratives.

In Infinity Ward's *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* [9], the avatar character is an undercover operative infiltrating a terrorist organization. He accompanies the terrorist group as they bomb an airport and murder civilians. Within the constraints of the game, the player must kill these civilians lest she be discovered by the terrorists. However, the player may struggle with shooting terrified women and children. The game deliberately capitalizes on the player's agency, the fact that she is *choosing* to murder innocent people, and evokes guilt and doubt—the same feelings the fictional avatar would have. These feelings are not evoked through a sense of empathy, however. They result from the player's deliberate choice to carry out an action.

This scene contributes to the overall narrative of the game, which argues that war and terrorism are bleak and pointless endeavors, and that detached politicians are too quick to throw away their soldiers' lives. A novel might portray this similarly, with the reader empathizing with the protagonists' frustrations, but the game is able to make the player feel that frustration directly.

## 7. IMPLICATIONS FOR NARRATIVE

Though developers have sought to draw players into the gameworld for decades, they are only recently starting to move games toward more complex narratives that address larger issues. More and more critics and developers want games to be taken seriously as a creative and expressive medium [7][19].

Understanding agency and avatar connection as they relate to narrative immersion is key to understanding the narrative limitations inherent in the medium. Games seem to be better-suited to eliciting certain emotions: it is easier to make the player feel frustration, fear, pride, or guilt than to make her feel love, grief, or to create emotional connections with non-player characters. Understanding how agency affects a player's ability to relate to game events or intended emotional experiences will also provide a better understanding of the types of narratives to which games might be best-suited. This understanding might allow games to branch into narrative fields in which they have been previously unsuccessful, or allow for better narrative adaptations across media.

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