Theory Wars: An Argument Against Arguments in the so-called Ludology/Narratology Debate

Celia Pearce
UC Irvine/Calit2
celiap@uci.edu

Abstract/Introduction

This paper offers an alternative to the agonistic debate presented by Gonzalo Frasca in "Ludologists Love Stories Too," in *Level Up, DiGRA 2003 Conference Proceedings* (Frasca, 2003). While Frasca's position is that the ludology/narratology debate is spurious and fraught with misunderstandings, his paper simultaneously succeeds in deepening the gap by further polarizing the alleged two sides of a debate that, in Frasca's words, "never took place." Furthermore, the paper adds to the misunderstandings by further mis-labeling, mis-quoting and decontextualizing some of the points made by others.

In this paper, I argue that there is little value in polarizing scholars into two "camps," even if one is doing so in an attempt to bridge the gap. As some of the scholars quoted by Frasca (some of whom I will refer to here) have pointed out, the argument is neither interesting nor productive. It begins to sound more like a theological argument than a deep form of discourse—somewhat like saying "communists love capitalism too." The very act of bestowing the suffix "-ist" is a kind of spell-casting exercise that only serves to reinforce the so-called false polarity that Frasca attempts to critique. And in fact, I am certain that a number of scholars who have been been grouped into the referenced camps—myself among them—would prefer not to be classified in *either* camp, but be allowed to move freely across the spectrum if ideas that lie between play and narrative without being forced to take a "position" on either end.

Keywords
ludology, narratology, story, narrative

Over the past decade, I have made the argument that games should not be looked at in terms of whether or not they are narratives by various theoretical definitions, but that "narrative" should be framed as an adjective rather than a noun. The more interesting question is not "Are they/are they not narrative?" but *"In what ways are they narrative?"* In the "Towards a Game Theory of Game, in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game* (Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin, 2004), cited in Frasca's article, I advocate the notion of "narrative operators." I am familiar with Frasca's argument that game theorists are imprecise about what they mean when they use the term "narrative" and it is exactly this point which the *First Person* paper attempts to address. In fact I describe in detail ways to think about the term narrative as descriptive of

specific types of experience, as narrative "operators" that function at different levels to support gameplay.

In the quotation cited, Frasca asserts that I "claim chess is a narrative." In fact, I do no such thing. Rather, I use the thought exercise of comparing the "plots" of chess and Macbeth to make a point about the differences in the way narrative *operates* in both. I specifically use the word *plot* because it has particular implications, and represents a higher level of specificity.

To savor this point, I thought we might wish to take a moment to medidate on the various common meanings of the world "plot."

> **plot** *n.* A small piece of ground, generally used for a specific purpose: *a garden plot.* A measured area of land; a lot. A ground plan, as for a building; a diagram. The pattern of events or main story in a narrative or drama. A secret plan to accomplish a hostile or illegal purpose; a scheme.
> **plot** *v.* To represent graphically, as on a chart: *plot a ship's course. Mathematics.* To locate (points or other figures) on a graph by means of coordinates. To draw (a curve) connecting points on a graph. To conceive and arrange the action and incidents of: "I began plotting novels at about the time I learned to read" (James Baldwin). To form a plot for; prearrange secretly or deviously: *plot an assassination.*

Indeed no better word could be used to describe the many angles of "plot" to be considered in this exercise. Not only is a plot "the pattern of events" within a story, but also a plan or "scheme," as well as a layout and a diagram, qualities that we see in both chess and Macbeth, but formulated in radically different ways. This approach may not be as erudite as espousing to one establihed theory or another, but it begins to provide us with a new, more specific, and perhaps more nuanced way to think about the relationships between games and stories.

I concur with Frasca that far too much of game scholarship is couched in vague, broad terms. Given that complaint, it is interesting to note that in "Ludologists Love Stories Too," while many theorists are named and classified, the only actual *game* mentioned is chess, as cited from the above paper. It seems to me if we are to talk about games and play, or games and narrative, or games and *anything,* we would be better served to talk about *games* than about each other. Indeed if one is to frame an argument between others, it might help to be more specific from the outset. What, exactly, are these people *saying* about games and story? Even the details of their ideas and theories are patently absent, let alone the games they have been applied to.

Many interesting arguments can be made from a number of different perspectives about what makes games more or less "story-like." While it is very easy to say, for instance, that checkers is not narrative (in the adjective sense) and *Dungeons & Dragons* is, most games lie in a fuzzy realm between where narrative has a role to play, albeit often abstract, allegorical or

metaphorical. What can be said of the narrative of *Monopoly*? Clearly a conflict is set up that mimics something we might consider narrative; roles are established, but they are abstractly rendered, e.g., "the shoe," "the car," et al. Needless to say, when playing *Monopoly,* even though my avatar may be "the shoe," this is not to suggest that my role in the game narrative is that of an actual shoe. Conversely, when we play *Clue,* we are indeed assigned roles of actual fictional characters, but again, very abstractly construed. While these sorts of analases may seem silly at first, they are merely referenced as a way to point out that there are many more levels to the interplay between story and game if we resist the temptation to move to the binary mode of anlysis and categorization, and begin to discuss the real meat of the matter.

Computer games add an additional dimension to the discourse. Jesper Juul, in his PhD disseration soon to become a book (Juul 2004) points out that while there is much to be learned about computer games from board games, there are also quite a few differences. The incorporation of the computer adds a number of characteristics that set the stage for expanding the role of narrative. The simple ability to create animations which are responsive to user input, and the ability to proceduralize (e.g., program) complex simulations with elaborate causal relationships may place computer games in another category altogether, one which has unique characteristics that do not map with complete satisfaction to board games.

The addition of this temporal aspect, about which Juul has also written most eloquently, (Juul, 2004), introduces the opportunity for adding features to gameplay that are patently absent from most non-digital games. High-quality animation, for example, opens up the opportunity for character. Thus, my role can be upgraded from "the shoe" to, say, "Mario," or "Lara Croft." At the same time, it is clear that Aristotelian notions of empathy and memeses must be reconsidered in terms of understanding our connection to these characters. Do I have empathy with my Sims, or is it agency that gives the game its compelling narrative framework? In Narrative Unlimited, a discussion group I co-lead with Jacki Morie of USC's ICT, John Baldrica of UCLA suggested that agency creates the opportunity for regret, an emotion that can only be achieved through personal culpability. In a related discussion Tracy Fullerton of USC argued that narrative arises out of the inclusion of "people I care about" within the game environment, in other words, emapthy. When looked at in these terms, we can begin to see that matters such as agency/empathy make for much more interesting and satisfying research questions, and also serve to remind us that games truly are a highly complex and evolving medium.

I have argued in the past (Pearce 1997, 2002) that, since the early 1990's, with the advent of conventions for the three-dimensional representation of space, such as isometric maps, real-time 3D and pseudo 3D, that games bear more in common with architectural storytelling forms, such as theme parks and cathedrals, then they do with what are generally categorized as narrative forms, such as novels and cinema. I've used the terms "spatial narrative" and "spatial media" (Pearce, 1997)—in constrast to "time-based media"—to distinguish forms where space is the primary form of narrative representation. Concurrent and subsequent and writings by Murray,

Ryan, Klastrup and Jenkins have also explore the notion of spatial storytelling as a potential way to unpack the narrative of games. This aspect of the game/story conundrum is woefully underexplored. Space is essential in most games, even board games, and in computer games, navigation becomes an important story telling mechanism. Initially, the world represented within the confines of the computer screen was essentially a "flatland"of one type or another, whether a map overview, such as *Pac-Man,* or a side scroller, such as *Super Mario Brothers.* We can begin to see in a game like *Pitfall* the first inkling of the potential narrative implications of a 3D space, and games such as *Myst* and *Doom* really set the conventions for the 3D representations which prevail in the commercial game world today.

Computer game designers liberally borrow from a long legacy of spatial narrative practices, ranging from temples and cathedrals to theme parks. *Myst* is probably the most canonical example of this, in which the story, gameplay, and even the characters are "embedded" in the space. The "game" is to uncover the story already in progress or even concluded. Space also plays an integral role in the unfolding of the narrative in more procedural types of games—so-called "God Games" such as *Civilization* or *Age of Empires.* The "fog of war," where areas of the map yet unexplored are obscured from view, provides a very compelling metaphor for navigating unexplored intellectual, emotional and geographic territory—in order to penetrate the fog of war, we must risk the potential dangers of the unknown and unseen.

Procedural narratives (Murray, 1997) probably present us with the greatest divergence from traditional narrative forms, while somehow bringing us closer to board games.
Juul has also looked at the role of emergence, although less in terms of story as in terms of play. (Juul 2002). Games such as *The Sims* or *EverQuest,* though they have little in common in terms of gameplay, share some general features of storytelling. In them, players are given a set of options that allow them to craft their own stories *through* gameplay, effectively merging the act of story production and consumption into one. The outcome is what I have referred to in the past as "emergent authorship," (Pearce 2002) where stories emerge as the outcome of play. Are there tools from traditional narrative theory equipped to handle this? If so, it would be very interesting to bring them into the discussion.

At DiGRA 2003, I witnessed a conversation in which Janet Murray was critiquing offering a critique to Eric Zimmerman of his company gamelab's on-site game event. The game involved catching people using buzzwords. Murray's comment was that the game forced people to play who had not willingly entered into its social contract, the "magic circle" which Zimmerman and Salen descibe in their recent book (2005). Similarly, the Frasca argument forces people to play a game that they have not willingly entered into, a position that nobody wishes to be placed in.

The examples above are provided only as a starting point, and by no means represent the only approaches. But they do serve to illustrate the complexity of the game/story problem, and set the stage for a what I hope can be a richer, deeper discussion of the relationship between the two.

References

Frasca, G. (2003). "Ludologists love stories, too: Notes from a debate that never took place." in Copier, M. and Raessens, J. (eds.) *Level Up: Digital Games Research Conference Proceedings.* Utrecht University, November, 2003.

Jenkins, H. (2004). "Game Design as Narrative Architecture" in Wardrip-Fruin, N. & Harrigan, P. (eds.). *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game.* Cambridge, MA, MIT Press.

Jenkins, H.. (1998). "Games as Gendered Playspace." in Cassell, J. & Jenkins, H. (Eds.) *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games.* Cambridge, MIT Press.

Juul, J. (2002). "The Open and the Closed: Games of emergence and games of progression." In Mäyrä, F. (ed.) *Computer Game and Digital Cultures Conference Proceedings.* Tampere, Tampere University Press.

Juul, J. (2004). "Time to play – An examination of game temporality". In Wadrip-Fruin, N. and Harrigan, P. (eds). *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game.* Cambridge, MIT Press.

Juul, J. (2004). *HALF-REAL: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds.* PhD Dissertation, IT University of Copenhagen, April 2004.

Klastrup, L. (2003). "A Poetics of Virtual Worlds." *Digital Arts and Culture Proceedings,* 2003.

Murray, J.H. (1997). *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace.* Cambridge, MIT Press.

Pearce, C. (1994). "The Ins & Outs of Nonlinear Storytelling." *Computer Graphics,* Volume 28, Number 1, May 1994.

Pearce, C. (1997). *The Interactive Book: A Guide to the Interactive Revolution.* Indianapolis, Macmillan Technical Publishing.

Pearce, C. (2002). "Story as Play Space: Narrative in Games." In King, L. (ed.) *Game On Exhibtion Catalog.* London, Lawrence King Publishing Limited.

Pearce, C. (2002). "Emergent Authorship: The Next Interactive Revolution." *Computers & Graphics,* Winter 2002

Pearce, C. (2004). "Towards a Game Theory of Game." in Wardrip-Fruin, N. & Harrigan, P. (eds.). *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game.* Cambridge, MIT Press.

Ryan, M. (2001). *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media.* Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press.

Salen, K. & Zimmerman. E. (2004). *Rules of play: game design fundamentals.* Cambridge, MIT Press.

Games Cited

Age of Empires
chess

Civilization
Doom
Dungeons & Dragons
EverQuest
Monopoly
Myst
Pac-Man
Pitfall
Super Mario Bros.
The Sims