

The Ludic Narrator: Towards the New Typology

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INTRODUCTION

The main goal of this presentation is to summarize the author's initial diagnoses in a broader research project devoted to revisiting and refining the theoretical frameworks used to analyze ludic narrators—understood here as more or less substantial characters or entities that verbally recount, frame, or comment on the events taking place within a game and/or its fictional world. While the concept of a narrator is among the most established tools in classical and postclassical narratology, its adaptation to digital, interactive, and multimodal media has remained somewhat limited. The present work therefore seeks to reassess both the usefulness and the limitations of traditional models of narration (especially those developed by Gérard Genette, Franz K. Stanzel, and Wayne C. Booth) when applied to ergodic media, and proposes a more integrative, game-oriented approach. In particular, Daniel Vella's seminal notion of the ludic subject serves as an important conceptual anchor for distinguishing ludic narrators—entities that speak, recount, or verbalize—from the broader and much more widely discussed category of ludic narratives.

Ever since the emergence of digital game studies as an academic field, scholarly attention has disproportionately centered on narratives rather than on narrators. This imbalance was shaped partly by the formative context of game studies, which sought to establish methodological independence from literary and film studies. Early foundational works encouraged a methodological “de-colonizing” of the field by emphasizing the specificity of games as interactive systems (cf. e. g. Aarseth 2001, Perron & Arsenault 2015). As a result, influential theorists grounded in narratology and intermedia (cf. e. g. Jenkins 2002, Ryan 2014) highlighted the digital games' distinctive modes of storytelling—emergent narrative, spatial narrative, and environmental storytelling—while others (cf. e. g. Aarseth 2001, Eskelinen 2001, Frasca 2003) questioned whether the concept of narrativity, inherited from older media, is even applicable to games.

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Although the narratology/ludology debate is no longer central to the field, its consequences continue to shape the theoretical landscape. One lasting effect has been the near-unquestioned assumption that digital games primarily exhibit distributed and multi-agent forms of narrative, in which designers, systems, algorithms, interfaces, and players jointly construct meaning. Most of the theories which aim at providing tools for analyzing digital games' narrative often take into account all of these aspects (cf. e.g. Farca 2011, Domsch 2013, Koenitz 2023), concentrating on synergies between various modes of storytelling. Within such frameworks, the figure of a single, stable narrator often appears marginal or unnecessary. Yet this assumption overlooks the fact that many digital games do contain explicit narrators—whether textual, voiced, diegetic, extradiegetic, system-generated, player-instantiated, or hybrid. The absence of a coherent typology that accounts for this diversity leaves the phenomenon theoretically underexplained, although it should be noted that some academic efforts at signalling the problem have already been made (cf. Kania 2018, Sakoğlu & Süngü 2025).

The author argues that his framework requires a shift from a performative conception of games centered on player agency to an understanding of the game as an autonomous, bounded entity and of the narrator as a prescribed, finite construct. In this respect, Daniel Vella's theory of the ludic subject (Vella 2015) —emphasizing player agency and rooted in literary theory—provides a particularly productive counterpoint to a theory that does not view the narrator as an inherent part of digital games but as merely one possible form of narrative agency within them. When narrators do appear in games, they cannot be understood as straightforward remediations of literary narrators; rather, they are shaped by interactivity, multimodality, and procedurality. Classical narratological tools remain valuable for identifying narrative voice and focalization, yet they must be supplemented by considerations specific to digital media.

In developing a more adequate framework, the project draws on three key areas. First, it acknowledges the influence of analog ludic forms, especially tabletop role-playing games, whose game masters and player-narrators offer significant precedents for digital narration. Second, it highlights the multimodality of verbal expression in games: ludic narrators may manifest through voiceover, textual pop-ups, UI elements, cutscenes, or meta-commentary delivered via system messages. Third—and most importantly—the framework integrates interactivity as a constitutive dimension of narrators in games, acknowledging that narrators may respond to player actions, comment dynamically on gameplay, or restructure their verbal output based on real-time systems.

As part of this conceptual expansion, the author is considering the inclusion of several new distinctions that better capture the spectrum of narrative agency unique to games. These include the differentiation between playful and serious narrators, which acknowledges the tonal variability and self-reflexivity often present in game narration; between fixed and interactive narrators, which distinguishes narrators with predetermined scripts from those whose discourse adapts to player behavior or systemic conditions; and between voiced and textual narrators, which recognizes the multimodal forms through which narration is delivered. These distinctions are not intended as rigid taxonomic categories but as analytical tools that reveal the heterogeneity of narrators in contemporary digital games.

The presentation will outline these preliminary components of a new typology of ludic narrators—one that bridges classical narratology, game-oriented theoretical frameworks, and the affordances of digital interactive media.

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