The attack of the backstories (and why they won't win)

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ABSTRACT
This essay adopts a formal model of play as semiosis [18] to explore the often dysfunctional role of backstories within computer game design and play.

Within this model, backstories indicate an extended play of contextualization. This definition raises questions concerning the appropriateness of backstories as currently implemented within many computer game designs. For instance, backstories are clearly not critical to all computer game play. And, even when limiting analysis solely to role-playing games, the use of backstories as design tools (as opposed to marketing devices or play supplements) remains problematic.

Conclusions concern "pre-narrative" aspects of play--particularly when narrative is defined (e. g., within narrative psychology) as a folk theory of causes.

Keywords
Backstory, computer game, game theory, narrative, semiosis.

INTRODUCTION

How much information do you need to play a computer game?

The premise here is that you need very little. You need only certain innate capacities: the capacity of vision, the capacity of tactile sensation and its consequent spatial orientations, and, most importantly, the capacity of semiotic play or, put more broadly, the capacity of *semiosis*, i. e., the capacity to recognize, construct, manipulate, and interpret signs and symbols.

You do not need to know the meanings--or values (Saussure)--conventionally assigned to a game's signs and symbols outside of play. In fact, such knowledge may inhibit game play. Most significantly, you do not need to know a game's *backstory*, which shall serve hereafter as representative of all those meanings assigned, purposefully or not, to a computer game's signs and symbols prior to game play.

THE BACKSTORY AS INTERPRETIVE DEVICE

Conventionally, a backstory consists of “the experiences of a character or the circumstances of an event that occur before the action or narrative of a literary,

cinematic, or dramatic work" [8].

Backstories commonly guide actors in creating characters and writers in creating narratives. Soap operas, for instance, have extensive and complicated backstories used as plot devices to justify character behavior. Computer game designers also use backstories as design elements in achieving a consistent, coherent, and aesthetically pleasing implementation of game components.

Ostensibly, backstories aid computer game players by delineating fundamental relationships among game characters. Learning the backstory of the well-known adventure game exemplar *Myst* (1994), for instance, serves as both a source of clues to and the primary goal of game play.

More generally, backstories engage audiences by either extending or expanding some original story. In extreme cases, this extension/expansion can blur the distinction between fiction and nonfiction--as in the case of the detailed backstory accompanying the release of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999)--but in all cases, it results in broadening the original story's *semiotic context*. This new, broader context is then more accurate and complete than the old.

By extending/expanding a story's context, backstories *recontextualize* interpretations--that is, backstories transform the meanings of signs and symbols within a semiotic context by subsuming that context within some other. Sometimes these transformations are mere confirmations of the meanings assigned within the original story, resulting in an *extension* of context; other times, these transformations are more radical--as, for instance, when Tom Stoppard recontextualizes *Hamlet* within *Rosencrantz and Gilderstern are Dead* (1967)--resulting in an *expansion* of context.

Semiotic Contexts

I have previously [18] described two types of semiotic contexts especially pertinent during computer game play: the *sensorium*, and, in mimic of the sensorium, *contexts of design*. Let me briefly review these here.

The *sensorium* consists of embedded and intractable characteristics of our common human neurophysiology, which shapes our sense of, among other things, color, emotion, and, ultimately, self. Due to its intractable nature, the sensorium serves as *ground* [10] for subsequent interpretive processes in a manner at least analogous to that attributed to "bodily experience" by Mark Johnson [12, 16]. A *context of design* is a semiotic context within which signs and symbols are commonly, consistently, and conventionally identified and valued. Contexts of design are constructed, unlike the sensorium, through an ongoing process of semiosis and can be of great variety.

Within this scheme, a backstory is a special sort of context of design--one which contains within it one or more related context(s) of design and effectively trumps all values and meanings within those subsumed context(s). The prototypical example of this interpretive trumping process may well be the denouement of the mystery novel, in which the mystery is finally (and irrevocably) solved.

While contexts of design might include non-narratives (e. g., physical

processes which educational simulations are intended to simulate or specific spatial and/or logical relationships modeled by game engines), “backstories” imply a specific sort of context of design: that of a story or *narrative.* And, therefore, the discussion of whether computer games require or benefit from backstories during play is ultimately a discussion of whether those semiotic activities taking place during computer game play either require or benefit from those interpretive processes characterizing stories, story-tellings, and narratives.

What are those processes?

A Folk Theory of Causes

Early cognitive psychologists identify narrative as a particular style of thinking/learning--sometimes explicitly [6, 7], sometimes less so [21]. In these developmental theories of learning, a narrative mode of thinking commonly occurs prior to some more "advanced" mode (e. g., abstract/formal). However, more recent cognitive theory [4, 25] recognizes both the persistence and intractability of narratives within human cognition. This is particularly true within narrative psychology--see, for instance, *http://web.lemoyne.edu/~hevern/nr-neuro.html* and the implications of narrative forms within constructivist theory and its related qualitative methodologies.

The work of William Labov, a linguist, has compiled assumed universal features of narratives [14]. In brief, the narrative is there--and elsewhere [3, 15, 22]--considered a *folk theory of causes*, particularly as regards the temporal sequencing of reportable events. That is, stories in general, and narratives in particular, function as sense-making devices by providing explicit relationships among otherwise unrelated observations. This is certainly consonant with the notion of backstories as semiotic contexts of design which subsume or "trump" previously constructed constructs of design, and serves well as a description of computer game backstories as they are intended to be used by computer game designers. However, the function of backstories during computer game design may be quite different from--and even contrary to--their function during computer game play.

For instance, consider the rough genesis of a model of human semiosis within narrative psychology:

- Sensory impressions first engage mechanics of the human sensorium. These mechanics are determined by long-term evolutionary processes and, as such, are relatively intractable within some extended span of generations. This is the domain of *instinct*.
- Semiotic processes emerge through spontaneous, recursive, and, at times, unintended uses of the mechanics of the sensorium. These uses, while grounded in the neurophysiology of the sensorium (and, as such, equally common and universal) do not appear to have evolved as primary functions and, therefore, may exist in parallel--and, occasionally, in competition or even in conflict--with survival behaviors. This is the domain of *play*.
- To the extent possible and beneficial, the outcomes--values/meanings--of semiotic processes adapt to sociological/cultural norms. This is the domain of *convention*, which includes the vast majority of mass media content, popular literature, and, potentially, computer games.

The cognitive function of backstories during computer game play might then fall within either *play* or *convention*--i. e., the backstory might be understood as a conventional means, sufficient but perhaps not necessary (and, possibly, inappropriate and inaccurate), of conveying the importance, causes, and lessons of play.

Pertinent, then, is the function of backstories both during game design and during game play. Are these functions complementary? Do the conventions of a backstory aid or inhibit the novelties of play?

THE FUNCTION OF BACKSTORIES IN COMPUTER GAMES

I have previously [18] placed computer games within separate genre according to the semiotic processes their designs motivate: arcade/action games, primarily motivated by oppositional relationships within the sensorium; adventure/role-playing games, primarily motivated by contextual relationships within and concerning contexts of design; and strategy games, which combine oppositional and contextual relationships recursively.

Action Games

In general, action games neither commonly use backstories nor does their play particularly benefit from them. Young children's play and games--e. g., peek-a-boo, chase, hide-and-seek--are of the same semiotic class as computer action games. Such children's games motivate the same fundamental semiotic processes as *Tetris*, the *Mario* game series, and virtually all first-person shooters. The signs and symbols of these games are interpreted without any immediate or necessary reference to narrative.

Semiotic play in this genre involves the recognition of oppositional (most often visual) signs in a sensory context existing prior to either stories or story-telling. Of course, extended play of any sort eventually motivates some sort of contextualization process, and it is interesting to note how often this contextualization is accomplished within the action genre *without resort to conventional narrative form*. One of the most common methods of contextualization during action game play is to use an arbitrary context unconnected to the game play per se--i. e., to attach a "score" to each episode of play that is then valued within the context of all scores of similar episodes of play.

Another common technique is to link isolated episodes of play within very generic contexts of human behavior--contexts so fundamental to the human experience that they avoid the narrative's conventional sequencing of events and any resulting values concerning cause, effect, or morality. For instance, the "backstory" in most first-person shooters can be reduced to a predator-prey relationship; if you understand this relationship, then you understand the context of fps play, regardless of any broader socio-cultural (i. e., conventional) context within which that relationship might subsequently be placed.

> DOOM also had no real plot. Sure, it had a backstory to set the mood, but that's all it did. DOOM did not encumber you with annoying side characters or long, boring sections of Full Motion Video (like all those damned Wing Commander games, or Jedi Knight (ug, what a

nightmare!)). [26]

Computer game players familiar with multiple genres of play immediately recognize the absence of backstory as an inconsequential element of play in arcade games, regardless of the length and complexity of that play. For instance, the *Mario* game series--produced/designed by Shigeru Miyamoto and originating with the arcade game *Donkey Kong* (1981)--has many superficial characteristics of role-playing games, but remains rooted in the action genre due to, among other things, the inconsequential nature of its backstory.

> None of the storylines answer some HUGE backstory questions, such as how the games tie together exactly, not to mention the relationship of the mushroom kingdom and other areas (Sarasaland anyone?) And what about the characters? What's their deeper motivation exactly? How old are they? What hand does Toad write with? And what about the koopa kids? Where'd they come from? And all these Yoshi's? How are they related? It's enough to make a guy go crazy! [20]

Miyamoto's subsequent designs include the hugely successful Zelda games--beginning with *The Legend of Zelda* (1987)--each of which has increased the degree to which contextualization extends and expands game play. However, the Zelda series, despite a growing backstory involving Link and the Princess, remains very much action-oriented and, as such, its design and play consciously de-emphasize the importance of a backstory.

> For every Zelda game we tell a new story... we actually have an enormous document that explains how the game relates to the others, and binds them together. But to be honest, they are not that important to us. We care more about developing the game system... [17]

Role-Playing Games

The role-playing genre (which includes adventure games as an intermediary form [18]) is most fundamentally distinguished from the action genre by its reliance on the *expansion* of contexts of design. Whereas action/arcade game (e. g., *Doom*; *Super Mario Bros.*, *Legend of Zelda*) goals are determined by and accomplished with reference to the sensorium and physical skills (and/or hardware accoutrements) of the game player, adventure/role-playing game (e. g., *Zork*; *Might and Magic; Neverwinter Nights*) goals are determined and accomplished with reference to contexts of design and pragmatic skills (and/or social contacts) of the game player. Where action game goals are obvious but difficult to achieve, role-playing game goals are relatively more obscure but relatively easier to achieve. Consequently, single-player role-playing games can and will be "won" by those who take the time to learn and play them thoroughly, which is not always the case with action games.

While the computer role-playing genre makes much more frequent use of backstories than does the action genre, it is interesting to note that the first design and publication of computer role-playing games did not. Richard Garriott's *Akalabeth* (1980) was the progenitor of the long-running *Ultima* series and arguably the prototype for subsequent early examples of the genre--including the many *Ultima* games, Sir-tech's *Wizardry* (1981), and, in a slightly later release, *Might and Magic* (1987). The original versions of these games had

simple backstories which were, in most cases, superficial embellishments of generic themes, and game play in each tended to emphasize the action genre staple of monster bashing.

However, over time (after the mechanics of role-playing games had become well known), specialized backstories became an increasingly common--and much more detailed--design element.

> *Might and Magic I* came with a forty-page manual. The first quarter of this manual described how to create characters prior to play, the rest concerned the mechanics of play... [T]he first game manual did not refer to narrative structures... unique to the *M&M* game world.... The manual of the next *Might and Magic* game (*II: Gates to Another World*) devoted its first 2500 words to a history of the expanding *M&M* game context. And each manual thereafter added... further information about preexisting characters and legends within the *M&M* fantasy universe. [18, pp. 115-116]

Let me use the extended example of *Ultima* and its related mmorpg, *Ultima Online* (*UO*), as an example of the characteristic elements of computer role-playing games and the function (or dysfunction) of backstories within them.

Ultima has one of the longer histories in the design and evolution of computer role-playing games. The *Ultima* series began with the rudimentary *Akalabeth*, a fairly simple dungeon crawl inspired by, as most early computer role-playing games were, the paper-and-pencil game, *Dungeons & Dragons*--which, in turn, owes much to miniature wargame rules (*Chainmail*) and the novels of Jack Vance. To the extent that computer role-playing games are based on such preexisting sets of character relationships, scenarios, and goals, all computer role-playing games can be said to have generic backstories (e. g., the heroic quest).

The common backstory guiding the original *Ultima* games was neither unique nor required advanced training or knowledge prior to play. Richard Garriott was, in fact, "particularly pleased" that playing the first *Ultima* games required "no main menu, no outside the game activity of any kind...you could install it and then, suddenly, go directly into game play" [9].

Garriott became concerned, however, that generic adaptations of the *D&D* system promoted a hack-and-slash, pillage-and-plunder style of play, which was, in his mind, more synonymous with villainy than heroism. By *Ultima IV* (1985), Garriott's designs purposefully emphasized the ethical consequences of character behavior and displayed what would come to be known as the *Ultima* "virtue system." Design elements such as the *Ultima* virtue system--along with recurring characters and a consistent game world--served as a prominent folk theory of causes within the *Ultima* game series. That is, knowledge of these elements provided insight into the proper interpretation of game signs and symbols (a context of design) through an ongoing narrative associated with the hero (Avatar) player-character; and, therefore, it was beneficial to play the *Ultima* games, like a narrative, in the sequence they were written, published, and distributed.

> [T]he real advantage of playing the previous ones is that you kind of *get*

> it... there's a lot of history to really understand the virtues and its meaningful backbone to the story.. and I think you'll find it much more meaningful. [9]

However, those design elements functioning as backstory were more often interpreted by game players as part of the mechanics of the game *rules* rather than as elements of a narrative restricting the exploitation of those rules. That is, playing the *Ultima* game series by adhering strictly to the moral code of the good-guy Avatar--as valued within and justified by the game's backstory--was neither the quickest nor, for many, the most fun way to play the game. More often, the early, single-player *Ultima* games were played, by designers and players alike (see *http://www.moongates.com/Media/4-Return_To_Virtue.ram*), in what Richard Bartle would later characterize (regarding MUD players) an "achiever" style of play.

> Achievers regard points-gathering and rising in levels as their main goal, and all is ultimately subservient to this. [2]

Realizing this, Richard Garriott consciously incorporated *Ultima*'s backstory into the rules of the single-player game series, with player penalties assessed for unethical behavior. However, these player penalties came also to be valued solely within the context of the game rules--and thus isolated from the context of the backstory in which they originated. This resulted in players seeking means to avoid the penalties associated with the player-character unethical behavior (totally okay within the context of the *rules*) rather than seeking to avoid unethical behavior itself (more appropriate within the context of the *backstory*).

In this way, the values constructed during game play, more often than not, "trumped" the values implied within the game backstory (rather than vice versa). This remains true of *Ultima*'s mmorpg successor, *Ultima Online*.

The current designers of *Ultima Online* (Garriott is no longer associated with the project) have gone to great lengths to promote appropriate game (primarily anti-player-kill[PK]ing) values by providing voluminous backstories justifying and exemplifying the *Ultima* virtue system. (See, for instance, the stories, events, and lore information available within the Stratics *Ultima Online* website, *http://uo.stratics.com/index.shtml*.) Many design changes implemented since the game's initial release--splitting the game between the Felucca and Trammel facets; distinguishing between red (PK'ers) and blue characters; etc.--have likewise attempted to make the *Ultima* virtue system and its related backstory more integral to game play. However, the largest portion of the *UO* player population continues to play the game with no reference to nor comment on the designer-generated backstory. Indeed, game play in *Ultima Online* seems as often motivated by semiotic systems outside the game entirely (the economic system of eBay, for instance) than by a pre-determined narrative through-line.

Herein lies a thorny issue regarding the use of backstories in role-playing game--particularly mmorpg--design. Backstories appear to motivate game players to buy (or simply play) a game. And game play appears to motivate values and meanings that are then naturally incorporated into stories, narratives, and, if

available, backstories. Indeed, my observations of early computer role-playing games and gamers [19] found many instances in which narratives were used to value game symbols and outcomes. However, these narratives were always constructed *by players as a result of play* and only as an afterthought conformed to backstories constructed by game designers prior to play.

Most often, play within the role-playing genre remains, like play within the action game genre, a semiotic meaning-*making* process--not a meaning confirmation or validation process. This makes it very difficult for any single and self-consistent backstory to contain the great barrage of meanings generated during play.

Even so-called "grand" backstories--like the heroic quests of *Ultima Online*, but also including the rebel-Empire divisions in *Star Wars Galaxies*, the race warfare in *Dark Ages of Camelot*, and the Axis-Allies conflict in *World War II Online*--provide little "story" other than the generic predator-prey relationship so common in the action game genre. Any further, more detailed explication of character relationships--i. e., explication leading to a more robust folk theory of causes like that of the *UO* virtue system--is rendered superfluous during extended play. Extended mmorpg play--for both designers and players--is almost always devoted to issues of play *balance* rather than play *narrative.* Indeed, insofar as narratives privilege one sort of character, or one sort of meaning, over some other, narratives pose a semiotic context antithetical to games and play.

This observation is made even more pertinent given those extraordinarily detailed backstories associated with newly conceived mmorpg designs. (Inspect, for instance, the *City of Heroes* website: *http://www.cityofheroes.com/links.htm*.) While, I suppose, one hopes the time and effort spent on constructing a complex mmorpg backstory will eventually be rewarded with increased interest in and sales of the game, it is very unlikely that that backstory will be critical to game play. And there is further evidence that a detailed backstory may actively interfere with game play--particularly within the strategy game genre.

While backstories do not carry great weight for experienced game players, role-playing game backstories do seem to engage a particular sort of player who is primarily interested in the peripheries of computer game play: the "fanboy."

The fanboy--usually a pejorative term, meant to include both males and females--is a relatively new phenomenon within computer gaming. In my early observations of computer games and gamers, I found little reference to fanboy types, whereas currently this segment of the computer gaming population is difficult to miss. Fanboys are similar in many respects to Bartle's socializer type [2], but do most if not all of their socializing *outside the context of the game rules*. In fact, long-lived games in which rules become well-known and widely distributed--such as *Ultima* and *Ultima Online*--seem to have relatively fewer fanboys than newer, less thoroughly learned and tested games. This may be because fanboys are more attracted to genre than game and, correspondingly, more attracted to narrative than play. The beta versions of mmorpgs, for instance, are often frequented by fanboys without regard to the mechanics or balance of game play (since those are, within the beta, still undetermined).

With little regard for the details of game rules, fanboys can be observed across all genres of games. There are fanboys within the action game genre--who normally are fans of a particular game system rather than a particular game. And there are fanboys within the strategy game genre--which helps reveal the critical distinction between the semiotic values within a backstory and those values generated during game play.

Strategy Games

While action games emphasize significations of opposition in constructing values, and role-playing games emphasize significations of context in constructing values, strategy games tend to prioritize signification itself in a self-reflexive process that functions to deconstruct conventional values and meanings [18].

Early and prototypical examples of computer strategy games include *Hammurabi*, *Civilization*, *SimCity*, *Master of Orion*, and many other games in which game rules and game play transform, to a greater or lesser extent, the game's context of design and, ultimately, the game rules. This transformation process is simultaneously critical to the strategy genre and contrary to the function of narrative as a theory of causes. Let me use *Master of Orion* as an extended example of the difficulties involved in attempting to frame strategy game play within the values of a backstory.

Master of Orion (1994)--or *MOO*--was a fairly typical, now classic, 4X (explore, expand, exploit, exterminate) strategy game; it was released with a minimal backstory. The player could choose to be one of several intergalactic species (the Alkari, fast but weak bird-like creatures; the Bulrathi, slow but strong bear-like creatures; etc.) in competition over some limited number of star systems. Thrown into this zoological mix were the remnants of a technologically superior uber-race, the Orions, who were eventually replaced by the player winning the game. There was a bit more about the origin of the mysterious Orions and such, but none of the game's backstory had any real impact on game play. *MOO* play consisted of, as all strategy game play does, valuing the advantages and disadvantages of one species, weapon, and/or tactic against the advantages and disadvantages of some other. Most importantly, this balancing act of determining the relative value of game elements simply could not be done thoroughly or accurately with reference to the game's backstory.

Thus, during play, the *MOO* backstory became increasingly superfluous. The competition among the intergalactic species within the game could have easily taken place within a fantasy world or an ancient civilization or beneath the surface of an isolated pond of scum. What mattered was not the setting or the characters or the plot, but the *relationships* among the game's signs and symbols as adjudicated by the game rules--and, of course, how these relationships were transformed (i. e., valued) during play.

The original *MOO* was popular enough to generate a sequel, *Master of Orion II: Battle at Antares* (*MOO2*, 1996). And, just as in the case of role-playing game series, the extension of play from *MOO* to *MOO2* generated a more detailed backstory. In *MOO2*, the Orions were supplemented by the evil Antarans, another technologically advanced race, which was eventually replaced by the

player winning the game. While the core game mechanics remained the same, a variety of embellishments extended play within the familiar context of the original game. And, while the *MOO2* backstory implied a meaningful connection between the two games, neither game required knowledge of the other to play. Both games were independently and widely praised.

Then came *Master of Orion III* (*MOO3*, 2003), which was and is, quite simply, a broken game.

Why was *MOO3* such a dismal failure, while *MOO* and *MOO2* were such major successes? At least part of the reason might be attributed to the emphasis given to the *MOO3* backstory during the game's design.

It is difficult to trace in detail the *MOO3* design process because that process took so long (over three years) and involved so many different designers--including some who were subsequently removed from the project. Alan Emrich, one of those removed, had this to say early about the emphasis on narrative within *MOO3*:

> "I believe in stories so much that I want players to get output at the end of the game... It will keep track of everything they do. Every leader who was raised and lost, every battle, every policy, everything. This huge text file is the chronicle of your civilization. And you can take that and literally write your own story from that outline." [13]

This goal is not inconsistent with a common result of strategy game play and, in fact, play in general. Players commonly work singly or in groups, rightly or wrongly, with some effort, to shape a theory of causes--a narrative--explaining and justifying game outcomes. Given this tendency, any game design aiding the post-play, meaning-structuring process (as the *Civilization* series did, for instance, with its saved game timelines) would be welcome.

However, later *MOO3* design efforts, headed most visibly by Rantz Hosely (art director) and Cory Nelson (producer) at Quicksilver Software, emphasized how narratives could be used to tie together the three MOO games and, simultaneously, provide a context of design for future games. This emphasis is made clear within a variety of *MOO3* pre-release interviews given by the Quicksilver design team.

> We went over the basis/setting for *Star Lords* (pre-*MOO1*), *MOO1*, and *MOO2*. These became the keystones for the history arc...*Master of Orion*, with two previous incarnations, already had elements established...but no overarching story or background that tied it all together. In talking with Microprose at the time, we were given the license and encouraged to flesh the *Master of Orion* universe out, with an eye not only on what the current project was, but also looking at the possibility of sequels, prequels, [in order to] establish a firm base to support the franchise for future projects… (A *MOO* RPG for example.). [11]

During the period prior to the release of *MOO3*, the game's backstory was a source of great interest (and play) for many within online forums devoted to the discussion of the *Master of Orion* series, e. g., the Infogrames--now Atari--

forums and the Apolyton website [*http://apolyton.net/moo3/*]. And, prior to the release of the game, the backstory received a favorable response from fanboys and strategy game aficionados alike. After the game's release however, these two groups were polarized; fanboys continued to champion the game's backstory while strategy game players much more negatively re-evaluated *MOO3* game elements based on game play. In fact, the pre-release interest devoted to *MOO3* character backgrounds, appearances, and dramatic roles within the game's backstory became a source of irritation for many players.

> The really disappointing part is that the initial *Master of Orion* got the aliens right. Sure, they were goofy, but... for the purposes of playing a game, that works out wonderfully. These guys [the *MOO3* design team] just had trouble determining what was important and what was trivial. [7]

> Yet another article about the "details of their space strategy game" that manages to not put in a single comment about the things that matter... It ain't art. It ain't animations. It ain't whether or not there's a backstory, if there are diplomatic animations, or anything else involving writing a story (i.e. authoring) or producing an image or animation of some type (i.e. artistry of many types and sorts). [23]

In this regard--in their inability to benefit from well constructed narratives *during play*--interactive computer games appear relatively unique forms of popular entertainment. Unlike the common experiences associated with non-computer-based entertainment--*Harry Potter* novels, *X-men* comic books, anime of various sorts--computer game play is often adversely affected by a predetermined narrative frame. Or, put more generally, human play necessarily exists outside a theory of causes. Or, put more simply, “storylines are bad” [1].

SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

Backstories have become increasingly common in the design and distribution of computer games for at least two apparent reasons.

First, any extended sequence of play motivates a natural semiotic contextualization process. During extended play, player-characters and player-groups are conceived and valued as human-like entities acting according to a particular theory of causes, i. e. within a narrative.

Second, game producers and designers seem increasingly motivated--primarily for commercial reasons--to include backstories as a means of reproducing within alternative media the values and meanings emerging during computer game play. This is largely successful insofar as computer game backstories provide examples of (and subsequently motivate) further play. It is largely unsuccessful insofar as backstories attempt to determine rather than exemplify that play.

While backstories inevitably result from a natural human semiosis, backstories neither motivate nor confine human semiosis. Thus, backstories function differently for designers and for players of computer games. For designers, backstories serve a framing function, making sure all game elements are implemented in a conventional (i. e., single and consistent) context of design. For players, backstories are of most benefit when exemplifying the outcomes of

play; and, within some games--particularly with the role-playing game genre--backstories may also contribute to an understanding of the context of design in which game elements are most effectively manipulated and valued.

Significantly, however, backstories function in characteristically different ways within action, role-playing, and strategy computer game genres. At their worst, backstories are irrelevant to action game play, misleading of role-playing game play, and destructive to strategy game play.

The inability of computer game backstories to function in a consistent manner, with the same degree of success, as backstories in other aesthetic forms--e. g., novels, films--argues that computer games are fundamentally different from those other forms. While semiotic values and outcomes emerging from computer game play are commonly combined into narratives, those narratives are an *imposition* on the values and outcomes of play. That is, the production of values and outcomes during play is neither caused nor determined by backstories.

In this sense, human play is a *pre-narrative* act, existing *outside a theory of causes*. In fact, in order to generate true novelty, play *must* exist outside all conventional theories of causes; i. e., play must be paradoxical [18].

For this reason, play remains instinctive, intractable, and, to some irrevocable degree, unpredictable. These are also fundamental characteristics of human semiosis, which, as I have previously argued, is closely intertwined with the nature and function of play. If so, then, computer games as unique aesthetic forms motivate a meaning-making process that cannot currently and will not in the future significantly benefit from backstories.

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