

Simulating the Storytelling Qualities of Life: Telling Stories with the Sims

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ABSTRACT

The stories vs. games debate has been prominent during the early years of game studies, and few other perspectives have been introduced to the discussion. In the paper, Game Researcher and Concept Designer Satu Heliö from Sulake Corporation introduces new concepts with which to approach the supposed divide. She argues that concepts such as narrative mindset and social schema provide better means to understand game features and player motivations regarding such game genres as role-playing games and popular game series such as *The Sims*.

Keywords

Narratology, narrativity, ludology, narrative mindset, *The Sims*

In Game Studies there is one discussion that seems to stick, year after year. That is the ludology vs. narratology debate, which that has been criticized as something that ‘never took place’. [4] Ludology brought into discussion the fact that games are non-narrative in their nature and that cut-scenes are non-interactive and thus un-game-like, or in opposition to the idea of interactivity that describes games. [3][6] Narratives are popular and deeply bound element of western culture. We tend to employ narratives for various purposes and seem to yearn after them. In this article I try to look critically at ludological categorizations and ponder upon certain forms of games that seem to support storytelling and story creation more deeply than ‘traditional’ computer games do.

CONCEPTUALISING THE NARRATIVE MINDSET

Games are by definition structurally bound, non-narrative structures. In their modern forms they can also embrace narrative elements, but don’t often do it very well. Still, several game designers seem to have a need to bring narrative into games in a similar form as has been done in other narrative art forms. Often these aspirations become evident as cut-scenes or background stories, or narratively motivated dialogue, but these elements do not turn games themselves into stories, like game researchers Jesper Juul [6] and Gonzalo Frasca [3] have pointed out. But if we accept the fact that games aren’t stories and don’t even tell them as such, then why do so many game designers and players still look for them or try to mix them together? What makes players and designers yearn after narratives?

I have argued elsewhere that one key motivator for role-playing in role-playing games is a so-called narrative mindset as well as a need to participate into a storytelling practice. In addition it

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is a mindset that can be adapted to many different game forms and its use can be supported with different types of design choices. Nevertheless this need or interest to role-play or create storytelling does not yet make games into stories. Nevertheless, I argue that it explains to some extent why these themes are so deeply bound into games as well.

As humans we seem to have a desire to create narratives from seemingly non-narrative elements. In the field of cognitive psychology, e.g. Jean Matter Mandler [8] has written about narrative schemas that people use to make sense of situations, actions and events, in the process individuals narrativize these actions. Matter Mandler also writes about scripts that people take advantage of in explaining their actions and which also structure their experiences [8]. It can be said that we hope to activate certain schemas & scripts in certain situations or even aim to structures that resemble those schemas. My idea is that individuals pursuit them, and certain games and game types amplify these pursuits. It is these needs that lay behind both the active storytelling practices of games like *The Sims*, and the core idea of the process known as role-playing.

STORY GAME GENRES?

The schemas that Mandler describes potentially also support interpreting actions as narratives. The schemas guide our actions and our understanding towards narrativized interpretation. If narrativization, then, is so deeply constructed in human psyche, and also something to desire, then might there be some game types or genres that would be more suitable to these needs than others?

Game researcher Jesper Juul categorizes games [7] into ‘real’ games and ‘borderline’ cases. Borderline cases include games of chance, role-playing games and simulations that aren’t necessary games at all, by Juul’s definition, or at least they do not share many traits with them as do other, more pure game forms like ‘action games’, for instance.

I have argued that one ‘class’ of these borderline cases is indeed role-playing games. This is genre strongly motivated by a ‘narrative desire’ [2] and the core gameplay is often about aiming towards narrative experiences. I also have claimed that the game play process itself is highly narrativised. Thus I ended up characterizing role-playing as a mindset that can be used with almost all forms of games to create narrative interpretations and shifting the style of play towards more narratively motivated experiences. [5]

The other one of Juul’s borderline cases was the category of simulations. Games that present, in my opinion, interesting cases in the sense of storytelling and narrativization, are *The Sims* (EA, 2000) and *The Sims 2* (EA, 2004). These ‘software toys’ fit into Marie-Laure Ryan’s description of narrative [10]:

“Narrative representation consists of a world (setting) situated in time, populated by individuals (characters), who participate in actions and happenings (events, plot) and undergo change.”

All these elements; world, time and characters are present in both games. Change is featured in *The Sims 2* where characters age, gain and lose aspirations, weight, families, skills and careers. *The Sims* games do also support Ryan’s model of external interactivity, where ‘the reader situates himself outside the virtual world’ (ibid.). This is due to the god type of perspective

employed in the games. In *The Sims*, this is the primary mode of interpretation of the game events and a design choice that seems to strongly encourage story creation and making narrativized, causal connections between actions within the game world. I would even go so far as to say that it is close to the classical third person view of narration in novels, in a certain sense. Moreover, the player in a god-like position may in a certain sense be ‘invited’ into an interpreting position of a third person narrator with an all-seeing eye, so to speak. In most games of the simulation category these type of interpreting positions are encouraged. In addition, the ways that information is often communicated to the players (in forms of info-boxes; fun, story-like snippets, animations, themes and visual as well as musical clues.) are also supporting a construction of inner monologue or storytelling through seemingly intentional causal relations inside the game.

ADAPTING NARRATOLOGY

While pondering the question whether games share narrative elements with stories, and whether they are part of the same media ecology altogether, we should discuss central narratological concepts. In narratology, ‘story’ has been defined like this:

“Story is the event and characters. “Text” is a spoken or written discourse, which undertakes the telling. Text is what we read. Since the text is spoken or written it implies someone who speaks or writes it. The act or process of production is the third aspect – “narration”. [9]

To sum up: narration always requires a narrator and someone for whom the story is narrated. In games this is not the case. But in several games it could be said that all players participate in the action of the narration, and also became the audience at the same time. Although it must be remembered that in cases where the actual ‘telling’ is done in a form of a cut-scene the possibility for players to actually participate has been kept in minimum, usually to contain the narrative coherence of the back story.

While playing *The Sims* the game positions the player also into Ryan’s category of ‘External-ontological interactivity’. This is the category for virtual fictive histories, something quite typical for simulation games:

“Holding the strings of the characters, from a position external to both the time and space of the fictional world, he specifies their properties, makes decisions for them, throws obstacles in their way, and sends them toward different destinies lines by altering their environment.” [10]

This description captures the essence of what players do in *the Sims*. Also, Ryan’s second category ‘Internal-exploratory interactivity’ had a subsection of soap opera-type of storylines which are also present in *The Sims*’ core gameplay.

“ The parallel plot, or soap opera type in which a large cast of characters acts simultaneously in different locations, so that it’s necessarily for the user to move from one location to another to observe every thread in the plot.” (Ibid.)

The games consist of different households and NPC characters who can interact with each other in various forms, and especially in *The Sims 2* the ability to raise children (who can even enter universities together) strongly encourages the soap-opera type of shattered narrative, i.e. many parallel plotlines and motivators that are all intertwined in high-level plots. Although actions in

the Sims game series do not take place by themselves, players must play one house at a time and one after another, in order to keep consistency, and this process is similar enough to Ryan's model. This "outsiderism" in playing *The Sims* makes it actually quite a 'narrativized' or 'narrativized' game. Although a player isn't still able to 'tell stories' as such through or in conjunction with the gameplay, the player is able to set up situations, events and scenes that can be both interpreted as narratives and also 'told' afterwards with the tools that the game offers. In my opinion design choices in the form of these tools are some of the most concrete signs supporting the motivation for narrative play and storytelling through games.

LUDOLOGICAL POINTS

To back up a step or two; in his article Jesper Juul listed three reasons for understanding games as non-narrative: 1) Games are not a part of the narrative media ecology formed by movies, novels, and theatre as such. Most of them are more closely related with sports than with novels. 2) Time in games works differently than in narratives. You don't first act out the actions and then re-make it into a story format, but you're play actions would "be" the story. 3) The relation between the reader or the viewer and the story world is different than the relation between the player and the game world. In games the player is always active participant who constructs the game at the same time whereas in stories the setting is preset and the role can be seen more passive. [6]

In *The Sims* the storytelling is something that emerges from the game itself. The members of the design team have told how they began to narrativize events of *The Sims* nearly immediately when they started playing the game, and thus felt that some kind of support for this would be needed. So they ended up on implementing a photo album feature in the game: Players are able to take screenshots from the game and write descriptions for the pictures and even share these albums in the web. This re-telling of the actions of sims in different forms and the ability to share these story fragments supports the player's storytelling-motivations when engaging with the game. It is not a story in itself, like several ludologists have pointed out, but it encourages and also supports narrative interpretation and storytelling -- it is one of those rare games where you are, in the end, able to tell stories through your actions in the game. This is maybe even more evident in *The Sims 2* where players are encouraged to write stories for their neighborhood screens, their household screens and the storytelling toolkit has an ability to shoot videos in a mode that is associated with television series or movies.

This action of creating stories comes actually very close to definitions of storytelling. Like I explained earlier, the temporal structure has often seen as a main differentiator in this. However, in *The Sims* the temporal structure is actually similar to storytelling; first people play or arrange events or actions, then they take pictures for the family album. Afterwards they edit them and write texts to go with the pictures and publish the story in the web. The structure of the process is identical to the classic model of storytelling where at first events happen and story is constructed afterwards in a form of telling.

This does not, however, turn the game into a story, much less a narrative. In games we have several elements (like those mentioned by Marie-Laure Ryan) that remind us about stories; however, the actual actions of a game do not make it a story. We can tell stories about life, but that does not make our lives, as they happen, stories as such: the story of one's life is always subordinate to the life actually lived. [6]

THE SIMS: SIMULATING THE STORYTELLING QUALITIES OF LIFE

To summarize: in narratological sense games do not tell stories. In narration one always has a narrator and a narratee (the one who tells the story and another one who listens). In games active players are taking part into those actions but the actions are still only the building blocks of the story, not stories themselves. Also the temporal structure in games is results from the present, whereas in stories it is constructed from the events that have already happened.

Maybe one could even say that in *The Sims* we simulate life and especially the storytelling qualities of life. While life lived is not the same thing as a story told of it, a played simulation of life is equally non-narrative, but as a construction maybe even more deeply motivated towards is narrative interpretations.

Although games' fascination is still based in doing and interacting, it is not to say that some forms might not be able to harbor storytelling qualities as well. Maybe these 'borderline cases' types of games that Juul lists, are more open to narrativized interpretations and storytelling in general? If designers really want to let players have a hands-on experience in the game world and embrace the possibility of storytelling, then it seems simulations and role-playing games in various forms would be the way to go. Games are 'ergodic texts' like Espen Aarseth [1] has said, after all, where even the true meaning and experience itself is created through active participating, and like in all fiction forms, narrative interpretation in connection with games presents no exception.

GAMES

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