Gaming DNA – On Narrative and Gameplay Gestalts

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Abstract:

This paper takes the concept of the 'Gameplay Gestalt' as advanced by Craig Lindley[7] as a basis for a fresh look at how games are read and designed. Disagreeing with Lindley's assertion of gameplay over narrative, it puts forward a model of the game as a construct of authored gestalt interplay, and concentrates on the links between the physical process of playing the game and the interpretative process of 'reading' it. A wide variety of games are put forward as examples, and some analyses of major 'moments' in classic games are deconstructed. The concept of the 'sublime' as applicable to games is examined as is the use of gameplay and narrative to generate 'illusory agency', which can make a game more than the sum of its parts.

Keywords:

Design Theory, Agency, Gameplay, Narrative, Gestalt, Game Readings, Game Construction.

> "The relationship between narrative and the gameplay gestalt tends to be antagonistic, since the gameplay gestalt formation process does not rely upon narrative structure, and narrative formation tends to interrupt gameplay."[7]

At first glance, Lindley's assertion of the primacy of gameplay over narrative '*gestalts*'[7] in contemporary videogames appears irrefutable. After all, these are *games*, first and foremost, and by this point in his essay Lindley has put forward a compelling case for observing gameplay alone as a complex and meaningful process. I contend that gameplay and narrative gestalts needn't be observed as locked in combat with one another, a "competition between these respective gestalts for perceptual, cognitive, and motor effort"[7]. However, when one observes the majority of games on the market today, it is easy to see how such a depressing conclusion could be reached. When Lindley goes on to take issue with narrative gestalt formation by contrasting 'authored' content experiences in, for example, story-driven third person action games with the freedom of something as drastically different as an MMO-RPG, the future looks austere indeed for the single-player medium.

The reality is that as with literature and film, which conversely have had far longer to build up their canons and much less problematic relationships with technology, the vast majority of videogames are failures. Either the gameplay will end up being supported by weak narrative or vice-versa. Results of this populate Lindley's dreary landscape, a graveyard of puzzle games with cumbersome, unskippable cutscenes between levels and first-person shooters flaunting "RPG elements!". Striking this balance to avoid a similar fate has been the toughest challenge faced by game design creatives as the representational tools available to them increase steadily in potency. Few games provide a near-flawless satisfying, pleasurable and moving experience and those which do are, in the main, rightly remembered and rewarded. Mostly single-player experiences, these games challenge Lindley's bleak structural analysis by explicating, manipulating and pushing the boundaries of what gameplay and narrative are capable of achieving. Videogames have not always been difficult hybrids of internally opposed ways of generating meaning. To a greater or lesser extent all have striven to reach artistic

heights achieved by very few. By observing in generic and specific contexts how the gestalts can work in unison as well as interpret one another, I hope to challenge Lindley's great divide.

It is important to emphasise at this point how worthwhile splitting up the analysis of gameplay and narrative design is. By observing "Making progress, and, with persistence and basic ability, eventually completing the game, is a matter of learning how to interact in a way that supports progress given a useable subset of the rules."[7] Lindley uncovers something fundamental: the way in which a perceptual, cognitive and physical process yields more than any single component can alone. This "Gameplay Gestalt" is as powerful a concept as Lindley claims, and looking at how the way we play the game affects the game's genre classifications and aspects of its creative identity is a far better methodology than analysing gameplay through the lens of makeshift genres imported from other discourses. However, the gameplay gestalt is useless as an analytical tool on its own, since games need to be read in their entirety alongside intertexts and historical contexts, in order to do them critical justice. Examining games solely as items of gameplay is as useless as trying to assess them using only the tools available to literary theorists. Isolating only aspects of narrative or gameplay does not do justice to the interplay which characterises so much of the experience, and putting them into hierarchical structures, even when supported by the game itself, creates a disunity which is only apparent outside of the game, since the two discrete aspects never appear alone during the process of gameplay. Perhaps an exclusive focus on gameplay would be effective when applied to competitive sport, and this may be why Lindley's hypothesising games without the 'problem' of this 'antagonistic relationship' turns directly to LARP and attempts to digitise human mediation. Avoiding the medium is sidestepping the issue; games are neither gameplay, nor narrative, nor even both. Lindley is right to establish the separate gestalt continuums of narrative and gameplay, but wrong to insist on observing them either in isolation or opposition. Narrative and gameplay are so tightly intertwined around one another that in *medias res* of a game reading they are inextricable, they make up the double helix of a game's DNA. To continue the analogy, sometimes one gestalt is recessive while the other is dominant, but elements of the weaker persist in the stronger and characterise the experience through unity. In order to understand this concept, we should revisit, briefly, the actual role of narrative and of gameplay in games.

Lindley seems so critical of the "current lack of narrative depth in games"[7], that he loses sight of what makes gaming such a unique and powerful experience. When he refutes acting within 'authored' spheres and questions whether a gaming experience can be called an interactive narrative at all, he ignores all the great gameplay experiences which have been created with the current model. It is generally acknowledged that a game is supposed to be a challenging and enjoyable interactive activity. The primary function of gameplay is to provide the challenge, while the gameplay gestalt can be relied upon to captivate, as Lindley describes. Both narrative and gameplay work towards this goal, but modern gaming has a further goal of producing satisfying dramatic content. It is certainly a compromise, as Lindley suggests, but not to the point where " focusing on the development of the sense of narrative (e.g. in the case of multipath movies) reduces the player's need and capacity for a highly engaging gameplay gestalt."[7]. Once again balance is required, and multipath movies represent a gene-splicing experiment where narrative gestalt is given free reign over gameplay, hence their failing as a genre. The new narrative dimension of gaming is the cost of thrusting more complex gameplay experiences onto players. The quality of the gameplay

gestalt must keep pace with the depth of the narrative. Narrative gestalt works to achieve this, and the two complement one another where they can. Where they cannot they have no choice but to grate, and these rough edges are perpetually being smoothed out.. From this angle, Lindley's assertion that "tension between gameplay and narrative can now be viewed as a competition between these respective gestalts for perceptual, cognitive, and motor effort."[7] is a skewed perspective, it is easier and more conducive to a reading to see narrative and gameplay coming to each others' aid over the course of a game.

If we consider a gameplay experience as mediated interaction with these two gestalts, what Lindley considers tension can instead be observed as an aspect of form. Narrative-heavy sections bookend areas of complicated gameplay over which the intensity and demands of the gameplay gestalt will ebb and flow, generally providing purely narrative interludes as 'breathing space' or rewards typically at the beginning and ends of levels, as Lindley mentions. Seeing this solely as the two gestalts struggling for dominance in what amounts to an attempt to tell a story and play a game at the same time misses the opportunity to see narrative covering up for the inadequacies of gameplay and vice-versa. Lindley sneers at principally narrative episodes in games: "the story is usually not interactive, since act one … key scenes within the story of act two, and the playing out of the consequences of … act three, are typically achieved by…sequences of conventional, non-interactive video."[7]. Since Lindley's writing, strides have been taken in removing the rough edge previously associated with cutscenes, and in many games all of the action takes place in an interactive environment.

The line between the two gestalts blurs ever more as companies realise graphics and effects alone will no longer make games stand out, and linking narrative more deeply into gameplay becomes a concern. Modern games, and to some extent modern players, may also have other agendas outside of the game itself, be they IP licenses which wish to generate a particular kind of cross-media branded fantasy or product placement, commonly an attempt to advertise the potential of the technology the game is running on. *Gears of War*, for example, appears designed to showcase the console's HD-TV features at every opportunity. Where the game itself begins and ends becomes harder to spot amongst all these competing features, and so a tight-knit double-helix provides distinct advantages. Microsoft's Achievement points system, another facet of the Xbox 360's design and a requirement to develop for it, adds multiplayer and gamer culture to the mix. Players generate points from exploring games and achieving pre-set objectives entirely outside the main experience, which in turn which increase their visibility as community users on the various websites and multiplayer hubs connected to the console. This is a game within the game designed to facilitate brand loyalty, community completion and above all, sales, and the positive requirement of a narrato-ludic compound to hang all this ancillary material around becomes ever more apparent.

If the repetitive, albeit pleasurable, requirements of gameplay are not constantly tweaked and altered, they lose their potency and become boring. Often the narrative context is called in at one of the 'bookend' moments to mark a rules-shift, or used more subtly during the gameplay gestalt activity itself. In *New Super Mario Bros.*, the various different worlds all test different aspects of the gameplay gestalt, and once again the narrative obviates the way the rules are now skewed, this time through different terrains and atmospheres, the ever-present 'ice-level', for example. In *Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee*, complex puzzle structures and controls are explicated by an overarching narrative of enslavement and domination which reinforces the player character's ability to possess others by making him the

perpetual weak victim. Playing 'in' character as Abe and engaging with his story makes gameplay easier to perform and more fluid, and the desire to blur the line in this case comes with the addition of 'gamespeak' controls allowing the player to converse with other characters for the purposes of both *paidea* and *ludus* [5]. In the penultimate dungeon of *Final Fantasy 3*, the game throws players a curve-ball. It interrupts the previously steady levelling progression of character development, and players are forced to rely almost entirely on the Dark Knight, a class which up until this late stage has been denied access to weapons, and as such almost certainly not been levelled up.

Dark Knights' exotic skills have previously been unnecessary, but in this dungeon players are punished with overwhelming numbers of monsters if they fail to use the class. The narrative gives the player warning that this will happen through the opening up of a Dark Knight training village with the same transportation method which allows access to the dungeon, and provides a context for the making of this voluntary step up in difficulty by leaving narrative clues before this section of the game in the form of injured Dark Knights some way inside the dungeon who give out advice and a free weapon to get players started. Thus narrative shifts some of the responsibility for ludic failure through not making the arbitrary choice back onto the player. This same principle holds true for most 'boss' encounters over all genres, where the rules or expectations of the gestalt are altered, often radically and in a very short space of time, increasing players' need to discover and exploit narrative clues laid down previously or extant in the encounter in order to maintain the experience. On a fundamental level, narrative and context takes on the role of explicating what the game has to offer in terms of content and gestalt features, making them visible and understandable to the player.

By the same token, if the narrative is simply constantly expounded, it stops being dramatic in the context of the medium, no matter the quality of the gameplay or the narrative. This was the trap *Metal Gear Solid 2 : Sons of Liberty* fell into, where hours of drab, motionless cutscenes drowned out otherwise impressive gameplay. If this reciprocal relationship is not to become the one-sided morass Lindley observes, then gameplay needs to give back, to add meaning to the narrative, and the way in which it attempts to do this is often a sign of weak or inadequate connection between the two. Interrupting non-interactive dramatic progression with action scenes seems to be the mainstay of recent games. Attempting to maintain narrative drive, the story is watered down to the point where Lindley's thesis holds true : "higher levels of narrative form could often be completely eliminated with very little impact upon the core gameplay experience"[7] but this is not always the case. Role-playing games have the best examples of gameplay adding meaning to narrative, since they usually involve large amounts of text and statistics, and are paced slowly. *Valkyrie Profile* is one of the more extreme examples, where the player sacrifices members of her party to the narrative one by one, choosing whose stories to watch develop passively, and whose to attempt to extend actively. Some choices or combinations of choices are rewarded by different scenes or endings, and ignoring the requirement of sacrifice leads to the player effectively having no currency to spend during the more typical RPG sections. *Valkyrie Profile* is also a prime example of how a gameplay gestalt's main strategic decisions can synchronise with a narrative gestalt's overarching theme. In this case, the main theme of the story is loss and redemption, and the player is constantly involved in gameplay decisions revolving around a strategic interpretation of this theme. Closer in, these tradeoffs are what drive the gameplay during battle, where the mental process necessary for success revolves around tactical compromises. Other genres

display similar connections between the gameplay and the storyline. A notable breakthrough is the redesigned character of Alyx in *Half Life 2: Episode 1*, an engaging, emotional sidekick character who is also a real help in gameplay. Character depth is a method of diluting the repetition gameplay gestalts exert on narrative.

The conclusion, at least regarding RPGs and more traditional adventure games which are admittedly story-heavy, is that higher-level narrative is given catalyst by gameplay. A good example of this is the way *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* frequently ironises the established semiotics of games by putting forward narrative as a weapon. Successful gameplay results in the storyline, rather than the player avatar, literally delivering a body blow to the baddies. Poor play results in your own character taking a narrative beating.   When rule changes, new features and 'boss' encounters ensue, it is the gameplay shift which sparks a change in narrative, and the constant threat of losing generates a dramatic drive which sets this method of storytelling apart from other media. In games which do not demote storyline a token addition to the design, the reverse can also be true simultaneously.

In *Deus Ex*, the constantly reconfigurable storyline and subtle 'reading' of the player's gameplay, shifted the narrative into various different, albeit fundamentally linear, modes. This monitoring of the player was often achieved in unexpected or unusual ways, to distance one gestalt from the other and prevent any overt methods of manipulating the storyline through purely ludic activity. A good example comes at the end of the first mission when your character must decide through gameplay action rather than staid menu choices whether to execute, interrogate or even free a terrorist suspect. A gung-ho player might kill the guards sent to escort the prisoner, since no friendly characters have been encountered for a while, whereas a scheming powergamer might icily dispatch them because they are carrying better weaponry. Upon returning to the mission briefing room the consequences of these actions will dog the player and affect the narrative, even up to the degree of plot structure and future level design. What this accomplishes is the creation of what Justin Parsler calls 'Illusory Agency'[8], a feeling of potential player agency and world scope which is implied through the game but not necessarily present in the mathematical bones of the object itself. It is possible to kill a character who would otherwise go on to betray you and prevent that whole dramatic arc from ever occurring, instead facing different consequences. It was realising and playing with the knowledge of this which imbued *Deus Ex*'s gameplay gestalt with a new potency. Knowing that the game was 'watching' you, and crucially that the narrative could be affected in unknown ways, propelled immersion to greater heights.

Gameplay analysis being fed back into the game through a narrative representation in real time has formed the bedrock of both *Black & White* and *Fable,* along with the franchise *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*. This success is mainly due to the novelty and communicative power of authored gestalt interplay.   *Uplink,* a game where the player takes on the role of a Hollywood-style computer hacker, is a superb example of how narrative context can induce paranoia and facilitate immersion. The smallest feeling of the game's reaching out to or somehow analysing the player rather than simply reacting to their actions paying dividends in terms of the amount of illusory agency generated. In this case the dead hand of previous victims ever so slowly trace the player and, if careless, eventually bring the whole game to an inextricable conclusion since progress cannot be permanently saved. This can be seen to work equally well from the opposite direction in MMO-RPGs. Blizzard's encounter designers comment that having game content which is unseen or has never been 'beaten' in *World of Warcraft* generates illusory agency and actually functions as surrogate narrative, it "makes the world seem

bigger for everyone."[9] Aspects of the role of the game designer seem to hinge around the creation of this illusory agency through constructing these sequences of authored gestalt interplay.

It is this catalysing of gameplay by narrative and of narrative by gameplay which allows either aspect of the experience to become worthy of the term 'gestalt' at all. While it is true that the dance one's fingers make on they joypad when stringing together a ten-hit combo in *Tekken 2* is pleasurable in and of itself, this pleasure is derived solely from a contextual connection, however rickety. Equally narrative and stories can feel as immediate and as responsive as that ten-hit combo, but only when the link between the gameplay and the story is immediate, apparent, and close to control. *The Bard's Tale,* a superb send-up of the traditional fantasy videogame genre, accomplishes this with aplomb when it juxtaposes an avatar who is constantly antagonistic towards storyline and his perceived heroic role with an omniscient narrator's voice-over, permanently accompanying him throughout his adventures. The bard hates the storyline and just wants to play the game and achieve goals, reacting positively to players' skipping cutscenes or indulging in mindless violence. On the other hand the narrator is obsessed with storyline, providing sarcastic interjections along the lines of "and then…there followed a long period where…nothing happened" in lieu of the usual 'idle' animation when the player fails to progress the storyline. Polar opposites, these two caricatures have to learn to rub along and get on with one another in order to complete the game. To some extent the bard represents a 'typical' player while the narratorial voice is that of the designer, but the two can just as easily represent gameplay focus and narrative focus. Gameplay and narrative work together towards a common goal, a macro-gestalt the player experiences during a game reading. Flaws in this structure force the game to spare its blushes with one

of the two subservient gestalts, more often than not the narrative, and the breaks in this continuum, which *the Bard's Tale* exploits for laughs, are what Lindley sees as antagonism. Observing this allows free and fluid links with other kinds of game theory, the most notable being Crawford's concept of the 'verb'[4] as an aspect of a gameplay gestalt, particularly when applied to game/story fusions like *Valkyrie Profile*. Unfortunately, this is beyond the scope of this paper, but observing what a control does and how the action is presented through narrative contextually is a perfect opportunity for a non-antagonistic gestalt based analysis to bear fruit.

The great critical successes of videogame readings, be they rave reviews or what designers sometimes call 'Wow Moments', come about when this macro-gestalt reaches its peak, uninhibited, even for just a   short moment. When the crux of the narrative and the key verbs of gameplay interlink *just so*, and control is given to the player, a reaction approaching the Romantic conception of the sublime is possible. Csikszentmihalyi's   theories on 'Flow States'[2] offer a more focused explanation of what this 'zone' of the sublime reaction entails, potentially, in a gaming context The link between the storyline's theme and its presentation in a gameplay context, down to the 'verbs' which dictate how we play the game, must resonate together to create one of these moments. *Final Fantasy 7* has its famous moment of tragedy at the end of the extended first act of the narrative. Aeris, the main healer and potential love interest of player-avatar Cloud, is irrevocably killed by Sephiroth, the central antagonist, and removed from the game in an FMV cutscene, over which the player has absolutely no control. Recompense for this comes at the very end of the game, just before the overarching tragedy of the plot is revealed the player is given the chance to take vengeance. Dropping out of FMV 'end screen' exposition, the game returns control to the player, allowing him to strike the final blow against Sephiroth, completing the

circle instigated by Aeris's death. In reality the player's only choices are to kill Sephiroth with one move or face the Game Over screen, but by making the player push the button the key question of the narrative; the futility of Cloud's nihilistic existence, is brought home with force. It demands the player make Cloud's last decision for him and exorcise his past using the standard battle screen and options, reversing the situation of the FMV death of Aeris. While this is the most poignant and powerful way to complete the narrative, it is also the most sadistic foreshadowing of the bitter aftertaste when the act which was denied players for so long is shown to be futile in the tragic end-sequence which follows the fight.

Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater takes this device even further. Its final battle is exceptionally challenging gameplay and crucial to the narrative of the game and the franchise. Once again the player has to seal the narrative and end the game by killing the last boss, known only as "The Boss". Naming the narrative figure after the gameplay terminology is a statement from the designers about the unification of narrative and gameplay.   After the exhausting and time-limited battle, it is necessary to quickly go into first-person view and shoot her in the head while she lies prone and defenceless to complete the mission. This is the crux of the entire narrative, which is about the woman you have to kill representing a mother figure explicitly to the main character and implicitly to all the values he supposedly fights for. This moment has been foreshadowed in narrative since the start of the game, and reinforced through gameplay over and over again as she has aided and frustrated your progress.   Looking at and killing The Boss marks the point at which your character ceases being a hero and becomes a tool of the military, growing into the antagonist of the next three games in the convoluted chronology of the series. Having to do it yourself puts the player right into the centre of the themes and message of the game, obviating them through the simple truth of the gameplay gestalt. You have to kill The Boss to complete the mission, but you sacrifice your own humanity in doing so. The player cannot fail to understand now the motivations of the character he was controlling, link that with the perverted theme of patriotism which characterised the narrative of the game and its various dramatic arcs, and read the other games in a new light. Through Snake's fall, the macro-gestalt of *Snake Eater* demands the sacrifice of other potential readings or empathy with the character to the message of the series through gameplay, absorbing the competing gestalts into itself.

Instead of an evolving, restorative dramatic arc, *Suikoden 3* is a series of short stories told in the same world and experienced in any order the player chooses. It called this novel angle on game storytelling the 'Trinity Sight System'. The same events are thus experienced from the contrasting perspectives of three different player characters, and gradually all the storylines begin to unify for the big climax. Playing as and thinking like all three of the protagonists becomes second nature over the course of play. All three get the same amount of screen time but have subtly different gameplay gestalts. One is a lone wolf, one a mercenary in a small team and the third a General in an army. All come into conflict with one another for various reasons, and have strongly competing motivations. At the end of the third of five chapters, the three characters all grab for a treasure which will give the bearer great power and effective dominance over the other two. You have to decide which of the three characters to name as Flame Champion, and since the different narratives associated with each character are all so strong for such different reasons, particularly to fans of the other games in this series, the resultant choice is both difficult and shocking. It feels as though you have to take sides against your own characters and choose which one would provide the gameplay you are most suited to and effective at, or instead send the narrative

the way you want to see it go. Putting this decision in the hands of the player, brandishing narrative against gameplay and demanding a choice is a great example of how high level narrative can influence gameplay if non-traditional structures are used to create authored gestalt interplay and illusory agency.

The fact remains that there is certainly a lack of narrative depth in videogames, which seems to be getting worse rather than better as the number of titles increases. Hollywood's restorative three-act structure may not be the best narrative form for the vast majority of games, in fact, if anything could cause friction between the two gestalts it is over-reliance on that structure. Particularly when interpreted by movie screenwriters, it is too cumbersome and too prescriptive to sync well with gameplay. It depends too much on a short-term build up of empathy with characters who need not be fully realised personalities. Games are actually played at a much slower pace than is demanded by the structure, which, while flexible, is all about telling stories not creating worlds. Lindley's "First Person Actors" are an intriguing way around this. However, a shift in focus away from single-player experiences and towards multiplayer games is not, since authored single player experiences can still be the most exciting and touching of games if the gestalt interplay process is well managed and balanced by a talented director, and a storyline is integrated as deeply into the game as the two gestalts will inevitably be during a reading.

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