Ludonarrative in Game Design Education – a Concrete Approach

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INTRODUCTION
Ludonarrative aspects have not been the focus of video game studies. During the foundational phase of the discipline, the focus was placed on game mechanics and on understanding what distinguishes games from earlier forms like the movie or the novel. In recent years, however, the growing field of narrative-focused games (e.g. Dear Esther (The Chinese Room 2008), Gone Home (The Fullbright Company 2013), Telltale Games' productions like The Walking Dead (Telltale Games 2012), The Wolf Amongst Us (Telltale Games 2013), Firewatch (Campo Santo 2016)) have alerted us to the possibilities of narrative expressions that embrace the affordances and unique possibilities of digital interactivity. In other words – these games do not attempt to 'interactivize' print literature or the movie, but instead explore a different and so far largely unexplored space of interactive digital narration. This development needs to be reflected in video game teaching. Yet, so far, narrative has been a stepchild in games education. Most game design degree programs feature only a single course on the topic. Our approach instead is to offer a minor concentration within a game design program.

MINOR INTERACTIVE NARRATIVE DESIGN
The minor Interactive Narrative Design has been developed mainly because the game industry in The Netherlands has expressed a need for skilled interactive narrative designers. When developing the narrative content for games, such as dialogues or storylines, game studios often rely on scriptwriters. While these master the art of creating traditional, fixed forms of storytelling, and understand the appeal of narrative experiences, scriptwriters often cannot apply their mastery in an interactive context. In contrast, game designers understand the art of interaction design, and see the appeal of interactive experiences, but often lack a deep understanding of narrative. On this professional backdrop, the minor targets game design students with an interest in designing interactive narrative experiences.

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As we have pointed out earlier, the interactive narrative designer finds its craftsmanship in the ability to express narrative through interaction (Koenitz et al. 2016). In other words, an interactive narrative designer understands the appeal of characters, or the importance of conflict and then must be able to apply this narrative sensibility when designing engaging player interactions. The question thus is how to turn this sensibility into concrete designs.

Two Approaches: Unlearn and Reuse

The challenge for us as educators in the minor is to first help game design students "unlearn" linear and static ways of storytelling which still dominate school education and public discourse about narrative. We do this by expanding students' understanding of narrative and raising awareness for alternatives to the dominant euro-centric forms (e.g. multi-climactic and cyclical Africa oral storytelling forms or the 'conflict-less' Asian form of Kishetenketsu).

Secondly, we train students to "reuse" their game design skills for narrative purposes. Students first need to develop a new understanding of narrative; one that is not based on established notions of storytelling, but one that understands narrative as a cognitive meaning-making process (Herman 2002; Ryan 2006). When they have acquired this alternative understanding of narrative, they can start using their skillset in a new way. For example, we ask students to design interesting narrative game mechanics (Dubbelman 2016), which invite the player to perform actions that support the construction of engaging stories and fictional worlds in the mind of the player.

BEYOND CREATING NARRATIVE GAME DESIGNERS

In this two-step process, we turn game designers into narrative game designers; students with the ability to design game systems in such a way that meaningful narratives emerge in the imagination of players when they interact with the designed interactive systems.

Ludonarrative aspects are not only a question of design-focused programs, they also need to be reflected in video game studies, for example to further expand empirical methods for evaluation (Roth et al. 2010; Roth 2016), to investigate specific narrative structures (Jennings 1996; Ip 2011a; Ip 2011b; Koenitz et al. 2018) or to understand the interpretative processes of players engaging with ludonarrative works (Karhulahti 2012; Roth, van Nuenen, and Koenitz 2018). To address these questions, we are in the process of creating a Master's program.

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