

Beyond “Walking Simulators” – Games as the Narrative Avant-Garde

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INTRODUCTION

In the early 2000s, games and narratives were discussed as antagonistic (Aarseth, 2001; 2014; Eskelinen, 2001; Juul, 1999; 2001). Later, narrative became a more accepted ingredient (Juul, 2005; Pearce, Boellstorff, & Nardi, 2011) of many games.

Irrespective of these developments, Game narrative is often seen as inferior to traditional forms like the novel and the movie (Bogost, 2017). In this paper, I want to point out an alternative to these comparison-driven perspectives and instead propose to reframe some recent narrative-focused games as an avant-garde form of narrative expression. Specifically, I will argue that these games have started to expand our understanding of what mediated narrative can do.

ARTISTIC AVANT-GARDE

The term “Avant-Garde” was coined in the early 19th century by the French socialist Henri de Saint-Simon to denote forward-looking, artistic works that are experimental, unconventional and potentially socially disruptive. By finding new artistic expressions, the avant-garde pushes the boundary of what can be considered art, which in turn also challenges our analytical understanding.

The 20th century saw the introduction of a range of artistic avant-garde movements including DADA, expressionism, surrealism, neo-realism and postmodernity. Each brought with it a set of artistic styles, formats and production methods, creating different artistic outputs like painting and film. Narrative is no exception to these developments. For example, DADA artists rearranged pieces from cut-up newspaper articles to form new narratives. At the same time, none of these movements were restricted to the printed word alone. FW Murnau’s 1922 horror movie “Nosferatu” is most likely the most well-known artifact of the expressionist period and for good reason: the film’s sets perfectly depict the expressionist vision. Maybe film just lends itself better to the kind of representation expressionism was aiming for. Similarly, we might feel that Surrealism is best expressed in Salvador Dali’s paintings featuring immensely detailed landscapes. Essentially, different media forms seem to fit particular narrative expressions in varying degrees. There is no reason to believe this does not hold for interactive media – video games in particular – as well.

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THE NARRATOLOGY VS. LUDOLOGY DEBATE

This academic debate in the early 2000s is framed by some of its instigators as a reaction to imperialistic advances positioning narratology as the dominant analytical framework for video games (Eskelinen, 2001). Instead, the ludologists argued, games were based on rules and therefore needed to be analyzed from the perspective of rule-based play that necessitated the creation of games studies as a separate academic discipline. However, some of the issues brought up in the debate have never been fully addressed, and instead stayed in “analytical limbo.” Indeed, even during the most intense period of the debate, Gonzala Frasca already voiced his concerns that the debate was fraught with “a series of misunderstandings and misconceptions” (Frasca, 2003). In particular, Frasca criticizes the restrictive binary view (ludology/narratology) as limiting.

It is important to realize, that alternatives exist to the literary models of narrative ludologists criticized. For example – simultaneously to the notorious debate – Aylett and Louchart (Aylett & Louchart, 2003) analyzed virtual reality as an additional narrative medium with specific characteristics. Earlier, Pamela Jennings had already proposed African oral narratives in connection with Eco’s Open Work as an alternative model. (Jennings, 1996)

NARRATIVE AVANT-GARDE

While other perspectives have focused on understanding video game narrative in a more general way (Calleja, 2009; Pearce et al., 2011), we propose an approach that concentrates on features that distinguish video games as a narrative medium from earlier forms. A group of recent games are especially promising in this regard, the so-called “Walking Simulators,” which includes *Dear Esther* (Pinchbeck, 2008), *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013) and *Firewatch* (Campo Santo, 2016). In these games, nothing much happens, at least not when seen through the lens or expectation of a typical first person shooter. Yet, we can also see them as the avant-garde for new kinds of narrative experience.

“Walking simulators” can be described as the discovery of “slowness” in video games. These kinds of games feature a leisurely pace, and often lack opportunities for interaction that are connected to the topics of fighting and resource management (e.g. there are no enemies to kill, and no depleting stocks of any kind). In comparison, the design in many current AAA video game titles focus on keeping the player busy. In addition, on-screen info displays are rare in these kinds of games. Players must often assess their current position in the game through environmental clues. Closure in the traditional sense is also absent. For example, *Firewatch*’s ending is crafted in a way so that the meaning of some aspects remains obscure. Fidelity of the depicted virtual world might vary, however, it is usually expansive, as unguided player exploration is one of the common features. When control over space/movement is handed to the player, other measures are necessary to sequence progress and exert a level of dramatic control on the side of the designers. In *Firewatch*, it is time: the intro sequence interjects a flashback and later, the designers make heavy use of dramatic compression. Player’s reactions to “Walking simulators” vary greatly, from enthusiastic to annoyed. Negative reactions seem to correlate with expectations of a “normal” game.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have discussed a group of video games, which focus on narrative development. A key aspect of these “walking simulators” is focusing on slow player exploration. Dramatic compression and the absence of closure are additional strategies

used by the designers of such experiences. The disappointment of some critics and players – who have a more conventional expectation of games – is testimony to their special status as a new kind of video game genre that can also be described as an instance of interactive digital narrative (Koenitz, Ferri, Haahr, Sezen, & Sezen, 2015). “Walking simulators” are not “broken,” they signify the next step in the evolution of narrative-focused video games.

OPTIONAL BIO

Hartmut Koenitz is Professor for Interactive Narrative Design at HKU. He holds a PhD from the Georgia Institute of Technology on the theory and practice of Interactive Digital Narrative. With a team at HKU, he explores the topics of design conventions, interactive narrative pedagogy, forefront practice and interactive digital narratives as representations of complexity. He is the creator of the ASAPS authoring tool, which has been used to create more than 135 works, including *Breaking Points* (available via the iTunes Store for iPad) and *Occupy Istanbul*, a game on the Gezi park protests in Istanbul 2013.

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