EXPERIENTIAL NARRATIVE IN GAME ENVIRONMENTS

Gordon Calleja
calleja@itu.dk
Center for Computer Games Research,
IT-University of Copenhagen
Rued Langgaardsvej 7
2300 Copenhagen
Denmark

ABSTRACT
This paper explores the contentious notion of experiential narrative and proposes the first step in a narrative framework for game environments. It argues for a shift in emphasis from story-telling, the dominant mode of narrative in literature and cinema, to story generation. To this effect the paper forwards a perspective on experiential narrative that is grounded in the specific qualities of the game. This avoids the over-generalization that tends to accompany discussions of experiential narrative while retaining the cognitive dimension in play.

Author Keywords
Emanant, Narrative, Fiction, Experience, Story.

Interactivity and Narrative Generation

A number of game theorists have argued that a key quality of games, interactivity, is incompatible with narrative. Juul, for example, states that: “you cannot have interactivity and narration at the same time. And this means, in practice that games almost never perform basic narrative operations like flashback and flash forward. Games are almost always chronological” [7].

Juul’s argument of incompatibility between interactivity and narrative relates to two dimensions of narrative in virtual game environments: the story that is generated from the moment to moment actions within the game environment, which I will here call “emanant narrative”1 and the story that has been pre-scripted into the game, particularly when this pre-scripted story dictates progression, which I will here refer to as “scripted narrative”. Although these two dimensions influence each other, their distinction is crucial for a thorough understanding of narrative elements in games. Failing to make such a distinction creates a confusion that is apparent in Juul’s argument. The claim that interactivity invalidates narrative is based on his assertion that in games there is no difference between story time and discourse time in games is a clear signal that they are not compatible with narratives:

By pressing the CTRL key, we fire the current weapon, which influences the game world. In this way, the game constructs the story time as synchronous with narrative time and reading/viewing time: the story time is now. Now, not just in the sense that the viewer witnesses events now, but in the sense that events are happening now, and that what comes next is not yet determined [7].

The latter quote is describing aspects of the emanant narrative, while the former quote relates to the scripted narrative. Juul’s moment by moment action can be related to the micro level of narrative engagement while the pre-scripted and at times rigid structure of progression relates to the macro level of narrative engagement [1, 2]. One relates to the here and now actions, the other to the broader structural level of the game which shapes the moment to moment actions in important ways, but, for analytical clarity’s sake the two should be distinguished.

Juul’s argument that interactivity gets in the way of a pre-scripted narrative, only applies to certain types of scripted narrative progression structures, not all dimensions of narrative in games. But even within the scripted narrative dimensions, Juul’s claim that games do not utilize narrative operations like flash-backs and flash-forwards is challenged by games like Max Payne and Call of Duty IV, among many others, which do utilize these devices. In Max Payne flash-backs and flash-forwards are utilized consistently throughout the course of the game and constitute an important part of the composite game experience. But even

---

1 I have chosen to use “emanant narrative” to represent the dependence of emanant narrative on a source; the semiotic and coded, machinic layers, in interaction with the player’s synthetic projection

in what is otherwise a relatively standard First Person Shooter game, *Call of Duty IV* contains a chapter which takes place a few years prior to the rest of the events unfolding in the rest of the game.

When we consider the second quote by Juul which is discussing the generation of events through interaction with the here and now, it becomes evident that story time at the level of the individual sequence of actions is not predetermined at all. If this were the case the game would lose one of its key defining criteria: ergodicity. Story time is equivalent to discourse time in the moment by moment interaction with the game, not its overall scripted narrative structure which can take a variety of forms and separate story time and discourse time in much the same way that literature and cinema does.

This paper will focus on this, on-going dimension of “emanant narrative” in games. I am using the latter term here to refer to the here and now interactions with the game environment that generate story through the players’ interpretation of events occurring within the game environment, their interaction with the game rules, human and AI entities and objects. It is the combination of these elements that through the practice of gaming, that the generation of story becomes possible. In other words, *interaction generates, not excludes story.*

Emanant narrative is borne out of the ergodic qualities that define games. It is not that ergodic media do not contain important story elements as Eskelinen [4] argues, but the form these story elements take is not adequately described by classical narratology. It seems counter-intuitive for Eskelinen to claim that “It should be self-evident that we can’t apply print narratology, hypertext theory, film or theatre and drama studies directly to computer games” [4] and, in the very same paper, build an argument against narrative in games based on claims developed by the most ardent of literary narratologists. To invoke the highly critiqued assertion by Genette [5] and Prince [9] that narratives require a narrator to be such only serves to undermine Eskelinen’s previous quote about the need to rethink existing theories originating from other media in the context of games. What Eskelinen manages to prove is that narrow conceptions of narrative that apply to a limited portion of oral and literary texts (by no means, all literary texts!) is not applicable directly to games, not that games do not have important story elements.

As Ryan [11] has stated, the arguments brought forward by Eskelinen and Juul; namely that games cannot suggest stories, merely imply that they do so in a different ways from literature and movies. This is not a negative claim for games. Quite the contrary; game environments have reached a sufficient level of sophistication that not only allow, but demand, a redefinition of classical notions of narrative. The rest of the paper will propose a formulation of the experiential dimension of generated narrative that is grounded in the interaction between the player’s cognitive faculties and the semiotic and mechanical qualities of the game environment.

**Which Games?**

Before we begin our discussion of experiential narrative I would like to clarify the media objects I am referring to in this paper when I talk about games. I would here like to avoid what I find is a problematic tendency within Game Studies: the practice of formulating theoretical and analytical frameworks that are meant to be applied to “games” without taking into account the fact that the various media objects referred to have radically different qualities. Using the blanket term “game” to refer to anything from a game of physical football to the computer-based *Bejewelled*, *Grand Theft Auto IV* or *World of Warcraft* undermines analytical accuracy. This is particularly the case of foundational theoretical framework building. If we are to be rigorous in our study of games we need to be very clear about what forms of games we are referring to. The computer’s ability to simulate any object, place, entity or behaviour that can be coded opens up the danger of following common usage of the term “game” by referring to all forms of software designed with entertainment as such. There is a considerable problem in trying to create theoretical frameworks for understanding a particular aspect of games without differentiating between *Bejewelled* and *GTA IV*. If we do, we run the risk of talking at cross-purposes. It is close to impossible to have a sensible discussion about, for example, stories in games, when one side of the conversation is taking chess as an example and the other *GTA IV*. There is little sense to the argument: chess has no meaningful narrative component and since chess is a game and so is *GTA IV*, ergo *GTA IV* has no meaningful narrative component either.

It is no surprise that game definitions that have tried to account for both digital games and board games are strained to cater for both media forms. Juul’s [8] definitional work in *Half-Real* is a good example of this. When it comes to, what he calls, *Classical Games* the definition he proposes works well. When applied to the majority of digital games the definition fares less amiable. The list of “borderline cases” stretches the limit of the definition’s universality. This, by no means invalidates Juul’s model. Quite the contrary, it points importantly to how games have developed over time into a hybrid media object that can, like the machines that run them, accommodate a variety of media texts. As Ryan [11] argues, digital games (and table top role-playing games before them) have enabled the combination of traditional game’s ludic elements with the fictional and narrative aspects of the media that preceded them. With this in mind, this paper is mainly concerned with games that occur in spatially navigable virtual environments populated by entities and (or) objects with
whom players can interact; what Aarseth has called “games in virtual environments” [18]. Examples of such games would be Oblivion, GTA IV, Call of Duty IV and Half-Life 2, World of Warcraft, among many others. What do I mean by “virtual environment” here? Does the stage in Guitar Hero constitute a virtual environment? What about Facebook? Here is a definition developed in another work [2] that aims to avoid vagueness of application while giving a precise and positive account of virtual environments:

**virtual environments are computer generated domains which create a perception of traversable space and afford the exertion of player agency. They are populated by objects and often human or AI controlled entities with whom players can interact.**

This definition allows us to separate chat rooms, web pages, blogs and webcam applications from virtual environments like driving simulators, virtual reality applications and the majority of digital games. The “game” modifier can be applied in the middle of the phrase to specify those virtual environments that have game-like properties. Virtual game environments, although a somewhat cumbersome term, places virtual environments as the broader category under which certain forms of digital games are placed. I say “certain forms” of digital games because just as not all virtual environments are games, not all digital games occur within virtual environments. Digitized versions of card games like Hearts or Poker, or digitized puzzle games like crosswords, Sudoku and the like are not forms of virtual environments. Similarly, following the definition of virtual environments above, Bejewelled or Tetris are not types of virtual game environments. This paper is concerned with the narrative potentials of game environments, not digital games as a whole.

**Experiential Narrative?**

A challenge facing a game theorist who finds the notion of experiential narrative analytically productive is to define what is meant by the term without collapsing all forms of experience related to the game as narrative. Although experiential, or emergent, as it has sometimes been called, narrative is strongly related to the cognitive faculties of the player, it does not mean that it exists in the mind of the player without relation to the properties of the artefact that engendered it. Quite the contrary, as Iser [6] has argued in the context of the experiential dimension of the reading process, the experiential dimension of game narrative is rooted in the (cyber) textual properties of the text at hand. Frameworks proposed by theorists that have approached the experiential side of game narratives have failed to adequately address the interaction between sign, code and mind, resulting in over-generalizable notions that are scarcely productive in specific analyses.

Pearce [9], for example, proposes a set of six narrative elements that may be found in games, the first of which is a component of all games, while the other five occur in different combinations. She briefly outlines the six narrative elements, or “operators”: Experiential, Performative, Augmentary, Descriptive, Metastory and Story System. Experiential elements relate to the “emergent narrative that develops out of the inherent “conflict” of the game as it is played, as experienced by the players themselves”. This becomes a performative narrative when viewed by an external, non-playing audience. The augmentary narrative includes various “contextual frameworks” like the game environment’s backstory. The descriptive narrative describes the retelling of game events to third parties. The metastory is described by Pearce as the story line, while the story system refers to the underlying rules and code that generate the above mentioned forms of narrative.

Although Pearce’s [9] attempt is notable for its acknowledgement of the importance of player activity in forming the on-going story, it suffers from over-generality that does not make the framework particularly useful. She applies the framework to describe the narrative aspects of a game of basketball and later discusses Tic-Tac-Toe and Battleship. As I argued earlier, it seems largely uninteresting to discuss the narrative of a game of Tic-Tac-Toe and one would be right to be suspicious of a narrative framework that claims to be constructively applicable to such a wide spectrum of activities and media objects as basketball, Tic Tac Toe, Battleship, Chess and The Sims. As Aarseth [19] argues, if we attribute all forms of experience related to a game as a form of narrative, the concept loses all analytical value. There is a considerable difference between the notion of emanant narrative I am proposing here and Pearce’s experiential, descriptive and performative operators.

Pearce formulates the performative operator as a narrative created by an audience watching the players (or their avatars) playing. A constructive analytical framework needs to differentiate between the narrative experienced by the player actively engaged with the game and a derivative, or secondary, narrative that is produced out of this, which becomes, in effect, a form of synopsis. There is an important distinction to my relating the events of The Matrix [15] from the narrative presented in The Matrix itself. The qualities of the secondary narrative inevitably depend on the original narrative (unless I decide to make them up entirely or have a terrible memory), but it does not seem like a relevant aspect of a framework that describes the story elements of game environments. Similarly, Pearce’s descriptive operator also produces a secondary narrative. While the descriptive operator refers to the retelling of the event by a third party describing the game, the augmentary operator relates those descriptions in a production of a text. This is yet another form of secondary
narrative which seems only marginally different from the one generated through descriptive operator. Whether it is the player re-telling the events of the game or someone else describing the events of the game or an inscribed version thereof, the resultant product is a re-telling of the story formed through engagement with the game environment and therefore falls outside of the scope of our framework.

Like Pearce, Salen and Zimmerman’s *Rules of Play* [12] emphasize the experiential dimensions of story elements in games. They sidestep the discussion relating to the perceived opposition of games and narratives discussed above by focusing on how narrative is experienced in games. *Rules of Play* takes game design as its primary focus and like other practicing game designers, Salen and Zimmerman take the presence of stories in games as a given. Reading through articles on Gamasutra, talks at the annual Games Developers Conference and various game design books it is evident that the central question for game designers is not whether games are stories but, how best to convey stories through games. In his 2008 talk at the Game Developers Conference, *Bioshock* creative director Ken Levine advocates designers to move towards what he calls a “pull” narrative instead of the more traditional “push” mode of communicating story. In the push mode the story is forced upon players through devices such as cut scenes while the pull story mode emerges from the players’ interaction with the environment. In an *Edge* article [3] GTA IV lead designer Sam Houser discusses how the dynamic system of the game environment creates moments that feel like pre-scripted narrative events. As increased storage and processing power enables designers to create more complex game worlds, the emphasis on the potential to tell dynamic stories is steadily increasing. Like Salen and Zimmerman, the emphasis in the majority of these talks and articles by game designers is on the players’ experience of narrative. When the focus shifts from a pre-scripted to an experiential mode of communicating story the discussion, both in academic and design circles, there is a tendency to equate all aspects of game experience with narrative.

Salen and Zimmerman [12] adopt Marc LeBlanc’s distinction between embedded and emergent narrative. The distinction is invaluable as a starting point for building a framework to understand narratives, particularly because the emergent narrative component accounts for the systemic structures of games. It is the dynamic structures of games, their emergent complexity, their participatory mechanisms, their experiential rhythms and patterns, which are the key to understand how games construct narrative experiences. To understand game narratives, it is essential to analyze game structures and see how they ramify into different forms of narrative play [12].

This call echoes Aarseth’s [17] intervention in Cybertext which stressed the importance of taking into consideration the mechanical, coded structures of ergodic texts, not merely their surface signs. In order to develop a coherent and sustainable framework of narrative analysis to be used in the context of game environments the emergent narrative that LeBlanc, Salen and Zimmerman are referring to needs to be anchored in the game elements that generate such a narrative. The major challenge here is to not let the experiential nature of this component of narrative become so general as to become unusable, as was the case with Pearce discussed above.

Although I would agree that we need to look at how games create stories, Salen and Zimmerman, like Pearce, stretch the notion of experiential narrative beyond its limit as a useful concept when they fail to make the distinction between abstract games, sports and virtual game environments:

The dramatic tension of Poker, too, gains its bite from the uncertainty of outcome. Bluffing contributes to the narrativity of the experience, heightening the potential for deceit. As players enter into the psychological space of the bluff, narrative tensions mount. Does she really have the hand she says she has, or is she bluffing? What if she isn’t bluffing? Can she still be beaten? He just made a large bet, so he must have a good hand. But he bluffed last round, and he wouldn’t try that same trick twice in a row [12].

The importance of experienced narrative to a framework of narrative in game environments becomes problematic when we can apply the concept to any interaction with the game system or thoughts relating to it, as in the example given above. As Ryan [11] has shown, a cognitive perspective on narrative can be both applicable to a variety of media while catering for the specificities of the form of media object in question, and in order to do this we need to ground the experiential in the (cyber)textual qualities out of which the narrative dimensions emanate. Salen and Zimmerman’s poker example views thoughts about other players vis a vis the state of the game as a form of narrativity. It might be more productive to distinguish thoughts about the strictly ludic dimensions of a game system from the game environment’s ability to generate fictionality, which will be here seen as the principal building block of emanant narrative.

**Emanant Narrative**

The rest of the paper will outline a first step in the construction of a narrative framework for game environments. This section will discuss the generation of experiential narrative through interaction with the cyber-
textual qualities of the game environment. It will aim to
tackle the challenges faced by other researchers in
articulating the experiential without collapsing all
experience relating to the game with narrative by grounding
the noetic in the textual.

**Perspective**

We can begin to discuss emanant narrative by identifying
the dominant perspective operating at any one point in its
generation. Every segment of fictionality can be expressed
on one of three focal perspectives: the narrative of
miniatures, narrative of entity and personal narrative.
These perspectives are used in combination with the matrix
of fictionality that will be discussed below.

**Fictionality**

Emanant narrative refers to the active construction of story
through interaction with the game world’s topography,
inhabitants, objects, game rules and coded physics. Emanant narrative thus consists of a feedback loop between
the player’s interpretation of cyber-textual elements [17],
the surface sign, and the coded structures of the game
environment: the game rules, physics and other mechanical
operations that animate the game world and its inhabitants.
The combinatorial power of emanant narrative is a
development of the phenomenology of reading proposed by
Iser [6] which similarly describes the combination of
textual properties of the printed page with the internal
syntheses from the part of the reader:

The text itself, however, is neither expectation nor
memory- it is the reader who must put together
what his wandering viewpoint has divided up. This leads to the formation of syntheses through
which connections between signs may be
identified and their equivalence represented. But
these syntheses are of an unusual kind. They are
neither manifested in the printed text, nor
produced solely by the reader’s imagination, and
the projections of which they consist are
themselves of a dual nature: they emerge from the
reader but they are also guided by signals which
project themselves into him. It is extremely
difficult to gauge where the signals leave off and
the reader’s imagination beings in the process of
projection [6].

The concept of emanant narrative takes the phenomenology
of literary narrative described above by Iser and combines it
with Aarseth’s cyber-textual matrix. The strength of the
narrative disposition is always dependent on the players’
inclination, but obviously a game environment with more
attractive narrative props, to borrow a term from Walton’s
[16], is more likely to generate emanant narrative. The
perspective on experienced narrative I am thus advocating
here is a mental construct [11] generated by the properties
of the media text. This mental construct can be derived as
readily from the numeric values of my character’s
attributes, or “stats”, as it can be from visual and auditory
representations. The creation of mental imagery through
interaction with the textual properties of a media object can
be referred to as the process of fictionality.

```
Figure 1: Narrative perspective in game environments

Narrative of miniatures describes environments
where the player is not embodied in any single avatar, nor is
she anchored in a specific point in the game world. Players
can control several entities at once, as is the case in Real
Time Strategy Games (RTSSs) like Age of Empires or
The Sims, or control a collective that is not individually
simulated and represented such as Sim City or the campaign
mode in Medieval II: Total War. Certain games like
Medieval II: Total War operate on multiple levels: you can
issue orders on the turn based campaign map where each
turn spans six months and the players manage their cities,
taxes, diplomacy with other countries as well as their
military manoeuvring. But they also control the units that
make up the army in battle. If the player wants, they can
participate in the battle from the point of view of the
general and thus shift into the narrative of entity.

The narrative of entity describes stories relating to a single
entity the player controls. It is differentiated from the
personal narrative mainly based on the player’s disposition,
although third person games more commonly evoke this
form of narrative while first person games tend to evoke a
personal one. Max Payne or Farenheit are good examples
of such games. Personal narrative is most commonly found
in first person games like Half Life 2 or Mirror’s Edge
where players interpret the events happening in the game as
happening to them. In other words, the narrative becomes
primarily about me, not about a packaged character I have
been given to control.

In all these modes, but especially the last two, it is always
the disposition of the player that matters in determining the
perspective of the narrative. I might be in charge of a
whole football team but my on-going generated story
centres around me as manager. Similarly, in a game of
Medieval II the emanant narrative might be focused on the
Holy Roman Empire (narrative of miniatures) as a whole or
myself as the ruler of the Holy Roman Empire (personal
narrative), or switch between a number of characters in
different stages of the game (narrative of entity).
```
Fictionality, in this context, is not primarily concerned with identifying fictional as opposed to real elements in a virtual environment. I am not using the concept to signify a particular formal quality or speech-act marker that identifies (and opposes) the fictional with the real. My interest here is to create a vocabulary that will facilitate discussions about narratives generated from games in their various dimensions. Fictionality is the culmination of the effort between designer and player, writer and reader that becomes manifest in the player/reader’s mind. This issue is not unique to games but is present in any representational medium:

When a work is produced, the creative act is only an incomplete, abstract impulse; if the author existed all on his own, he could write as much as he liked but his work would never see the light of day as an object, and he would have to lay down his pen or despair. The process of writing, however, includes as a dialectic correlative the process of reading, and these two interdependent acts require two differently active people. The combined efforts of author and reader bring into being the concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind. Art exists only for and through other people [13].

As both the quotes by Sartre and Iser argue, in the case of literature the process of syntheses between the arbitrary sign and the mental image it generates is crucial for the reading process to occur. In game environments we interact with both arbitrary and iconic signs (i.e. verbal text, images and audio) as well as the rules of the game, which, if we are able to interpret them meaningfully contribute to the synthesis of fictionality. The process is usefully illustrated by table-top RPGs.

If, in an RPG system which expresses attributes as ranging between the values of 1 to 21, a character with an Appearance value of 4 will be considered rather unpleasant looking. Although the mental image generated by these numbers will vary between players, their imaginings are grounded in the numerical value and the rule system that gives it meaning. If we also know that the same character has an Intelligence value of 18 our image is somewhat reconfigured to take into account this factor. When the player who controls this character declares that he strides out of the tavern where the players’ party is discussing where to travel to next, he generates a succession of images based on his declaration and players’ image of the character. If the RPG group is using miniatures and markings on a hex sheet to represent the places the party inhabits in and their locations therein, the process of synthesis is further influenced by the representational qualities of the miniatures, terrain and other markings used on the game board. If a player decides to jump from one roof of a house to another, they roll dice to see if the action succeeds. The player has a Jump skill of 51% and he rolls an 80% on a 100 die. The jump roll is failed and the result immediately creates an image in the minds of the players and the game master, who proceeds to ask the player for a Dexterity check to see if the character manages to grasp on to the opposite ledge in time… Both these episodes are examples of emanant narrative resulting from stringing together segments of fiction expressed by a synthesis of interaction and interpretation of game rules, representation and mental imagery. The examples brought here are trivial in terms of their narrative complexity, but they show how even the most basic of game operations generates narrative segments that contribute to the overall narrative experience.

RPGs are a great example of how rules contribute to the process of fictionality since the material analogues, or “props”[16], they use are poor in terms of graphical representational quality. But, no matter how impressive the quality of the representational layer of a game environment is, its experience, and consequently its narrative elements, only comes together after a considerable amount of synthesising work from the part of the player. Most of the time the player is not aware of the internal work being performed in this operation, as is the case with all cases of perception; at least until the synthesised image is readily determinable. It is only when the qualities of the representation are ambiguous does our synthesising effort become apparent [14].

---

2 For a discussion of fiction in games see Espen Aarseth’s paper The Perception of Doors: Fiction vs. Simulation in Games [20].

3 Table-top RPGs are useful in such analyses because the mechanical workings of the system are transparent to the players and game masters, since they are expressed in numbers that are made meaningful through the cognitive interpretation of the rule-system. Digital games hide these calculations within their layers of code, making them accessible to those that can dissect and interpret it, which, sadly, does not include the majority of game rearchers.
I am here proposing to view fictionality as the core building block for emanant narrative. Emanant narrative is made of up a sequence of fictional segments ordered in the player’s mind. Fictionality in game environments can therefore be represented as a cognitive construct that constitutes a matrix of the surface sign, game rules and the subjectivity of the player.

Every fictional segment can be located somewhere on this diagram. When taken as a progressive composite, these segments make up the emanant narrative. The player corner represents the most subjective of imaginings that although inspired by the game are not supported by its rules and code, nor are they communicated by its representational dimensions. An example of this (1) would be the background story of my character in World of Warcraft. I might imagine that my Night Elf Muun is leaving his homeland of Teldrassil because of an embarrassing situation with the Head Tailor’s younger daughter. Aside from the basic geography of Azeroth and the existence of tailors, the game system does not support this segment of emanant narrative, yet I am free to create it and even act upon it. It is worthwhile noting that although the Player corner of the triangle can be relatively free form, it is still emerging from, and at times influencing in return, the fictional world of the game. Fictionality that is out of place within the fictional world in question is not considered under this framework.

As described by the RPG example above, interaction with the rule system of a game affords the generation of fictionality. This is no different in virtual game environments. It is often the case that a character’s attributes are expressed in numerical values. These values manifest themselves in the course of the game in various ways. A strong character can carry more items before getting tired. A charismatic character might get access to a dialogue option in an interaction with an AI controlled agent that would not be otherwise available to them, and so on. But there are other imaginings that are based on the rules which are not necessarily upheld by the system. The visual representation of the character in the form of the avatar rarely expresses these numerical values, for example. In Oblivion, for example, my character may have a rotund body. As he sprints to and fro in Cyrodill his Strength, Endurance, Speed and Agility increase, but this increase is not reflected in the graphical representation of the avatar. This, however does not stop me from imagining my character’s body leaning and developing (3). The numerical values of a character are internally synthesised with the avatar’s graphical representation into a composite image in the player’s mind, if the player cares at all. What I am claiming here is not that this is the case in every situation, but when narrative is generated through interaction with rules, the resultant ongoing narrative is a combination of rules, representation and imagination.

The way the overt communication of the game system’s machinations generate stories are not limited to the attributes in Computer RPGs (CRPGs) but occurs, to some degree or other in the majority of games. Let us consider a completely different genre: sports games. FIFA 2008’s management mode includes newspaper cuttings that reflect aspects of the history of the team being managed and the career of the manager (referred to by name). After certain matches, the world surrounding the manager, which is merely alluded to, not in any way simulated, is brought to light through simple scenarios that the player has to respond to with one of three options. These situations can range from arguments the players are having about music in the locker room to team visits to local social clubs or appearances from the manager on the media. Responses to these situations yield a variation in fan support, team morale, money or the board of director’s opinion of the manager. Although not simulated or represented in any other way than text, they stimulate the player’s imagination and add to the on-going emanant narrative of the player’s career as a manager (3). Players tend to add their own explanations to such situations which are subjective interpretations of actions upheld by the game system and rules which contribute to emanant narrative. This also happens when the game system is not transparent to the player (which it rarely is) and thus interpretations of certain outcomes, like a team player’s performance not living up to their numerical skills, might be attributed to the in-game entity rather than the ineptitude of the controlling player. In many ways it makes sense to displace such incongruencies to the level of fictionality rather than bring in the skill of the non-diegetic player. If Ronaldinho has three matches were he is completely ineffective, it makes more sense for the fictional coherence of the game world to blame the lack of performance on him (4) rather than the controlling player, since the controlling player’s role in the game world is that of a manager not a dug-out puppeteer.

At other times there are graphical or audio representations which are not supported by the simulation. The chosen race of a character in Oblivion modifies their starting attributes and physical appearance. Other than that AI agents do not treat the character any differently based on their race. However, if my character is of the Redguard race, I might interpret a negative interaction with a Breton character as a sign of racial snobbery and be inflamed enough by it to act differently back in their behalf (5). This may happen because I am inclined to follow my imaginative input into the emanant narrative or because my lack of insight into the machinations of the game system prompts me to assume that this is a racial issue. Whatever the case, the emanant narrative is also shaped by representations that are not supported by the simulation.

On the other hand, when the representational signs are supported by the coded rules of the simulation, the resultant
emanant narrative tends to be more powerful. When the sprint speed numerical attribute of an upcoming player I have recently acquired through a scouting tour in South America increases and I see those changes manifest during the match, the fictionality of that situation is of a more enduring kind than if it were sustained only by my imagination. Similarly, if every bump of my car in a driving game is both visible on the body of my vehicle and it has an effect on the way that vehicle drive, the emanant narrative produced surrounding my driving situation is more enduring because it is supported by surface sign and rules in a relatively congruent fashion. I am saying “relatively congruent” here because game simulations are always reductive in nature. They select and implement key features that will convey the designed experience the designers wish players to have, without the need to model every detail, which is, at least at the current state of technologies of simulation, not possible.

Various instances in the game can therefore be traced somewhere within the triangle of fictionality I have outlined above. Most situations will fall between the three corners representing varying degrees of blending of the three main determinants: surface signs, coded rules and the player’s subjective imagination.

Conclusion

Although this paper focuses on emanant narrative, a more complete view of narrative generation in virtual environments need to consider how emanant and scripted narratives interact. I would argue that although a game environment can do without a scripted narrative, emanant narrative is never absent. It might be uninteresting or trivial, but in some form or other it is always present. If one holds traditional narratology close to heart an objection to the concept of emanant narrative might be: why call something narrative if it has not been retold? Do I generate emanant narrative when I walk down the street and buy a loaf of bread? In short, what separates emanant narrative from memory? To reiterate the core emphasis of this paper: the generation of emanant narrative does not rest solely with the free-roaming imagination of the player or their reconfigured memories. Emanant narrative is generated at the intersection of the semiotic surface, the coded structure of the game environment and the player’s cognitive faculties.

Emanant narrative is a concept specific to game environments. In a walk down to the baker’s I interact with a variety of signs, but these were not written as a unified whole, but intended as multiple texts which share a relationship at a more general context than their individual scopes allow for. The road sign, the “Jesus Loves Me” sticker on the back of a Volvo and poster for a new burger at McDonalds are part of a constellation of a particular slice of a particular culture. At that general level they are connected, but it would make little sense to view them as part of a single, coherent text. Similarly, the coded structures of games: their rules, physics and general properties of the environment and its inhabitants, are not designed as a unified text to create a specific experience. Aside from this, the physical world does not contain a scripted narrative with which the emanant narrative interacts with.

How scripted narratives are structured in games and their interaction with emanant narrative will be described in a future paper that outlines a narrative framework for virtual game environments. This paper is a first step in that direction.

REFERENCES

Bristol: University of Minnesota Press; University Presses Marketing distributor.


