Defragging the Divide: Narrative Practices in Current Videogames (And How to Understand Them)

Hartmut Koenitz  
University of Georgia  
120 Hooper Street  
Athens, Georgia 30602-3018  
(706) 542-1704  
hkoenitz@uga.edu

Mads Haahr  
Trinity College  
Dublin 2  
Ireland  
+353 (0) 1 896 1765  
Mads.Haahr@cs.tcd.ie

Gabriele Ferri  
Indiana University  
Bloomington  
901 E. 10th St.  
Bloomington, IN 47408  
gabriele.ferri@gmail.com

Digdem Sezen  
Istanbul University  
34452 Beyazit/Fatih - Istanbul  
Turkey  
+90 (212) 440 00 00  
digdemsezen@gmail.com

Tonguc Ibrahim Sezen  
Istanbul Bilgi University  
Santralistanbul  
Kazim Karabekir Cad. No:2/13  
34060 Eyup - Istanbul / Turkey  
+90 (212) 311 77 02  
tonguc.sezen@bilgi.edu.tr

ABSTRACT
A decade ago, many scholars in the new discipline of games studies vigorously denied any connection between games and narrative (Aarseth 2001, Eskelinen 2001, Juul 2001, Frasca 2003). Recently, game companies are explicitly promoting narrative as a key selling point for their products. At the same time, developments like the success of The Walking Dead, an explicitly narrative game, as well as the prominent positioning of a Narrative Summit at the world’s largest industry gathering, the Game Developers Conference are testimony to new (or renewed) interest in game narrative. This panel therefore discusses current practices of narrative in video games, and how to understand them.

Keywords
video game narrative, ludology vs narratology debate, current practices, narrative summit, game writing, game industry

INTRODUCTION
Is Narrative an integral part of computer games, or is it just an accident? A decade ago, the new discipline of games studies/ludology vigorously denied any connection between games and narrative (Aarseth 2001, Eskelinen 2001, Juul 2001, Frasca 2003). For example, Markku Eskelinen wrote that since a well accepted descriptive methodology for traditional games - he references The Study of Games (Avedon and Sutton-Smith 1971) - does not consider narrative as part of the ludic field, computer games should follow the same route. If they do not, as he implicitly suggests, it is more because of marketing strategies than of intrinsic characteristics.
Indeed, game companies are recently boasting narrative as a key selling point for their products. Steve Papoutsis of Visceral Games (2012), best known for their “Dead Space” franchise, stated “Our goal [...] is to apply our key design principles – immersive, challenging gameplay, intense narrative and focus on quality”. Rockstar Games (2012) recently announced Grand Theft Auto 5 defining it “a bold new direction in open-world freedom, storytelling, mission-based gameplay and online multiplayer”. Dan Connors of Telltale Games (2012) underlined the “narrative design” in The Walking Dead games as a feature that appeals equally to hardcore gamers and to more casual gamers who are fans of the franchise.

To interpret these industry perspectives solely as marketing ploys seems unconvincing. Consequently, what we are faced with is a curious disconnect between theory and practice. Whatever the academic argument regarding narrativity in videogames, the industry clearly believes they are using narrative in some capacity. While industry did not concern itself with the outcome of the ludology-narratology debate, the game studies community should, as it concerns the understanding and expressivity of games as a creative medium. We are not satisfied with the outcome of the ludology-narratology debate from last decade, as specific theories for understanding narrative elements in computer games have not yet emerged. Perhaps the best openings into this puzzling situation is provided by Gonzalo Frasca’s perspective that the debate on narrative in video games never took place (vs. the debate of whether games should be understood as yet another text and be analyzed with the toolbox of narratology) (Frasca 2003a) and Marie-Laure Ryan’s identification of a pragmatic position regarding the application of narrative in video games (Ryan 2006).

From these vantage points we want to re-open the debate on games and narrative in a panel that includes academics on both sides of the debate, as well as industry insiders. Has radical ludology been refuted, not by narratologists but by game producers themselves? Or are new technological possibilities making narrative features emerge more prominently?

The topics to be addressed in this collective discussion include:

- the current state of the art in computer games with strong narrative qualities;
- the evolving role of narrative in computer games, from the points of view of academia and the industry;
- the ludology/narratology debate in the context of recent developments in the game industry;
- future scenarios for game and narrative studies.

The panel will be conducted in the manner of a dialogue between panelists, guests and the DiGRA audience. We aim at an open, informal and stimulating discussion involving top experts in our research field and in the game industry.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Frasca, G. “Ludologists Love Stories, Too: Notes from a Debate that Never Took Place,” in


