Transmedia Storyworlds, Literary Theory, Games

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Abstract

Introduction

This essay will focus on some of the connections between digitally transmitted stories, games, narrative processes, and the discipline whose ostensible job is the study of storytelling, namely literature. My observations will be limited to the specific case of computer games, storytelling, and what is often unproblematically referred to as “literature,” in order to focus attention on historical and contemporary features of the development of the relationship between the two that remain largely unexamined. Therefore, one goal of this essay is to re-think this relationship from a fresh perspective, whose “freshness” derives from reopening the past and re-examining what is overlooked when games scholars talk about “narrative” and “literature” as though they were interchangeable.

Further, I will discuss the dissemination of narrative on/through various platforms before mass-media, such as textually transmitted stories that anticipate digitally disseminated narrative. This will include specific examples as well as a more general re-examination of claims made on the topic of literature, narrative and computer games, via a brief review of disciplinary insights from the study of digital games and narrative. The following is therefore intended as a view of games and (literary) narrative in pre-digital forms as an attempt to build bridges between media studies and other disciplines by calling for a longer, developmental history of games, narrative and/or literature that considers them together rather than as separate territories.

The Stakes of the Game

My reasons for re-examining games and narrative scholarship include my desire to discuss a number of somewhat less-than-accurate or misleading notions about narrative and literature that have been folded into computer game studies, where these notions go unchallenged. I also want to point out a body of work on literature, mimesis and play that has been overlooked in game studies, and that would be helpful in thinking about stories and some of the (digital) platforms through which they are disseminated.

To begin by responding to the tacit question of why it is worth asking what literary studies have to do with videogames, my answer resides in the link between play, games and storytelling forged by Aristotle in the Poetics. As a function of imitative play or “mimesis,” he claims, art
forms mimic phenomena found in nature such as the singing of birds. So, by virtue of the playful mimetic function ascribed to the arts or “poiesis,” games and storytelling are kindred forms of play. Moreover, the pretend function common to art forms such as realist fictional narratives that are read “as if” the story were true, and games played “as if” their premises were real, unfold in playfully imitative ways that produce possible worlds presented through different media.

In the intervening centuries, numerous scholars discussed mimesis and play from Kant and Schiller in the 18th century, to Huizinga, and to many scholars who wrote on literature, mimesis and play later in the 20th century, such as Gadamer, Bell, Spariousu, Hutchinson, and Morrow. More recently, games scholar Janet Murray wrote that computer games are “a kind of abstract storytelling that resembles the world of common experience but compresses it in order to heighten interest,” hence even Tetris acts as a dramatic “enactment of the overtasked lives of Americans in the 1990’s” allowing them to “symbolically experience agency,” and “enact control over things outside our power” (142, 143). Similarly, Ryan has argued that videogames offer micro stories that are mostly about the pleasure of discovering nooks and crannies of online, digital possible worlds (10).

At the same time, a tendency developed in games studies in the 1990s to eschew any connection with narrative, literature and earlier scholarship on mimesis. One example is Markku Eskelinen’s article in Game Studies wherein he argued that “[o]utside academic theory people are usually excellent at making distinctions between narrative, drama and games. If I throw a ball at you I don’t expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories.” Eskelinen then explains that “when games and especially computer games are studied and theorized they are almost without exception colonized from the fields of literary, theatre, drama and film studies.” As Eskelinen’s argument attests, his concern is disciplinary territorialisation rather than stories and their transmedial dissemination, whereas I prefer to take an historical approach to games and storytelling, to which I now direct my attention.

Stepping Back

Both mimesis and interactivity are central to how stories are told and travel across media. In light thereof, I recall the story of Zeuxis who, in the 5th century BC, introduced a realistic method of painting. As the story goes, Zeuxis painted a boy holding a bunch of grapes so realistically that it attracted birds who tried to enter the world of the painting, whereupon the artist remarked that, were the boy rendered as realistically as the grapes, he would have scared the birds away.

Centuries later in the 1550s, the camera obscura and mirrors were used to project scenery as actors moved in and out of it as an early form of multimedia storytelling entertainment (Smith 22). In the late 17th century, van Mieris painted The Raree Show, representing an interactive travelling storyboard and story master who invited audience participation, hence the girl pictured here, leaning forward to interact with the story.
Numerous interactive narrative toys were produced in the 18th and 19th, such as these storytelling playing cards sold as a leaf in *The Great Mirror of Folly* (1720). Along with the plays, poems and cartoons also contained in this volume dedicated to the South Sea Bubble crisis of 1720, the cards serve as a storyboard with plot lines that follow suits, so that hearts picks up one narrative thread, and clubs, spades and diamonds another. Hence while the cards could be removed for gaming they could also be *read* as a story in a medium that, to borrow games scholar Espen Aarseth’s terminology, requires non-trivial physical or “ergodic effort” on the part of readers and players.
In the 20th century examples of interactive and ergodic codex fiction abound, including Hesse’s *Das Glasperlenspiel* [Glass Bead Game] (1943, 1949), Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962), Saporta’s *Composition No. 1* (1962), and Winterson’s *PowerBook* (2001) that conceptually and/or physically mimic and anticipate hypertext. More recently, Chloé Delaume’s *Corpus Simsi* (2003)
explicitly attempts to remediate a MMORPG as the title suggests, just as there are videogames that attempt, in various ways, to remediate novels. I have presented these examples to argue for a long-continuum view of storytelling and games, as a series of attempts to produce stories—from Zeuxis grapes to PowerBook and beyond—that can be entered and interacted with, at least metaphorically or cognitively. Over time, various game-like or playful interfaces from text to computer have invited us into storyworlds while partially impeding or opening the door to interaction and texturing our experience of the story in medium-specific ways.

The desire to make stories interactive has developed across media, from image to text and various combinations thereof, as a means of externalizing an author’s imagination to be activated by opening and reading a novel, or by playing a game wherein the story is mediated through a screen while players interact to change the course of the story. While I am arguing that storytelling has for centuries striven to interpolate spectators or readers by various means and though numerous media that would eventually make storytelling thoroughly and not only metaphorically interactive, I want now to return briefly to the question of literature.

**Narrative vs Literature**

The term “literature” is frequently assumed to be unambiguous when it enters discussions of transmedia storytelling and videogames. What literature “is” was, however, hotly debated in the 1980s-90s with many scholars concluding that literature is a construct invented by “old dead white men,” resulting in much criticism on the topic of canon formation. Yet, without rehearsing the arguments produced in previous decades on the topic of literariness, I want to provide a few examples of what happens when games scholars and practitioners assume they know what literature is and then absorb or eschew it in their own transmedia storytelling endeavours.

The 1990s saw the emergence of game studies as a young discipline, eager to burst out of the crucible of English Departments that were, as Eskelinen pointed out, the earliest testing grounds for the legitimized study of games. Thus ensued the “ludology vs narratology” debate wherein “ludologists,” keen to move away from literary studies, insisted that games be studied as games only, and participated in what Gonzalo Frasca famously called the “debate that never happened.” Yet as short-lived as the debate may have been, a negative and limited view of literature still inheres in games studies along with an abiding lack of awareness of the shared origins of stories, games, and thinking about both that I have attempted to sketch out thus far.

Exemplary of arguments on the side of “ludology,” was storytelling game designer Chris Crawford’s keynote at Mediaterra 2007, in which he explained that literariness is measured by degrees of fun. Hence, whereas literature is highly formulaic and structured, storytelling is unconstrained and fun because storytellers have no rigid blueprint and can change direction at any moment. Yet, Crawford went on to explain how his storytelling machine works by drawing together individual syntactic elements, oddly echoing the Russian formalists’ description of literature, and particularly models that locate literary production at the intersection of the axis of selection, containing linguistic elements such as verbs, nouns, adjectives and so on, and the axis of combination governed by rules of genre.
I foreground Crawford’s ludological argument because it highlights some of the issues that arise when one doesn’t care to know much about the study of literature. Crawford understands literature as rule-based, rigid and non-fun, and then trots out his own storytelling-model based or rigid syntactical building blocks and rule-based laws of combination, without the understanding the irony. This returns me to ludologist Eskelinen who also argued that “stories are just uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings to games”. In either case, the matter of “story” is stretched over the rigid syntax of language, and the literary structuralist enterprise has consisted precisely in peeling back that narrative skin or “gift wrap” to reveal the bones of human cognitive thought processes, as for example, when we read rhetorical figures such as metaphor and metonymy. In the words of William Carlos Williams, poetry is a machine made out of words, from whose nuts and bolts meaning emerges when activated, similar to programing language in a videogame whose story is eminent and comes into being as we play.

Finally, the question of genre hangs in the background given that “literature” itself is potentially transmedia because its content can take many forms and be transmitted across diverse platforms. Importantly in this regard the novel, which is the form most games scholars have in mind when drawing or rejecting connections between games and literature, is itself a shape-shifting, difficult-to-define genre whose form, as the term novel implies, is subject to the constant imperative to innovate across media as it has done over time.

**Different Approaches**

While I just highlighted inadequacies in some of the scholarship on games and narrative (or “literature” when narrative is defined as such) there is work on interactive storytelling and the transmedia dissemination of stories explicitly as games that deals with some of these issues. In their article on virtual bodies in *Dante’s Inferno* (2010), Welsh and Sebastian explain that the game is a “reboot of a Trecento poem,” and discuss what must have been Dante’s own struggle in the 14th century to “materialize sin through metaphors of suffering,” while contending “with the abstractness of the subject matter [as well as] the representational shortcomings of language itself,” concluding that Dante’s “corporeal allegories must become interactive objects constructed of light and math that feel to the user like they have heft and volume” (166). This notion of “corporeal allegories” accords with my own model of a “body hermeneutic” that could help to understand the reception of stories transmitted in non-codex media: a poetics of reading that includes how game narratives “engage the body hapitically” (Goggin 219).

Likewise, Kathi Berens’s work on “Novel Games: Playable Books on iPad” is exemplary of what literary theory and game texts can do for each other, that is, through the ways in which games can remediate, imitate or simply embody the kind of meditative depth that we encounter in the expansive literary narratives of the 19th century. In her reading of *Living Will*, Berens argues that the best way to gauge meaning is not in the potentialities of its text, but rather “in the human performance of reading and gaming in new thresholds of egodicity,” and offers a close reading that uncovers the story hidden in the JavaScript code, and which potentially changes the meaning of the game. Here again, the argument runs parallel to my own call for readings that take into account the visceral experience of games, and which demands a configurative/interpretative approach to the unfolding of narrative and its impact on our being as
a whole. Such an approach would destabilize the old mind/body split and account for various modes of sensation as part of the story itself. This is where literary theory, storytelling, and games may be seen as coming together in novels like Delaume’s *Corpus Simsi* and a host of others that in some way remediate video games. Such analyses would include features of the platform/text—shape, topography, ergodicity—and how the story is disseminated through the printed text, the authors’ websites, blogs and so on.

It is likewise important to examine what literary criticism that has dealt with games and storytelling in the past can do for games. For example, if one agrees with Wittgenstein that language is inherently game-like or ludic and that, by virtue of literature’s long association with mimesis, its “as if” function, and its “autotelic” or supposedly non-expository nature, then most fiction is itself a form of game. Andrew Ferguson’s work on *Finnegan’s Wake* (1939) takes these considerations into account while moving games and literary studies into the digital age. Ferguson argues that *Finnegan’s Wake* prefigures much of what computers make possible such as glitching, which “foregrounds the gaps in the code that produces the video-game environment.” This he argues, is an operation that Joyce performed textually, thereby “radically destabilizing” his own work, “leading to effects [similar to] short-circuiting plot events, and entering spaces where a game’s normal ontological conditions are suspended.” As Ferguson points out, moreover, literary criticism resembles glitch hunting as scholars look for keys to unlock the puzzles that constitute the text through which readers must level up.

## Conclusion

My intention has been to highlight arguments presented by ludologists like Eskelinnen who want to keep game studies separate from narrative and literary studies, as well as those game scholars who favour a narrative approach like Murray and Ryan, in order to suggest ways in which a longer, historical view of how stories travel across platforms might offer a more holistic view of where we are at today. Moreover, as my final examples of games scholarship suggest, games, and games that specifically remediate works of literature such as *Dante’s Inferno*, constitute a rapidly moving target that demands that we keep up by finding new ways to take narrative and ergodic complexity into account.

The point of this essay was not, therefore, to adapt a position in any one camp but rather to nod to the major contributors in a debate which was largely about institutional turf, and perhaps never really happened, yet still continues to inform scholarship. At the same time, I wanted to argue for the value of discussing the long tradition of understanding literature as a form of mimesis and therefore as a particular kind of game, and to show how such an understanding contributes to historically situating and analysing videogames. Stories can be experienced across multiple platforms or formats, and my ultimate goal is to see what literary studies can do for game studies by trying to show that the two share more of the same goals, elements, and characteristics than is commonly supposed.

## References


