Plotting the Bare Bones of a Story

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What is Narrative? (Broad Approaches)

“We make narratives many times a day, every day of our lives” (Abbott Cambridge 1).

• Narratives are not only a literary form but a fundamental way of organizing human experience and knowledge (Neumann 8).

• Narrative as a cognitive style or a mode of thinking. In this view, stories can exist in the mind as pure patterns of information, inspired by life experience or created by the imagination, independently of their representation through the signs of a specific medium (Ryan 27).
Abbott: Narrative is so much a part of the way we apprehend the world in time that it is virtually built into the way we see. [...] Even when we look at something as static and completely spatial as a picture, narrative consciousness comes into play (Abbott Cambridge 6).
A Sequence of Events

Genette: “One will define narrative without difficulty as the representation of an event or sequence of events” (Genette 127).

Prince: “The representation … of one or more real or fictive events communicated by one, two or several … narrators … to one, two or several narrates.” (qtd. In Ryan)

Onega and Landa: “The semiotic representation of a sequence of events, meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way.” (qtd. In Ryan)

Bal: “The transition from one state to another state, caused or experienced by actors.” (qtd. In Ryan)
Narrative is about ...

[...] ‘event’ implies transformation and ‘action’ involves agents; if these agents decide to take actions, they must have motivations, and they must be trying to solve problems. If agents have problems they must experience some kind of conflict” (Ryan 24).

Narrative is about problem solving.

Narrative is about conflict.

Narrative is about interpersonal relations.

Narrative is about human experience.

Narrative is about the temporality of existence” (Ryan 24).
Further Aspects of Narrative (Towards Plot)

**Spatial dimension**

(1) Narrative must be about a world populated by individuated existents.

**Temporal dimension**

(2) This world must be situated in time and undergo significant transformations.

(3) The transformations must be caused by non-habitual physical events.

**Mental dimension**

(4) Some of the participants in the events must be intelligent agents who have a mental life and react emotionally to the states of the world.

(5) Some of the events must be purposeful actions by these agents.
Further Aspects of Narrative (Towards Plot)

Formal and pragmatic dimension

(6) The sequence of events must form a unified causal chain and lead to closure.

(7) The occurrence of at least some of the events must be asserted as fact for the storyworld.

(8) The story must communicate something meaningful to the audience (Ryan 28f.).
“It is an implicit acknowledgement that a story is understood as having separate existence from its narration (Abbott Story 39).

“Structuralist theory argues that each narrative has two parts: a story (histoire), the content or chain of events (action, happenings), plus what may be called existents (characters, items of setting); and a discourse (discours), that is, the expression, the means by which the content is communicated. In simple terms, the story is the what in a narrative that is depicted, discourse the how” (Chatman 19).
Building Blocks: 
**Story** as a Virtual Construct

**Three Common Consensus:**

1) Story **exits separately from its rendering** (discourse), formulating the **raw materials of a narrative** (cf. Ryan Narrative 347; Chatman 44).

2) Story **moves forward in time** (cf. Abbott Story 39).

3) Story can be divided into **existents/entities** (characters and setting => the storyworld) (cf. Abbott Cambridge 19f. Chatman 19).

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**Sequence of Events**

Events in a story happen in order. First, next, then, and last or beginning, middle, and end words might be used to tell the events in order.

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**Narrative writing has a setting.**

*It has a beginning, a middle, and an end.*
Building Blocks of Narrative

cf. Abbott 41ff.; Chatman 19, 43; Dansky 2

Narrative

Story (fabula)
- What happens

Discourse
- Transmission/How it is presented
  - Narration

Plot (sjuzhet)
- Discourse also creates “story”

Events
- actions
- happenings

Existents
- Characters
- Items of setting

Kernels
- The vital / essential events of a certain story (skeleton)

Satellites
- Minor events (flesh)

1. Events connected by cause
2. Artful sequencing/arrangement of events
3. Story as discoursed
Video Game Discourse

Dynamic System

Shapes the plot through...

- Cut scenes
- Static images
- Quick Time Events
- In-game artifacts: texts (diaries, e-mails, etc.), recordings, video projections ...

- Gameworld (visuals/ signs => spatial stories / environmental storytelling)
- Scripted events (event triggers)
- Random events

NPCs: Character Dialogue Narrators

Discourse in Video Games

Player interacts with a dynamic plot framework

The Player

Shapes / alters the plot through...

- Player Movement
- Player Action / Agency

Choosing from events, dialogue options, etc.

Choosing to participate in events: battle, picking up something, reading a text, etc.
Dynamic Plot Frameworks
(Catering to one or more interrelated Themes)

*Journey* *(Thatgamecompany 2012, 2014)*

Plot framework: The Hero's Journey

Linear game structure

**Theme(s):** *Journey of life / companionship / happiness*

*Fallout 4* *(Bethesda Softworks 2014)*

Plot framework: critical dystopia

Nonlinear game structure

**Theme(s):** *Search for Utopia / fear and suspicion of the Other*
Dynamic Plot Frameworks
(Catering to one or more interrelated Themes)

1) Game Structure / Labyrinthine Structure

2) Placing Signs in the gameworld (through setting and characters)

3) Player Agency (creating signs through actions)
How *Journey* creates a Dynamic Plot Framework

- A linear route towards a final destination.
- Alternation between ups and downs.
- Route scattered with signs (mountain, ruins, dunes, any in game-object.
- Follows Campbell's Hero's Journey Plot Model.
- Potential interaction with companions (creating signs).

Themes: *Journey of life / companionship / happiness*
Game Worlds as Labyrinths (Aarseth 5 ff.)

The unicursal, where there is only one path, winding and turning, usually toward a center;

Classical labyrinth of Crete:
Theseus “had no choices to make: he could not bur reach the center, and from the center, they way out” (Eco 80; quoted in Aarseth).
... games designers less as storytellers and more as narrative architects (Jenkins 121).

... they design worlds and sculpt spaces (121)

Environmental Storytelling and the Organization of Plot

The organization of the plot becomes a matter of designing the geography of imaginary worlds, so that obstacles thwart and affordances facilitate the protagonist’s forward movement towards resolution (124f.).
Signs evoke imaginings and questions

Gameworld evokes imaginings and questions:

- A place that many years ago was struck by disaster?
- Who are these characters I’m playing?
- We learn about the world through the signs placed in it: tombs, ruins, etc.
Embedded Narratives (Reconstructing the Past)

In the case of embedded narratives, the game space becomes a memory place whose contents must be deciphered as the player tries to reconstruct the plot (Jenkins 129).

But the player does not only reconstruct, she or he creates.
In the case of emergent narratives, game spaces are designed to be rich with narrative potential, enabling the story-constructing activity of players. (Jenkins 129).
Steps of the Hero’s Journey

1. Departure:
2. The Mentor
3. The First Threshold
Steps of the Hero’s Journey

4. Obstacles and enemies
5. Friendly companions
6. Death (near death)
Signs evoke imaginings and the desire for taking action

**Potential interactions with companions:**

- Communicate
- Wait
- Help
- Walk together
- Show the way
- Etc.
“The monomyth model”, so Michael Nitsche, “provides a scalable and adjustable matrix” (64) which allows “a form of quest that comes to live in the player’s comprehension and his or her interaction with the game space.” (64).
Evocative Narrative Elements

- **Game spaces evoke narratives** because the player is making sense of them in order to engage with them (Nitsche 3).

- The elements that are **implemented in the game world to assist in the comprehension** will be called “evocative narrative elements,” because they do not contain a story themselves but **trigger important parts of the narrative process in the player**. These processes can lead to the generation of narrative (3).
How *Journey* creates a Plot Framework

- Every aspect in *Journey*'s gameworld fulfils a purpose.
- Labyrinthine structure towards a final destination.
- Signs out of which the gameworld is composed.
- Pleasurable descends and torturous ascends.
- Potential interaction with companions.
- Steps of Campbell’s Hero's Journey Model.
How *Fallout 4* creates a Dynamic Plot Framework

- Creating a world that revolves around a central problem or theme!
- The Search for Utopia (every faction has their own vision).
- Alternation between various labyrinthine structures.
- Places, people and ideologies you encounter in the Wasteland.
- The player’s agenda => what is her or his Utopia (which faction do I side with).
Game Worlds as Labyrinths (Aarseth 5 ff.)

- **the multicursral**, where the maze wanderer faces a *series of critical choices*, or bivia.
Juxtaposition: Confining Indoor Spaces (Past)

- Unicursal labyrinths
- Embedded narratives of a past that led to the apocalypse
- Confinement, ludic action
Juxtaposition: Confining Indoor Spaces (Past)

- Boston Downtown: Area of Intense Battle
- Diamond City: Failed Utopia
Liberating Outdoor Sections

- The sublime beauty of nature
Liberating Outdoor Sections

- A Place for reconstruction / constructing Utopia
Making Sense of the World through Combinatorial Efforts

- Locations
- Getting to know factions
- Exploration
- Player Action
- Etc.
Indexical Storytelling (Clara Fernández-Vara)

• Indexical storytelling is the **construction of a game narrative mainly through indices**. The story is not “told” in a traditional sense, but rather put together through different pieces, as Nitsche suggests with his concept of evocative narrative elements.

• Thus, indexical storytelling is actually **more story-building**, both on the part of the designer and the player—the designer creates the elements of the story and integrates them in the world, the player has to interpret them and piece them together (5).
Interpreting and creating Traces (Clara Fernández-Vara)

- Indexical storytelling can be a device for both—in the case of the **history of the gameworld**, it refers to the **indices left over by previous events**, which have left a trace in the space that the player navigates, and which the player has to interpret.

- Indexical storytelling can also **generate part of the player’s history**, where the player can leave indications in the world, which other agents in the world (human or computercontrolled) can interpret.

- In *Fallout 4* this means, **making sense of what led to the apocalypse, avoiding these mistakes** through creating own traces towards a better future.
A Gameworld Catering to one or more interrelated Themes (Fear of the Other)
Conclusion

• **Every aspect of your gameworld matters**, as the player will put together the dots she or he encounters.

• **Signs and possibilities to action** can be structured linearly (*Journey*) or in non-linear form (*Fallout 4*).

• If your game **revolves around central theme**, this will make it easier for the player to connect the different elements of your gameworld.

• Beware of the **toolset** you are using (which discourse methods).
Exercise

• **Employ a plot model** of your choosing (one that caters to your gameworld).

• **Outline a plot**: guiding the player but leaving enough room for her or his agency (imaginative and ergodic agency).

• Beware of the placement of signs and the combinatorial efforts these evoke in the player.

• Sum up your findings in a **blog post** (500 – 700 words).

• One post **per group**.
Secondary Sources


