

## **When Narrative and Games Collide**

How a game is informed by narrative, and when it isn't.

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## Introduction

The common idea that video games and narrative are two separate entities is not new. Where a novel or film can be judged and praised on its narrative, narrative within games often takes a backseat, regardless of quality or execution. Why would a movie with the same plot as a video game be praised and the latter dismissed, and likewise, why do so many movies struggle to adapt the narrative of its video game counterpart? The distinction between traditional and video game narratives has only in recent years become easier to recognise, where before games existed almost entirely in the realms of pure interactive entertainment. (Jenkins, 2005) The roots of gaming however should always be considered, after all a video game is first and foremost an interactive experience intended to entertain or provoke and does not even need a form of narrative. However, if a game forgets its foundations, aspects like narrative will struggle to find its footing, and without a games foundation is it a game at all? Or simply an interactive experience? (Buckler, 2012)

## Narrative and Traditional Mediums

A narrative is simply a series of events which are conveyed to the active participant to express a story. A story can depict anything from fact to fiction and often is told in a linear fashion. Moving from a start, to a middle and an end, narratives are often predetermined, and every action, character and setting will be a constant. (Anon., n.d.) Mediums such as novels, theatre or songs, find their roots in narrative and are subsequently built around them. Cinema much like theatre has grown around storytelling. These mediums lend themselves well to the common form of narrative, containing a linear story in which the consumer follows along. (Club, 2018) Unlike these traditional mediums, video games find their roots within classical games, like chess or sports and differ in one key aspect - interactivity. (Jenkins, 2005)

## Narrative and Video Games

Video games at one point were considered only for one purpose; their ability to provide a user a fun experience, and by some still are. However, games can now offer much more than just an experience solely for fun, such as making an experience which can provoke thought, capture reality or convey narrative. Narrative within a video game may sound as simple as writing a good story, and in part this is true. (Simons, 2007) However, just as film narratives require good casting, camera work and editing, video games require their own set of foundations to deliver good narrative. The foundations for video games however, were not initially made to fit narrative, beyond providing context for the user's experience. (Buckler, 2012) Unlike film, which evolved in the early days of its conception to include narrative, video

games have only in recent years began to strongly adapt true narratives to varying degrees of success. (Club, 2018) While video games have included some form of narrative from as far back as 1980 with 'Zork', storytelling often served as a point of context, such as explaining where you are and roughly what you are doing, before leaving the rest to the player. Now games can contain complex interaction between fictional characters, with multiple settings and photo-realistic graphics. (Lindley, 2002) The narrative structure however, remains unchanged from the days of 'Zork', despite the ability to create movie like sequences or motion captured characters - why?

## Interactivity and Structure

Video games are set apart from other mediums like films due to their interactivity and structure. The ability to interact with a fictional world, to explore and immerse oneself within it, is unlike any medium that has come before it. (Juul, 1998) As interactivity is a core function of a game, the interactive elements should come first. Gameplay such as character movement, combat and game systems are integral when developing a game, with narrative coming later. However, that is not to say narrative is unimportant, but it is important to bear in mind the differences of the medium in its creation. (Jenkins, 2005) (Holleman, n.d.) Narrative within mediums like film are purely linear (this is understandable as the viewer is likely to view the film only once) however with games, it is a different situation. The focus no longer necessarily rests entirely on narrative but on gameplay and it is likely a player would play the game multiple times. (Lee, 2013) Often games incorporate a similar structure to allow gameplay within context, with the core gameplay loop between a start and end. (Lopez, 2006) The core gameplay loop is the repeatable chunk of actions the player takes for the entire game. The core loop is usually comprised of at least 3 parts, in the classic arcade game 'Pac-Man'; the player must avoid ghosts, collect dots and fruit, then finally eat the ghosts, as shown in figure 1. (Katoff, 2013) This loop is then repeated for the remainder of the game. Why then is the core-loop important at all to how narrative is conveyed through video games? (Kim, 2014)

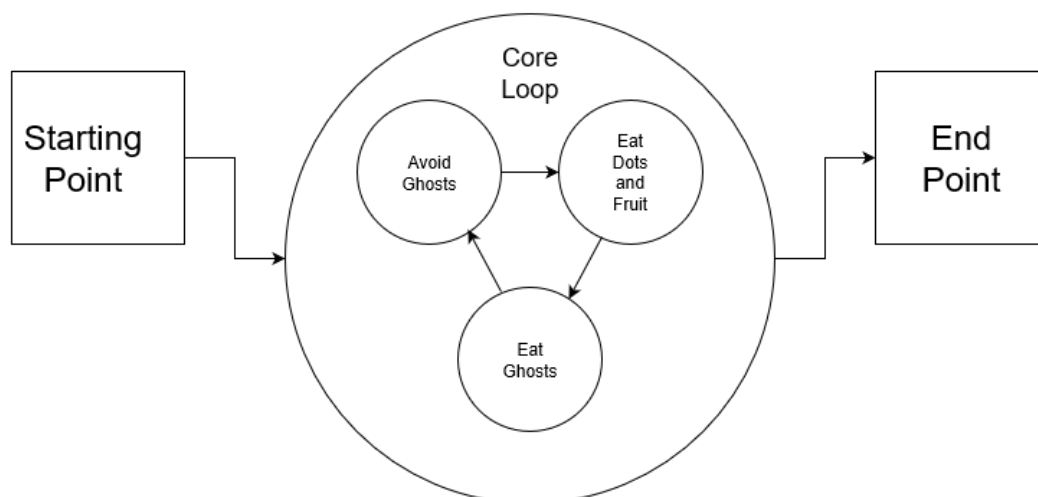


Figure 1: Pacman – Core loop

## Where Gameplay informs Narrative

While it may not at first seem apparent why the core-loop of gameplay might be informed by or inform narrative it becomes clear when comparing traditional narrative to game narrative. In 2001, the survival horror game *Silent Hill 2* was released on the PlayStation 2 system to critical acclaim, being praised for its strong senses of horror, atmosphere and plot. (Byrd, 2017) Soon after, many adaptations of the game came to release including a film by the same name. However, the film, despite being enjoyed among the game's fans was not as easily accessible to non-players. (Dyer, 2006)

While the film was praised for its attention to atmosphere and visuals, matching that of the game. Many criticised the length, dialogue and plot, feeling the movie began and ended strongly but with a weak centre. James Berardinelli of 'ReelViews' describes the film as "overlong, with too many unnecessary scenes" and "a lot of the movie seems like pointless running around". The story of the film is almost directly the same as the games' with some more cinematic changes but with one key difference, no gameplay or interactivity. Without the gameplay which was core to the game and its narrative, the film instead left a hole where gameplay was before, not realising how important that was to the initial design of the narrative. (Dyer, 2006)

In *Silent Hill 2* (2001), the main character and player, experiences the town of *Silent Hill*, an abandoned and lonely place which comes to life with unspeakable horrors. In the game, the core gameplay is in its exploration of this town, the finding of key items and facing the demons inhabiting *Silent Hill*. Throughout all of this, the player is in control, allowing immersion within the world. The narrative is built around this experience, the town acts as a playground for the player to explore, while informing the player of the world around them through the items they find, the creatures they fight and environmental storytelling. (Byrd, 2017)

Environmental storytelling is an extremely important area where video games like *Silent Hill* can make use of the most. Unlike film where all that is shown on screen is completely intentional to the viewers experience, video games allow a user free reign over their experience. Due to the nature of video games often being explorable with open worlds and different perspectives, the idea of environmental storytelling flourishes. (Carson, 2000) In the case of *Silent Hill*, the narrative comes to life with dense fog, abandoned streets, buildings and cars and juxtaposes them against a world of rust, decay and hellscape all for the user to explore and examine.

***“The plot doesn’t feel the need to tell you much at all. Silent Hill 2 is a rare instance of “show don’t tell” storytelling in gaming. The considerable benefit of this approach is that it allows a writer to eliminate such cumbersome storytelling elements as narration, exposition, and any other tools designed to outline a plot outright.”***

(Byrd, 2017)

The journey is personal to the player and on average this experience is as much as 14 hours long. As much as the film attempts to emulate the core gameplay loop of the game, with scenes of the main character running around the town, finding items and escaping enemies, it is no longer personal, and this occurs in a medium where the narrative should begin and end within a two-hour window. (Juul, 1998) (Jenkins, 2005)

### When Narrative Does Not Inform Gameplay

With the popularity of newer, more cinematic movies dominating digital media, the temptation to create experiences within games to emulate this becomes more difficult to resist. (Club, 2018) As technology advances, allowing more complex characters and visuals, attempting to create similar experiences has been becoming more frequent among big budget video games. In Bioware’s *Dragon Age : Inquisition* (2014) the player takes control of a character of their making and is thrown into a world filled with political intrigue and complex characters. The core gameplay of *Inquisition* lies in its role-playing roots, where the player must journey around a space completing missions and getting rewards, like many other role-playing video games. (Kim, 2014) One of *Inquisition*’s differences however is in its use of key cinematic moments which change the direction of the narrative and the players’ main goals. These cinematic scenes function similarly to cutscenes and are mostly non-interactable or features “quick-time events” where the player must press an allocated button within a short time frame. While these cinematic cut-scene style scenes are high quality, it appears *Inquisition* focuses more on these scenes than it does on gameplay. Many critiques of *Inquisition* often cite mediocre gameplay, with shallow open world areas and little to do beyond “fetch quests”. (jhonMalcovich, 2015) (BloatedGuppy, 2010) Unlike *Silent Hill*, *Inquisition* places even greater focus on narrative and character interaction, but in practice the narrative fails to inform the gameplay. A focus on narrative without true thought into the core gameplay which holds it together, is akin to making a pie without the filling, it might look good, but it has no substance. (Lopez, 2006)

***“If some games tell stories, they are unlikely to tell them in the same ways that other media tell stories. Stories are not empty content that can be ported from one media pipeline to another.”***

(Jenkins, 2005)

### Interactive experiences

A game is often defined by its rules and ability to allow a user a fun experience, however in recent years companies like Telltale Studios have released games which have blurred the line when it comes to those definitions. (Thompson, 2017) Before the height of their popularity Telltale Studios released fairly classic but also very cinematic graphic adventure games, with focus on exploration, item finding and puzzle solving. However, after the release of their tie-in game, *“The Walking Dead”* (2012), their method of game creation changed substantially. Focusing instead solely on the narrative experience and the characters reactions to those events. Initially praised as the reinvention of the graphic adventure genre, as Telltale have continued the trend, the praise has given way to numerous critiques of their games. Recent releases such as *‘Game of Thrones’* or *‘Batman: The Enemy Within’* have led to fans feeling disenfranchised, with many disappointed that their interactions do not effect the narrative in any meaningful way and the feeling Telltale falsely advertises its games. Telltale suffers from the issue of calling their products “games”. While Telltales’ games began as a more cinematic variant on graphic adventure games, with the ability to explore and solve puzzles, their recent games have stripped these features back to the extreme, leaving only small sections to walk around or look at before moving onto the next scene. Without these interactions, players are left feeling like they are not affecting the narrative but simply being dragged along with it, and as such, the term “game” applied to these experiences does more harm in representing their products. When narrative becomes such an integral part of ones’ experience and interaction secondary, the final product becomes less of video game and more of an interactive experience. (Thompson, 2017)

***We must, therefore, be attentive to the particularity of games as a medium, specifically what distinguishes them from other narrative traditions. Yet, in order to do so requires precise comparisons - not the mapping of old models onto games but a testing of those models against existing games to determine what features they share with other media and how they differ.***

(Jenkins, 2005)

## Conclusion

Attempting to place traditional narratives within video games can be difficult; structurally the medium of video games is unique when it comes to storytelling and implementing narrative within games can be treacherous without proper consideration. It is easy to see when games use narrative and gameplay to inform each other, and narrative can become so much more than it can alone. Games like *Silent Hill* use the game world itself and the player to further the underlying narrative, without falling into the trappings of creating an interactive film. Without well considered core mechanics, a game can fall prey to becoming a lacklustre experience with small chunks of effort scattered between. Strong narrative alone cannot create a good gaming experience, but in combination with strong foundations of gameplay and good environmental storytelling a game can push great boundaries in the pursuits of narrative.

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