

GAME DESIGN AS NARRATIVE ARCHITECTURE

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Conflict Between Games and Story

- Interactivity
 - The ability of the game world to respond to the player's input
- Narrative Information
 - the aspects of a game that contribute to the story it tells

“Interactivity is almost the opposite of narrative; narrative flows under the direction of the author, while interactivity depends on the player for motive power.”

-- Ernest Adams

Conflict Between Games and Story

“There is a direct, immediate conflict between the demands of a story and the demands of a game. Divergence from a story's path is likely to make for a less satisfying story; restricting a player's freedom of action is likely to make for a less satisfying game.”

-- Greg Costikyan

- Ludologists wanted to see the focus shift onto the mechanics of game play
- Narratologists were interested in studying games alongside other storytelling media

Conflict Between Games and Story

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- Middle Ground: Examine games as their own medium of narrative communication
 - Games should only be analyzed in terms of the medium specificities of video games, and not with respect to filmmaking, books or other media that have their own methods.
- Essentially, look to the role of game space in crafting a unique narrative experience.

Background: Game Spaces

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- Games fit within a tradition of spatial stories
 - Hero's odysseys, quest myths, or travel narratives
- Game space
 - The virtual space within which a video game takes place
 - “Game designers don’t simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces”
- Predecessors to video games can be found in board games
 - In both, the design of spaces is paramount even where narrative context is also provided
 - Everything arises from space, and so video games narratives can arise from these space

Background: Jenkins' Five Points

1. Not all games tell stories
2. Many games do have narrative aspirations
3. Narrative analysis need not be prescriptive
4. The experience of playing games can never be simply reduced to the experience of a story
5. If some games tell stories, they are unlikely to tell them in the same ways that other media tell stories
 - a. Game spaces are useful as the main asset that game developers have for constructing their own narrative

Background: Current Game Discourse Issues

- Too narrow a model of narrative
 - Currently focused with the rules and conventions of classical linear storytelling at the expense of consideration of other kinds of narratives, such as spatial narratives
- Too limited an understanding of narration
 - Currently focused more on the activities and aspirations of the storyteller at the expense of narrative comprehension.
- Deals only with the question of whether whole games tell stories
 - Doesn't consider micronarratives, or elements that might enter games at a more localized level.

Key Idea

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There needs to be an increased understanding of game designers as narrative architects, and not storytellers.

- There should not be any prescriptive and unbending video game terminology
- Jenkins provides some suggestions for broader development by considering how narrative architectures interact with game space

Narrative Architectures in Game Space

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- Four models of how narrative possibilities might get mapped onto the game space
 - evocative spaces
 - enacting stories
 - embedded narratives
 - emergent narratives
- These are different approaches to game spaces that generate unique narratives.

Evocative Spaces

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- Non game example: Disney World

“The story element is infused into the physical space a guest walks or rides through. It is the physical space that does much of the work of conveying the story the designers are trying to tell....Armed only with their own knowledge of the world, and those visions collected from movies and books, the audience is ripe to be dropped into your adventure. The trick is to play on those memories and expectations to heighten the thrill of venturing into your created universe.”

Evocative Spaces

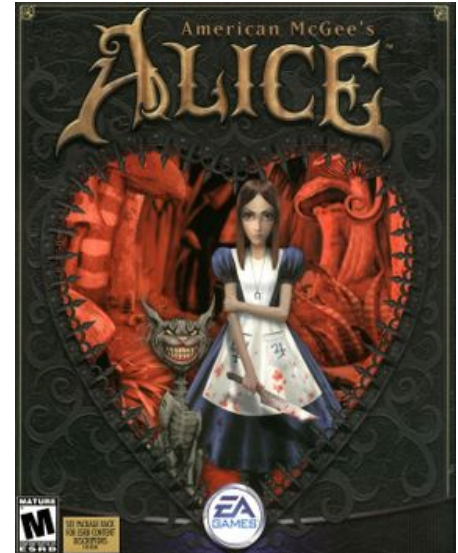
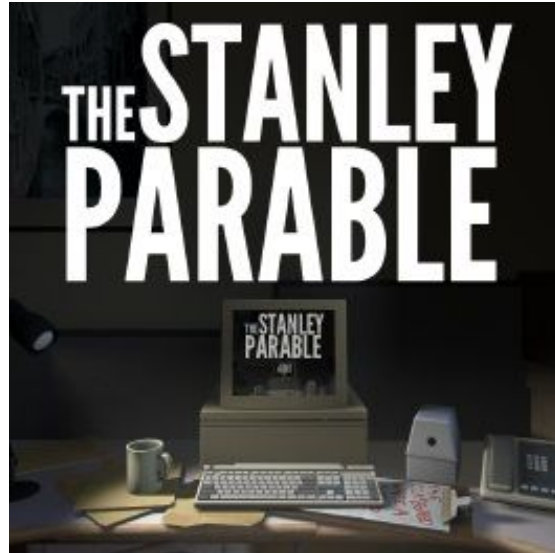
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- Spaces that “evoke pre-existing narrative associations”
- Environmental storytelling creates the preconditions for an immersive narrative experience
 - evoke pre-existing narrative associations
 - provide a staging ground where narrative events are enacted
 - they may embed narrative information within their mise-en-scene
 - provide resources for emergent narratives

Evocative Spaces

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- Examples
 - *Stanley Parable*
 - *American McGee's Alice*



Evocative Spaces: Transmedia Storytelling

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- Depends less on each individual work being self-sufficient than on each work contributing to a larger narrative economy
 - Information communicated through books, film, television, comics, and other media
 - Games will give concrete shape to memories
 - Ex: Jedi: Fallen Order

Enacting Stories

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- Stories that provide “a staging ground where narrative events are enacted”
- Stories “may be structured around the character’s movement through space and the features of the environment may [change] that plot trajectory”
- Progression through space is the dominant means to experience narrative

Enacting Stories

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- Micronarratives
 - Micronarratives share smaller ideas that may be an offshoot of the general brand message
 - Cut-scenes, animations, dialogue, NPCs, object interactions
 - Noteworthy additions that can color the player's experience of the game
- Odessa Steps sequence in Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*
 - Series of short narrative units that are stock characters or situations
 - None of them last more than a few seconds

Enacting Stories

- Examples
 - *Journey*



Embedded Narratives

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- Narrative comprehension
 - “process by which viewers assemble and make hypothesis about likely narrative developments on the basis of information drawn from textual cues and clues.”
- Embedded narratives are stories that involve information within their mise en scène
 - Clues, notes scattered on the ground, dialogue
- The activity of the players themselves constructs the overall story
 - Most common forms of this narrative are detective and conspiracy

Embedded Narratives

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- Detective stories
 - Two kinds of narratives
 - One unstructured and controlled by the player as he/she explores
 - One pre-structured but embedded within the mise en scène
- The game world becomes an “information space”
- This allows for balance between the flexibility of interactivity and a pre-authored narrative

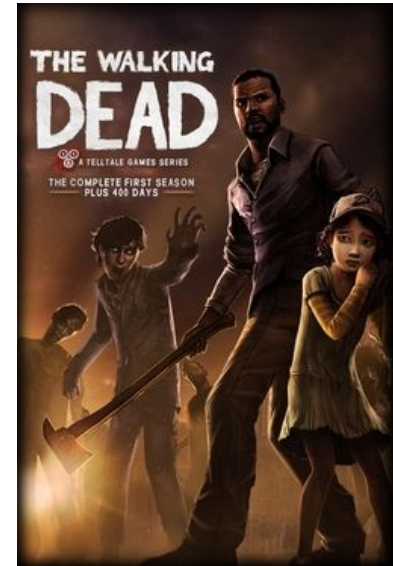
Embedded Narratives

- “Staged areas...[can] lead the game player to come to their own conclusions about a previous event or to suggest a potential danger just ahead. Some examples include...doors that have been broken open, traces of a recent explosion, a crashed vehicle, a piano dropped from a great height, charred remains of a fire.” -- Don Carson

Embedded Narratives

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- Examples
 - *LA Noire*
 - Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead*

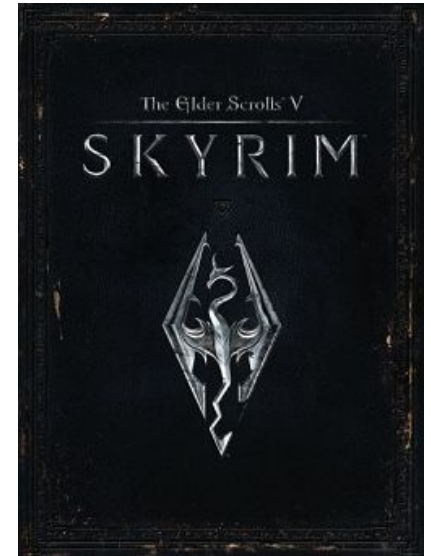


Emergent Narratives

- Players have their own authorship and agency, and look toward defining their own narrative experience and objectives in the grand scheme of the videogame.
- Stories emerge based on a player's choices and actions within game space
- Requires specific design of the game space
 - Choices about the design and organization of game spaces have narratological consequences

Emergent Narratives

- Examples
 - *The Sims*
 - *Skyrim*



Conclusion

Spatial design can enhance our sense of immersion within a familiar world, communicate a fresh perspective on that story through the altering of established details, and allow for new forms of narrative to emerge through player-game interactions. These four models serve as suggestions and ideas for the development of discourse in game design narratives.