# Games Telling Stories

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Diegesis

A style of storytelling in which the narrator explicitly reveals information about the world and its characters rather than showing or enacting it.

- It comprises the narrative's world that is interacted with and encountered by characters
  - Existents: characters and settings
  - Events: actions and happenings within a narrative
- The story is recounted: the events have occured prior to the narration
- The speaker and audience are detached from the story

The 3 Levels of Diegesis in Narrative Fiction
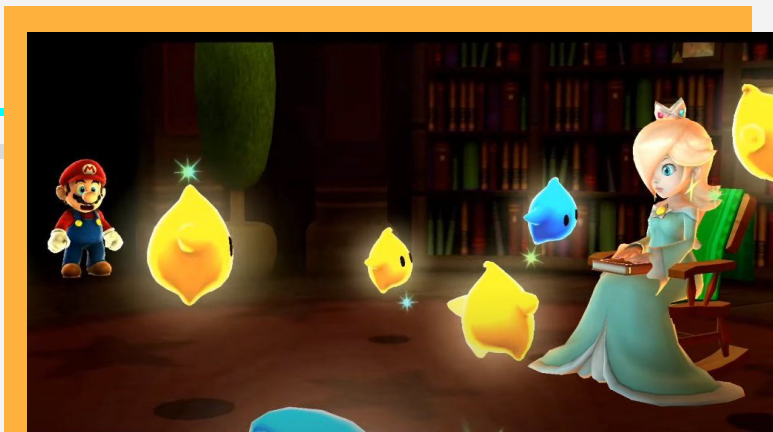
Super Mario Galaxy (2007)

Extradiegetic: refers to elements that exist outside of the story world
- Health bar, Coin count

Intradiegetic: elements within the story world: fictional time, places characters, actions, thoughts, etc.
- Mario going to save the princess, Bowser, Goombas, Koopa Troopas

Metadiegetic: a story within a story
- Rosalina's storybook

Other Terms to Remember

Dynamic Systems: a system that allows a user to explore/interact with it. This allows for a multitude of possible sequences and outcomes, thus creating a unique experience for each user

- video games with multiple endings
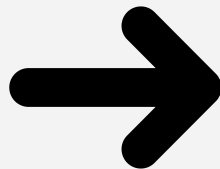

Silent Hill 2: In Water Ending

Silent Hill 2: Dog Ending

Other Terms to Remember

Translation (AKA Remediation): the process of transforming one media form into another

Anime

PS4 Game

"Games Telling Stories?" - Jesper Juul

In this piece, Juul applies narrative theory to video games in order to highlight their key *differences*:

- Games aren't part of "the narrative media ecology formed by movies, novels, theatre"
- Temporal differences between games and narratives
- Relationship between reader/viewer and story is vastly different than that of a player and a game

Games and narratives can work together, but they are not one in the same

Remediation and the Narrative Media Ecology

Juul demonstrates that video games are not part of the "narrative media ecology" by exploring film-game remediation:

Film-to-Game
- The *Star Wars* (Atari 1983) game based off of *A New Hope* (1997)
  - Based off the climax of the film. The game does not include "prehistory, relations, characters, or purpose."
  - Unlike the movie, another death star is generated after one is defeated.

The game focuses on one sequence and does not have a narrative that can be recognized without prior knowledge of the *Star Wars* film.

Game-to-Film
- The *Mortal Kombat* (Anderson 1995) film
  - The original game was a dynamic system with multiple existents and events, whereas a film can only have specific characters and one outcome

"Working from game to movie, the game is no longer a game, but is rather presented as specific game sessions, played by specific characters, with specific outcomes"

Temporal Differences Between Games and Narratives

Story time: intradiegetic (time of the the events that are being told)

Discourse time: extradiegetic (time of narrating the events)

Narrative Media (novels, movies, etc)
- Usually asynchronous (can occur at different times)
- "In Eisenstein's account there is the sense that the text before us, the play or the film, is the performance of a 'prior' story." (Bordwell, p.15)
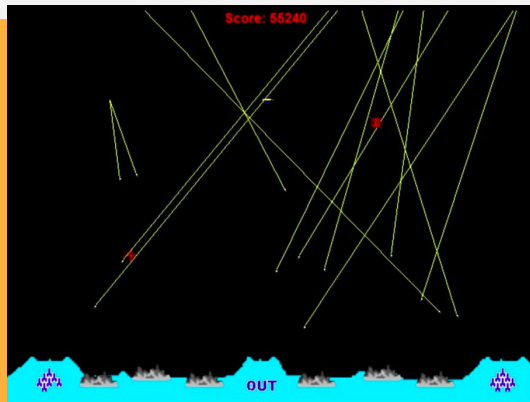
Video Games
- Usually synchronous (in the moment)
- events represented cannot be past or prior
- The player can recount what happened during a play session

The Player and the Game

Most narrative forms are about anthropomorphic characters that the reader can identify with. However, games do not require such characters.

- In Missile command (Atari 1980), the player is not represented by a character. This is because the player themself is the "anthropomorphic" protagonist in the game.

Unlike traditional narratives, games can directly involve the player. They do not need an anthropomorphic character that a viewer can emotionally relate to. This allows video games to be much more abstract.

Missile Command (1980)
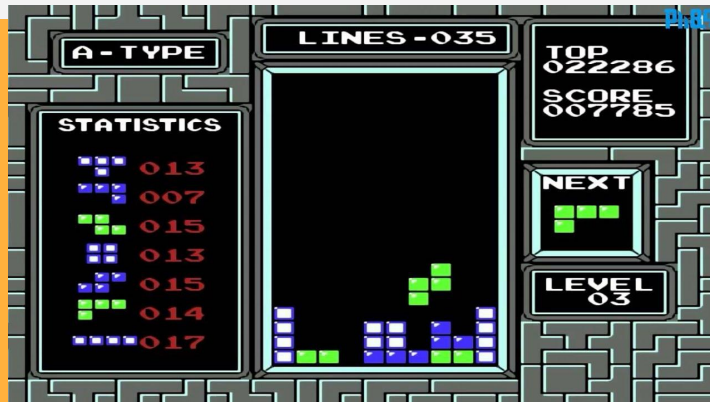
Tetris (1980)

According to Juul: Games and Narratives *Are* Different

Although video games and narratives have a few similarities, they have key differences that disqualify video games as narratives.
- academics, researchers, designers, etc. should focus less on attempting to describe video games as narratives
- video games are interactive: direct systems that involve "rules, goals, player activity, the projection of the players' actions into the game world, the way the game defines the possible actions of the player"

These unique areas are what should be focused on and studied

Narratology vs Ludology

Essentially there is a disagreement over whether or not video games are stories or systems.

- Jenkins believes that games are about storytelling the same way film and novels are
- Juul sees games are a form of play, therefore a unique form unrelated to storytelling.

In reality, narrative also has influence over what video games are today.

"The Last of Us: Stealthy Cinematic Survival Horror"

Critics praised *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013) for being "cinematic," but why is that seen as a compliment for a video game?

Cinematic Games and Cinema Envy

Not unlike the struggle for film and photography to be seen as art in the 20th century, video games often face little respect as a medium.

- According to the article "Cinematic Games: Video Games and the Shadow of Cinema", "this desire for legitimacy manifests itself in using this idea of the "cinematic" to describe... games that we consider to be top of the form."
- Fears that video games can only become high culture by "approximating and emulating" film

However, games that prioritize cinematism often sacrifice gameplay, which creates little more than a walking simulator.

Walking Simulators

While there are many people who despise walking simulators, some critics laud them as "true art" as opposed to traditional video games.

- Walking simulators abandon the "militaristic conventions" of video games (Clark 2017)
  - Presupposition that video games *should* abandon their key mechanics if they want to be seen as art.

Question: What is the point of making a video game with a narrative that could easily be explored through a traditional medium such as film?

Firewatch (Campo Santo 2016)

The Online Disinhibition Effect

"People say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn't ordinarily say or do in the face-to-face world" (Suler 2004).

- Benign vs toxic disinhibition
- Because cyberspace is **anonymous**, nobody has to own their behaviour
- Users are **invisible**, which emboldens them to say and do things they would not do in real life
- Online communication is **asynchronous**, which allows people to express themselves more honestly
- **Solipsistic introjection:** typed-text conversations can make a user feel as if they are talking to themself
- **Dissociative imagination:** online lives feel like a game or a dream world. The user "dissociates online fiction from offline fact."
- All cyberspace users are peers, which minimizes real-life authority

Does the disinhibition effect reveal our true selves or only a dimension of our true selves?

What Does the Online Disinhibition Effect Have to Do with Video Game Stories?

Video games create stories that allow players to break boundaries that they wouldn't normally break in real world settings
- The *Grand Theft Auto* series (Rockstar Games)
- *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* (Ledonne 2005)

Video games can also generate situations that allow players to explore their own morals and ethics, which can provide positive benefits
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Do these fictitious stories spill over into real life? What effects do they have on a player's disposition?
- Players often think that they can dissociate from their video game personas or characters, but their actions and the events they experience online can affect how they perceive reality
  - Studies about how video games cause violence, empathy, better decision making, ethical reasoning, etc.

Applications in Game Design

- Consider writing stories that can be effectively told through the video game medium
- Strive for balance between content and gameplay
- Make sure gameplay does not contradict the narrative (no endless Death Stars)
- You don't have to rely on other mediums for context
- Create tangible goals within your games
- Be considerate of what you allow your player to do in game space. This could affect reality.

Key Takeaways

- Diegesis comprises all parts of the narrative (time, existents, events, narrator, places, etc.)
- Video games are different from narratives
- The tendency to compare video games to narrative and cinema stems from the want for video games to be seen as legitimate and "high culture"
- The online disinhibition effect allows people to say/do things they would not do in real life. This reveals a facet of their true self.
- Video game stories create situations that allow players to do things they would not do in real life. Studies suggest that this can have positive and negative effects.

THANK YOU!