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Mobilization of Knowledge and Narrative Improvisation in Storygames

Olivier Caïra (Université d'Évry/EHESS)

“So, you know those old radio plays? Where people take on characters and speak as them, but occasionally switch into narrator mode? That’s how a story game sounds. Except that instead of reading from a script, we’re creating that through play. Some of it we’re making up all on our own, and some of it’s coming from the rules of the game. We roll dice, sometimes, because the rules tell us certain things based on what we roll. So, there’s elements of radio play, improv, board games and conversation. The specifics are always different.”

Avery Mcdaldno, storygame designer (<http://buriedwithoutceremony.com>)

I have been working on fiction for the last twenty years as a sociologist, and five years ago the CRAL invited me to join its narratology team in Paris, mainly because I try to study what I call an expanded and updated range of fictional works and experiences¹. I think that the theory of fiction and narratology have a lot to learn from games in general, and not only from video games. This is why I will deal with storygames in this paper.

The study of these games remains a virgin territory, even in “post-classical” narratology, which is supposed to expand the range of its objects beyond its literary birthplace². Narratologists are everywhere today, from music to physics, from economics to medicine, from sports to food, we have plenty of new fascinating objects to study. But it is astonishing to note that the field of narratology encompasses both stories and games, but not storygames.

The first section of this paper comments on this missed opportunity and the reasons why narratologists should study these objects. The second section is concerned with the recurring questions of plot and emplotment techniques, because storygames shed new light on these issues. The third section outlines a major distinction in the field of games in general and storygames in particular: the dialectic between intradiegetic plots and extradiegetic stakes.

Storygames and Narratology: Why Parallels Never Met

The first explanation of this paradox is a global discrepancy between digital and analogue interactive storytelling. Many scholars nowadays study digital interactive narratives in “digital humanities” teams, projects and departments which provide them with visibility and professional opportunities. It is much more “hazardous”, in terms of academic and institutional visibility, to study tabletop or live action roleplaying games which both exist since the seventies, or analogue storygames which only appeared in the nineties.

Compared to video games or collaborative online storytelling projects³, these analogue narrative games are unglamorous research objects. Firstly because they require extensive fieldwork, and secondly because they are not meant generate reproducible fictional works, which could be displayed as “end products” in an academic talk or paper. You have to spend hours playing elves or hobbits in tabletop roleplaying games, and none of your recordings will sound like a “well-formed” narrative⁴. You have to stay in costume in a forest for several weekends to really discover live action roleplaying games, but you will be unable to provide a global narrative of what happened during the session⁵. So we can understand why so many narratologists are reluctant to deal with these games, despite their scientific interest in terms of scriptwriting and collective narrative improvisation.

Storygames are much simpler. All you have to do is buy a game, sit at a table with some friends, and play for an hour approximately. As game designer Avery Mcdaldno writes: “Story games allow us to experiment with storytelling, in a way that’s detached and playful. We can take on new roles, experiment with new ideas, and we can leave it behind when the game is over. That it’s a game takes away a lot of the pressure – of doing it well, of proving anything, of impressing anyone. The point is simply to play.”⁶

What are storygames? The first of them and still one of the most successful, *Once upon a time*, was published in 1994. It is a card game sold in a small cardboard box, not very different from traditional games. Its rules are simple. Each player starts the game with several “storytelling cards” which depict elements of the traditional fairytale: characters (a princess, a dragon), items (a sword, a tree), places (a village, a lake), aspects (ugly, disguised) and events (an argument, people meet). Each player draws one, and only one “Happy Ever After” card, which is the secret conclusion of her narrative. Each of these 55 cards leads to a different ending sentence.

1 Caïra 2011

2 Herman 1999, Ryan 2004, 2006

3 Rettberg 2014

4 Mackay 2001, Caïra 2007

5 Kapp 2013

6 <http://buriedwithoutceremony.com>

I have recorded many sessions of *Once upon a time* in French, but improvisation raises many translation problems, so I will use the example given in the game's rulebook in English:

Cliff: "*Once Upon A Time there was an old woman...*" (Plays "Old Woman" card)

"...Who was very sad. She lived in a very poor country which had an evil king..." (Plays "King" card)

"...Who taxed the people terribly. All the people wanted someone to come along and get rid of the king, but no one in the kingdom was brave enough to do so. The old woman decided that she would go and find a Hero to help her, so she set off on a long journey..."

(Spike plays the "Journey" card. He becomes the new storyteller. Cliff takes the top card from the *Once Upon A Time* deck, and play continues)

Spike: "*She travelled for many days until she came to a village.*" (Plays "Village" card)

Here, the game begins with Cliff introducing the story of an old woman. The rule says that "whenever the storyteller mentions something which is shown on one of her cards, she may play that card, placing it face up on the table. Each card should be mentioned in a separate sentence and should be of some importance to the story. It is not acceptable to mention things for no reason just so you can play your cards." This point is critical: it means that basic "power gaming" – a win-at-any-cost attitude – will or would instantly destroy the narrative dynamics of *Once Upon A Time*. Traditional game designers never use expressions like "of some importance" or "for no reason", because they are too vague and therefore lead to conflict between players.

So Cliff plays the "Old Woman" card and introduces a new important character, the Evil King, in a separate sentence. But his narrative is soon interrupted, because Cliff unintentionally mentions one of Spike's storytelling cards, "Journey". Spike becomes the new storyteller and he must continue where Cliff just stopped :

Spike: "*She asked around to see if there was a Hero in the village, but they said that the only hero they knew of lived at the top of the nearby mountain.*" (Plays "Mountain" card.)

"*The old woman climbed up the mountain and after many tiring hours came to a castle. She knocked on the door...*" (Spike plays "Door" card.)

(Jessica then plays an "Any Item" interrupt card. Since a Door is an Item, this is a correct interrupt. Spike takes the top card from the *Once Upon A Time* deck and Jessica takes up the story.)

Jessica: "*There was no reply to the knock and so the old woman peered in through a nearby window.*" (Plays "Window" card.)

The game goes on until a player has discarded all of her Storytelling cards and played her "Happy Ever After" card to end the story. Once again, the rule is based on the players' narrative encyclopedias and commonsense: "Should the other players judge that the storyteller's ending card does not finish the story satisfactorily or make sense, then that player must draw a new ending card from the Happy Ever After deck and one story card from the *Once Upon A Time* deck. Play then passes to the person on her left." The designers recommend not to enforce this rule too strictly, particularly with inexperienced or younger players.

Winning at *Once Upon a Time* requires improvisational and narrative skills such as a good sense of foreshadowing. If a player's ending card says "And they were blind for the rest of their days for their wickedness and their falsehood", this player has to make sure that some important characters are wicked and false enough to make their punishment a satisfactory ending. So every time a character gets killed by a storyteller, you can see disappointed faces among the other players, like : "Oh my God! The witch just killed the kidnapper who was supposed to end up in jail in my ending card" or "Hey, don't kill Prince Charming, I need a happy loving couple to get married in the end." Of course, killing too many characters is not strictly forbidden, but it is considered "cheating".

Players do not always respect the traditional fairy tale's narrative conventions. In my fieldwork, I have seen many lesbian and gay characters (the princess saving the princess), many references to current events in France or in the world (such as a strike in a castle, or President Nicolas Sarkozy depicted as the keeper of a necropolis), and many fictional crossovers between fairy tales and exotic universes, like *Mad Max*, *Harry Potter*, and even *Night of the Living Dead* (with a zombi couple happy "ever and ever and ever after").

Here, we focus on *Once Upon A Time*, but each storygame designer adopts a different approach to narrative issues. For example, *Polar base*, by French game designer and theorist Jérôme Larré, begins with the end of the story and the death of all its characters. The players are supposed to be B-movie scriptwriters, and they use storytelling cards in a series of scenes improvised in flashback. Optional rules can make the improvisation more difficult, or simply funnier, like "Parental Guidance" which strictly forbids any reference to sexuality, or "Dominos", in which one character can only kill one other character.

Fiasco, by Jason Morningstar, is based on movies like *Fargo*, *Way of the Gun* or *Blood Simple*, in which private conflicts between characters trigger dynamics of collective failure. The game provides several "playsets" for the improvisation, such as a boomtown during the gold rush, a World War II camp in Normandy, a contemporary residential suburb, or any setting – many *Fiasco* playsets can be found online – where greed and boredom can easily lead to a major conflict.

The Many Faces of Plot

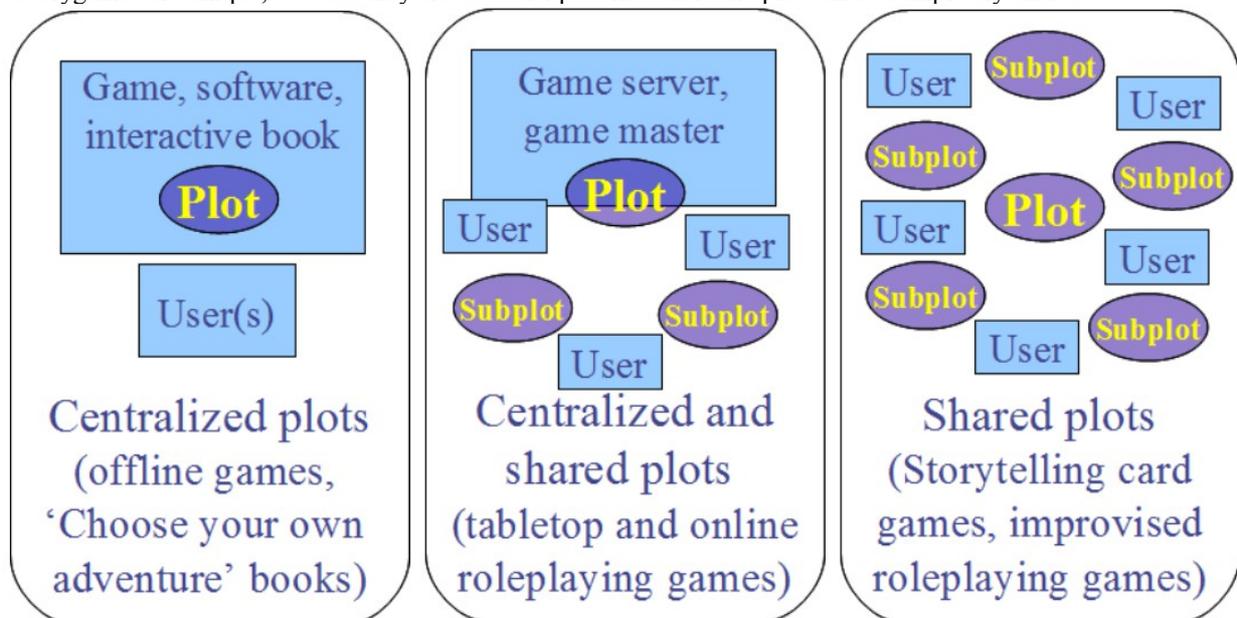
What triggers collective and/or individual narrative improvisation? The answer varies from game to game, which provides narratologists with an interesting range of *emplotment* techniques and processes.

Plot, *emplotment* and *narrative tension* are the three keywords in the study of these games⁷. What interactive fictions have in common with contemplative ones is not the production of well-formed narratives, but the use of “minimal plots⁸” and emplotment techniques as a basis for scriptwriting or improvising. Marie-Laure Ryan defined plot in terms of diegetic conflict: “For a move to occur and a plot to be started, there must be some sort of conflict in the textual universe. Plots originate in knots – and knots are created when the lines circumscribing the worlds of the narrative universe, instead of coinciding, intersect each other⁹”.

The opposition between games and traditional narratives is clear-cut only they are regarded as “end products”. A game that you buy in a shop is interactive, its action is stuck in the present and its engine is a formal system; if you buy a book, you will have a contemplative, retrospective experience of intentional storytelling. But if you move one step backwards in the creative process, you can find a real parenthood between contemplative and interactive fictions. Simulation games do have plots, knots which generate tension in their diegesis. These plots are important because they frame the player's experience: every abstract move in the game becomes plot-oriented; therefore every decision in the present is linked to the past and future of the game, not only in a formal tactic or strategic pattern, but in a sense-making chain of diegetic events.

The temporal pattern of plot in narratives and simulation games emphasize this parenthood. Narratologists are familiar with the following structure: diegetic initial state, exposition, action, resolution, final state¹⁰. In a simulation game, the exposition becomes an instruction: the player is told or showed what to do in order to resolve a conflict in the diegesis. Then, the action has to be a test, a challenge, something that requires personal engagement and skill... or luck. This challenge must have several possible outcomes, like total success, partial success, partial failure, catastrophic failure... and very often, negative outcomes simply lead back to the initial state: “Nothing happened, you can start again”. Scriptwriters for games do not write narratives, they use plots and narrative tension to design uncertain challenges, like quests, investigations, negotiations.

Plot also has a social dimension. Theorists of interactive fiction like Espen Aarseth and Nick Montfort have suggested concepts like the intrigant/intriguee pattern¹¹, or the riddler/riddlee pattern¹² to describe the communication between game designers and game users. These are linear models, based on the traditional pattern of communication between narrator and narratee. Once again, if we move one step backwards, we can describe more open and complex patterns: plots can be centralized, in offline computer games, for instance, but they can also be partly shared with the players. This is what happens in MMORPG and in tabletop roleplaying games: the game master “manages” the main plot, but many “emergent” subplots arise between players. Storygames are unique, because they create social patterns where the plot can be completely shared.



7 Abbott 2007, Baroni 2007

8 Baroni 2012

9 Ryan 1991: 120

10 Adam 1997

11 Aarseth 1997

12 Montfort 2001

A distinction can be made between three major processes of emplotment in storygames:

- Goal-driven collection of diegetic elements – Games like *Once Upon a Time* or *Polar Base* (2012) provide diegetic material, but the relationship between these fictional elements is left undefined. What the rule clearly defines is how the narrative is supposed to end. Plots emerge both from narrative dynamics and from different forms of competition between storytellers. For example, the successive storytellers in *Once Upon a Time* have to use emplotment techniques because their Happy Ever After card brings a resolution. Thus, each player tries to tie narrative knots in anticipation of the untying sentence she must play to win the game. We saw Cliff use the King card when he included an *evil* king in the improvised narrative, thus creating the possibility of a conflict within the diegesis. When Spike plays the Mountain card, he creates minimal narrative tension because an old woman is about to climb it, etc.
- Narrative tension and a setting – In games like *Fiasco* (2009), narrative tension comes first, through multiple subplots among the various protagonists. Instead of providing diegetic “spare parts” like *Once Upon a Time*, every setting displayed in *Fiasco* is designed to create a web of complex and tense relationships between player-characters, before these characters are even named and defined. For example, Joe, Eva, Nick and I decide, each in turn, that my character is the sister or brother of Joe's character, and that they are both looking for a suitcase full of German money, and that my character and Eva's are co-workers who have a stable adulterous relationship. We also define relationships between Joe's and Nick's characters, Nick's and Eva's characters, which involve crime, passion, unjustified secrecy, jealousy... Only then will the characters be named and described, so that the improvisation can start. Thus, each diegetic element, like the “suitcase full of money” or any object, place, or character, is directly involved in a tense dramatic network. *Fiasco's* emplotment rules create a “narrative timebomb”, with so many possible subplots that nobody around the table knows where the narrative improvisation will lead.
- *Tabula rasa* and a time-line – The best example of this third model, *Microscope* (2011), is a “fractal role-playing game”. The game is simply a digital book by Ben Robbins and does not display any diegetic material. The players are free to build or choose whatever fictional or documentary world they want. All they need is a pen and blank cards. Their first steps are to define a beginning and an ending for the time-line they are going to create, and to list the diegetic elements they want to include in or exclude from the improvisation. For example, the Beginning card can be: “Mankind leaves the sick Earth behind and spreads out into the stars”, the Ending card: “Humanity stagnates isolated & alone”, player A can exclude “habitable worlds” (so people will have to live in artificial habitats), player B can include “aliens” but player C can exclude “communication with aliens” (so “there may may turn out to be aliens in the game, but there will be no way to talk to them”, *Microscope* p. 14). Then, the players will, each in turn, add a major Period to the time-line, create an Event inside an existing Period, or focus on a particular Scene which takes place during an existing Event, using roleplaying techniques. These three “sizes” of narrative elements – which materialize through new Period, Event and Scene cards on the table – really make the game fractal, because players sometimes choose to work on the macrohistory of their diegesis, and sometimes to “roleplay” important Scenes (for example, the first encounter with an alien ship).

The Dialectic of Plots and Stakes

As any fictional work or experience, simulation games can be studied on two levels: the intradiegetic and extradiegetic ones. Each of them requires a specific vocabulary. On the intradiegetic level, narrative tension derives from local and global *plots*, which generate challenges for the characters. On the extradiegetic level, another form of game-oriented tension is based on collective and individual *stakes*, such as “who will earn a maximum of experience points ?” or “will my tactical decision be approved by the other players ?”. There are multiple stakes among the players of *Once Upon A Time*. The main interest of this game is not “Who is going to win?”, but “How can conflicting narrators create a continuous and consistent narrative?”

The plots/stakes distinction may not appear to be significant to scholars who only study “traditional” interactive narrativity, which is dominant in the entertainment industry since the publication of *Dungeons & Dragons* in the mid-70's. The “*Dungeons & Dragons* Model” (*D&D* Model) is based on three basic premisses:

- the adventure takes place in a predefined diegesis – or setting – which generally involves tunnels, doors, monsters, riddles, traps and treasures, and non-player characters such as quest-givers or opponents,
- each participant interprets a player-character and tells what this protagonist attempts to do in the diegesis,
- a human or digital “game master” is in charge of determining the results of each protagonist's actions and of expressing their intradiegetic and extradiegetic outcomes, according to the rules of the game's simulation system.

Narrativity in games remains frequently studied through the lens of the “D&D Model”, mainly because the video-game industry embraced it since the very beginning of text-based adventures. In this model, stakes and plots basically have the same orientation towards success: every time her character overcomes a challenge (defeating monsters, escaping a trap, solving a riddle), the player earns experience points and levels which allow her character to grow more powerful and face harsher challenges. Success and failure have globally the same meaning in intra- and extra-diegetic terms, since the survival and evolution of the player-character are the first – and sometimes the only – evaluation criteria around the table.

The interplay between plots and stakes grew more complex as scriptwriting became increasingly important in simulation game design. Jesper Juul, who defines videogame as an “art of failure”, shows how counterintuitive it is to write tragic endings for games: “If we knowingly play for tragic ending, our priorities as players may not be aligned with the interests of the protagonist as much as with the completion of the story arc of the game. In addition, this setup shows a disconnect the personal flaw that makes it necessary for a tragic protagonist to meet a tragic end, and the player who in completing the game has managed to *overcome* personal flaws¹³.”

Gaming as a mere succession of victories constitutes a very poor narrative experience, each episode being as predictable as the next point in the player's learning curve. This is why scriptwriters have learned to add major reversals: after completing more than half of the game's script, the player-character suddenly experiences major misfortunes such as injury, betrayal, kidnapping, loss of equipment and weaponry¹⁴.

The study of storygames sheds new light on the interplay between success and failure on intra- and extradiegetic levels. Tabletop roleplaying games brought many innovations in this field, but they did not break the connection between the player and her character: when you play the same character for hours or for months, you cannot want this character to head for failure, even though the rules of games like *Call of Cthulhu* (1981) or *Dying Earth* (2001) can make extradiegetic success a quite unpleasant experience for fictional characters. Jérôme Larré's *Polar Base* is an example of radical break between the player's position and the character's fate: how can we tell a good story – once we know every character is dead?

This brings us back to the issue of “power gaming”. Most of the players I observed and interviewed during and after storygame sessions said they were not particularly interested in winning the game. Jérémie, 32 years-old: “When I play traditional boardgames, my one and only goal is to win. After the game, I try to understand precisely why I won or lost. My experience of storygames is really different. I would say I adopt a more relaxed attitude, not towards the rules, because you need them to create a good narrative, but towards victory. And surprisingly, after a storygame session, I cannot analyze how I played, because my mind was not focused on what *I* was doing, but on what *we* were telling each other.” What we can notice in Jérémie's comment is a disconnection between individual and collective stakes, even though the rules remain important as “syntactic” guidelines for collective narrative improvisation. Typically, Ben Robbins' *Microscope* provides 81 pages of rules and examples, but does not say who wins or loses the game.

Conclusion

Storygames do not require extensive corpus analysis and can be discovered without any expensive and time-consuming fieldwork. They are totally worth it, because they give a very clear and direct view of improvisation in storytelling. On a more sociological level, storygames are not bestsellers on the game market, but they are popular *within* this industry. Game designers, scriptwriters, publishers, retailers and influential game bloggers are fond of them, so storygames are in the same position as free jazz or contemporary dance in their respective fields: they do not reach a wide audience, but they are popular among *insiders*, professionals who design and market bestsellers.

So why do these games remain unseen in narratology? I see two reasons for narratologists not to study them.

The first one is the lack of visibility, and thus of credibility in the academic field. Storygames are not totally invisible, but they are often confused with tabletop role-playing games, like *Dungeons & Dragons*. It is true that they have many features in common, such as the use of natural language and the small group configuration of players¹⁵. But the main difference is that each storygame player is given the opportunity to define and change the fictional diegesis, not only through the actions of a player-character, but also through the use of a storyteller's voice.

The second way to exclude storygames from the field of narratology would be to say that they are not narratives. Indeed, they are mainly dice or card games and rulebooks, wherein the only narrative texts are short examples of gameplay. But we might argue that a kitchen pasta machine is not made of flour and eggs. Nevertheless, it is the perfect device to make pasta at home. So if storygames are devices designed to create homemade narratives, they do not have to be narratives themselves.

13 Juul 2013: 93

14 Sheldon 2004

15 Caïra & Pajares Tosca 2014

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