From Narrative Games to Playable Stories

Toward a Poetics of Interactive Narrative

Marie-Laure Ryan

The genres of digital narrative are, if not innumerable like the genres of narratives, at least very varied. They include stories generated by artificial intelligence (AI) systems, which have yet to produce narratives that people would want to read for the sake of entertainment; human-generated stories, such as the news, gossips, or autobiographical sketches that circulate constantly through the Internet; and interactive narratives produced through a collaboration between the machine and the user—or, to be more precise, through a manipulation by the machine of human-produced data in response to the user's input. In this article I focus on the third kind, more particularly on the design problem of integrating the user's activity into a framework that fulfills the basic condition of narrativity: a sequence of events involving thinking individuals, linked by causal relations, motivated by a conflict, and aiming at its resolution.
Narrative Games and Playable Stories

Realism

The use of the animation engine allows for realistic and highly detailed environments, which can be explored and interacted with in a naturalistic manner. The player is able to experience the world as a living, breathing entity, with a complex ecosystem and a diverse cast of characters. The game’s narrative is driven by the player’s choices, which can have significant consequences on the story’s outcome. The game’s graphics and soundscapes are designed to create a sense of immersion, making the player feel as if they are truly part of the world.

The player’s decisions can affect the game’s progression, with different paths and outcomes available depending on their choices. This allows for a high degree of replayability, as the player can explore different scenarios and see how their actions impact the world. The game’s narrative is also enriched by the use of interactive elements, such as puzzles and dialogue, which require the player to think critically and creatively to uncover the story’s secrets. Overall, the game presents an engaging and immersive experience, inviting the player to explore, interact, and make decisions that shape the world and its characters.

Whether or not interactive narratives practically exist or are still on the horizon, the potential for such narratives is vast, and the possibilities for exploration and engagement are endless.
Natural Interface

Multimedia games and graphic stories involve the manipulation of digital imagery and virtual environments that are expressed through interactive narratives. These narratives are often characterized by a sense of immersion, where the player feels as if they are part of the story. This immersion is achieved through various techniques such as sound design, visual effects, and interactive storytelling.

The Poetics of Interactive Storytelling

Theorists like Jay Leach and Izumi Shimizu have explored the relationship between computer games and interactive storytelling. They argue that interactive storytelling can be seen as a form of narrative that is far more dynamic and flexible than traditional storytelling. Interactive storytelling allows for greater audience interaction and engagement, making it a powerful tool for teaching and learning.

In conclusion, the future of interactive storytelling is likely to be shaped by advances in technology and the ever-evolving nature of digital media. As with all forms of storytelling, the challenge is to create narratives that are both engaging and meaningful, whether they are presented on a screen or in a physical space.
Page 49

Page 50

Page 49

Page 50
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The pleasures of interactive narrative

The combination of top-down and bottom-up design

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The bottom-up approach is illustrated by *The Sims*. The program creates a world full of things and characters. Each of these objects is linked to a set of possible behaviors, listed on a menu that comes to the screen when the user decides to play with this particular object. When a behavior is selected, it brings another state of the fictional world, and another set of behaviors becomes available. As the world passes from one state to another, a story is created. In this kind of system the choices offered to the player are too numerous and the interactions of the various objects too complex for the designer to anticipate all the possible developments. Bottom-up narrative design is a little bit like the TV show *Survivor*: you throw a number of characters with well-defined personality features together in a space, and you wait to see what kind of story will come out of their interactions. If there is a drawback to bottom-up systems, it is the lack of closure of their output: without top-down authorial control, it is virtually impossible to create an Aristotelian curve of rise and fall in tension, or a sequence of events that stops after a conflict has been resolved. But closure is not indispensable to narrative pleasure: throughout literary history, from the never-ending Renaissance narrative of *Orlando Furioso* to the feuilleton novels of Dickens, Trollope, or Eugene Sue in the nineteenth century and to the modern TV soap operas, readers have time and again been fascinated by narratives that go on and on, like life itself.

While the bottom-up approach is favored by playable stories, the top-down approach is typical of narrative games, such as shooters and adventure games. In this approach there is no event generation on the fly. The player's progression is a journey along a path that is already traced and that leads to a fixed destination, or to several destinations when the system offers branching points. There are two ways to create top-down interactive narrativity. The most common is to start from a set of problems to solve, actions to take, weapons to use, effects to create—in short, starting from the design of gameplay—and to wrap this gameplay into a story. This is how, for instance, the game *Prince of Persia* was created (Mehner 2007). The other method consists of starting from a specific storyworld and inserting possibilities of user action to make it interactive. We see this approach in games based on *Harry Potter*, *The Matrix*, *Lord of the Rings*, or *Alice in Wonderland*. But because the plot of these games must be adapted to the possibilities of action offered by game controls, it is usually fairly different from its literary or cinematic source. Many of the games based on a pre-existing story tend to become stereotyped shooters and quests, with weak integration of the player's actions into the storyline. These games attract players much more for the spatial and visual pleasure of finding themselves in a familiar fictional world and of encountering favorite characters than for the temporal pleasure of enacting a specific sequence of events. In this kind of design, storyworld takes precedence over story.

The top-down and the bottom-up approaches are not mutually exclusive: scripted elements can be used in bottom-up systems to give proper narrative form to the output, while top-down systems, as already noted, would not be interactive if they did not find a way to integrate the bottom-up input of the user in their narrative arc. *The Sims*, for instance, sparks interest by occasionally taking control away from the player in order to stage pre-scripted scenarios that create unexpected turns of events (such as a male character being kidnapped by space aliens and returning pregnant), while *Façade*, a basically top-down design in which the system-created characters take command of the plot and bring it toward closure, manages nevertheless to make the dialogue vary with every performance thanks to the player’s active participation. Any future solution to the paradox of interactive narrativity will lie in a novel combination of top-down and bottom-up design.

The Pleasures of Interactive Narrative

What kind of reward can we expect from active participation in a story? Narrative pleasure can be generally described in terms of immersion in a fictional world, though some kinds of pleasure lie in disorientation. But a distinction should be made between ludic and narrative immersion. Ludic immersion is a deep absorption in the performance of a task, comparable to the intensity with which a mathematician concentrates on proving a theorem, or a soloist performs a concerto. This experience is independent of the mimetic content of the game: players can be deeply immersed in playing chess, go, football, or *Tetris*—all examples of abstract games—as well as in *Second Life*, *Doom*, or *Cops and
EXPERIMENTAL IMMERSION

The study of the effects of virtual reality on the human brain and behavior has been a topic of interest for many years. The use of immersive environments, such as those found in virtual reality systems, has been shown to have a significant impact on human cognition and behavior. The experimenter is able to manipulate the environment in real-time, allowing for a more dynamic and realistic experience. This can help to improve the accuracy of the data collected, as well as provide a more engaging and interactive experience for the study participants. Overall, the use of immersive environments in behavioral research can provide valuable insights into the effects of virtual reality on human cognition and behavior.

TEXTUAL IMMERSION

The textual immersion component refers to the use of text-based elements within the virtual environment. This can include the use of written instructions or prompts, as well as the use of text-based interfaces for interaction. The textual immersion component can be used to provide additional information or guidance to the user, as well as to facilitate more complex interactions within the environment.

SPATIAL IMMERSION

The spatial immersion component refers to the use of spatial elements within the virtual environment. This can include the use of spatial cues, such as visual and auditory stimuli, to create a sense of place and location within the environment. The spatial immersion component can be used to create a more immersive and engaging experience for the user, as well as to facilitate more complex interactions within the environment.

The integration of the textual and spatial immersion components can further enhance the overall immersive experience, providing a more engaging and interactive environment for the user. This can help to improve the accuracy and reliability of the data collected, as well as provide a more enjoyable and engaging experience for the study participants.
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Conclusion

The experience begins with the player being thrust into a new environment where they must navigate through a series of challenges. The story is told through dialogue and cutscenes, which help to build the player's emotional connection to the characters and setting. The game's mechanics are designed to be intuitive and easy to understand, allowing players to focus on the story and characters. The game's graphics are impressive, with detailed environments and realistic character models. Overall, this is a game that successfully combines story and gameplay to create an emotionally engaging experience.
Philosophy, Practice, and Practice of Practice: Toward a Critical Theory of Experience


Note: This content is a draft and may not reflect the final published version.