

“A story must have a beginning, a middle, and an end, but not necessarily in that order.”

-Jean-Luc Godard

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The Story of Games: A Theory of Game Narrative

Celia Pearce
University of California Irvine

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Disclaimer

- PERSPECTIVE:
 - I am not a narrative theorist
 - I am a game designer
- PRACTICAL THEORY:
 - Theory you can use in practice.

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Aristotle was not a game designer.

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What is a Game?

- Games are about PLAY
- A game, simply described, is a structure for spontaneous play
- The purpose of a game is to create a *fun* and *challenging* experience for the player
- A game is a possibility space

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Narrative in Games

- A Play-Centric way to look at game narrative
- Narrative has a radically different function in games than in other media
- Games use “narrative operators” to **support play experience**
- Narrative in games tends to function at various levels of abstraction or metaphor

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Six Narrative Operators in Games

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1. Experiential

- Narrative arc of game play itself
- The player experience as it's happening
- Improvisational, emergent, "live," social
- First person/real time

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2. Performative

- Play narrative, from audience POV
- Can be theatrical and quite compelling, e.g., and extremely profitable

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3. Augmentary/Encyclopedic

- Story layers that augment the experience arc
- Backstory, factoids, personal anecdotes, etc.
- Provides layers, depth and extension of experience
- Janet Murray: "Encyclopedic"

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4. Descriptive

- The retelling of the experience after the fact

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5. Meta-Story/ Narrative Overlay

- A specific narrative overlay
- Creates a narrative context for player experience and social interaction and to create tension between players
- Often exists at a highly metaphorical level

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6. Story System

- Narrative construction kit
- Deconstructed narrative elements; object-oriented
- Gives some or all authorial control to the player
- Can operate in conjunction with a Meta-Story, such as a story world

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Basketball has...

- Experiential: Creates a compelling narrative arc
- Performative: High drama value for audience
- Augmentary/Encyclopedic: Backstory of players; tension between and within teams
- Descriptive: Post game and sports journalism aspect

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Basketball does not have...

- Meta-Story
- Story System

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Golf

- J.C. Herz: It may be fun to play, but it doesn't make much of a story.

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Narrative in Chess

- Abstracted/Metaphorical
- Characters are highly abstracted
- Play pieces: avatars for the player to project onto
- This tends to work better in games than highly articulated characters
- It's also why game characters tend not to work well in film

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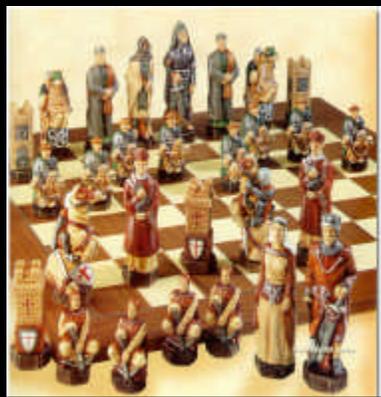
Narrative in Chess

- In the service of game play Without the narrative, the game has an elegant play mechanic
- Narrative serves to tension between the players

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Chess vs. Macbeth

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Computer Game Examples



The Sims

A screenshot from The Sims showing a character creation screen. It features various sliders for traits like 'Neat', 'Outgoing', 'Active', 'Playful', and 'Nice'. There are also icons for different body types and a preview window showing a female character. Below the sliders, there is a text box with a description of the character's personality and a 'Done' button.

The Sims



The Sims



In Conclusion...

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- It's a mistake to force traditional narrative theory on games
 - Plot
- Useful to apply aspects of narrative theory that can enhance the play experience
 - Character Development
 - World Creation
 - Storytelling techniques, i.e., cinematography, music, etc.

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- CRAFT of game narrative that should be cultivated as a unique skill
- Procedural Narrative

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The End

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