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Towards a ludonarrative toolbox

Hartmut Koenitz

University of Georgia
120 Hooper St,
Athens, GA 30602
USA
hkoenitz@uga.edu

Gabriele Ferri

Indiana University
919 10th E St
Bloomington, IN, 47408
USA
gabferri@indiana.edu

Mads Haahr

Trinity College
Dublin 2
Ireland
Mads.Haahr@cs.tcd.ie

Digdem Sezen

Istanbul University
Kaptani Derya Ibrahim
Pasa Sk. 34452 Beyazit
Istanbul, Turkey
dsezen@istanbul.edu.tr

Tonguc Ibrahim Sezen

Istanbul Bilgi University
santralIstanbul, Kazim
Karabekir Cad. No: 2/13,
34060 Eyup
Istanbul, Turkey
tonguc.sezen@bilgi.edu.tr

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INTRODUCTION

This paper contributes a preliminary set of operational categories (a toolbox, or a set of lenses) to conceptualize the relationship between ludic and narrative elements in game design (Schell, 2008). Although we theoretically ground our work in game studies and in narrative models, we frame our contribution as a generative toolset for game design practitioners, to be used as part of the ideation and evaluation processes. Our set of lenses foregrounds modularity and extensibility and provides a common ground for game designers and academics to discuss the relationship between ludicity and narrativity (Koenitz et al., 2015).

A SET OF LENSES FOR DESCRIBING NARRATIVES IN GAMES

Game studies are a fundamentally interdisciplinary field: in contrast with more homogeneous disciplines, ours is characterized by a general interest towards playable artifacts but not by a single shared research method, terminology and epistemology. While appreciating diversity and transdisciplinarity as important characteristics of game research, here we argue for a shared ground allowing more productive discussions with less space for theoretical misunderstandings.

About the (in)compatibility of games and narratives

Whether or not to ground the study of games in narrative theories has been a heated debate since the early 2000s. In that context, narrative-oriented and game-oriented approaches were framed as a dichotomy, painting games and simulations as a “radically different alternative to narratives as a cognitive and communicative structure” (Aarseth

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2001). The first ludological perspectives not only opposed the use of narrative-oriented concepts but, in their early forms, also described interactive narratives as practically impossible: “computer games [are] simply not a narrative medium” (Juil, 1999, p.1). Jesper Juul’s argument - later revised by the author (Juil, 2001) - conflated two claims: a) notions derived from narrative theories are not effective to analyze games, and b) games cannot convey narratives. In hindsight, the first claim followed from the need to legitimise by contrast game studies as an independent academic discipline and to establish their own vocabulary. This necessity gradually faded in the following decade and today interdisciplinary perspectives are welcome (Aarseth, 2014). Although later retracted (Juil, 2001), the claim on the categorical incompatibility of play and narrative remains influential, especially in the professional practice of game design. In this vein, Ralph Coster writes “The commonest use of a completely parallel medium that does not actually interact with the game system is narrative” (Koster, 2012).

Mappings across the ludo-narrative continuum

Whereas different researchers articulated schemas of the interplay between narrative and procedural components, similar models are much less frequent among practitioners. As an exemplar of the first set, we might mention Juul’s “classic game model” (2005) which stresses a multiplicity of forms and includes narrative-related cases (hypertext fiction, open ended simulations, role-playing games, etc.), although only in the periphery of his diagram.

As for designers’ perspective, here we select two examples (Figures 1 and 2) by Stephane Bura (2013) and Warren Spector (2013) from the 2013 Interactive Storytelling Symposium.

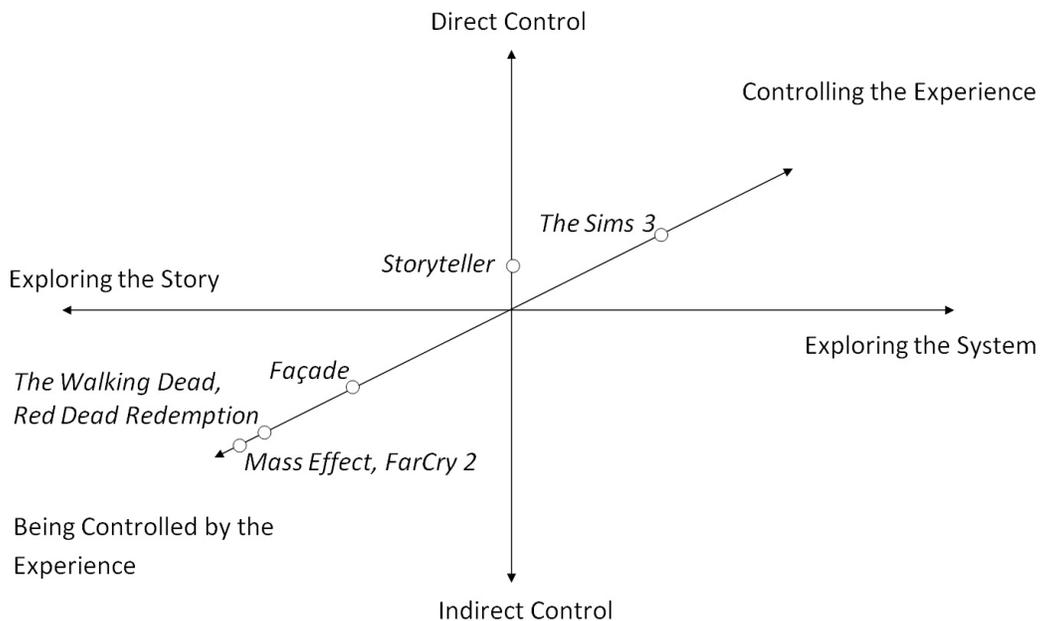


Figure 1: Stephane Bura’s mapping of interactive narratives

Bura proposes a diagram in a coordinate system along the dichotomic axes of exploration (story vs. system) and control (user control vs. system control).

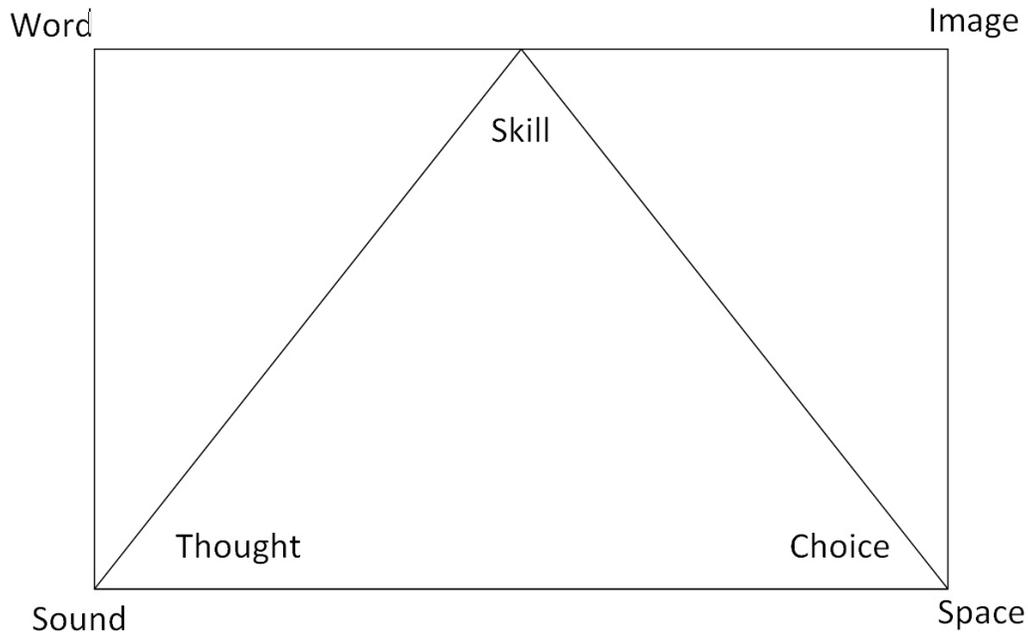


Figure 2: Warren Spector’s mapping of aspects of interactive systems

In contrast, Spector’s example is not concerned with comparing different works, but with the essential parts of a player’s engagement with a single artifact.

THE LUDONARRATIVE LENSES

In this final paragraph, we present a set of proposals to extend the ludonarrative mappings examined so far. We expressly frame our work as a practical contribution to game designers, as a set of concrete categories for a more nuanced and productive understanding of the relationship between stories and games.

As a first step, we propose to structure the ludonarrative field by constructing a set of semantic differentials (Hanington et al., 2012), couples of significative opposing terms (e.g. scripted narrative vs. procedural narrative). Differentials shouldn’t be understood as binary oppositions, but as continua over which designers may position their sketches: by selecting a number of oppositions, structure and meaning are assigned to their surrounding space and allow different works to be compared according to their relative positions.

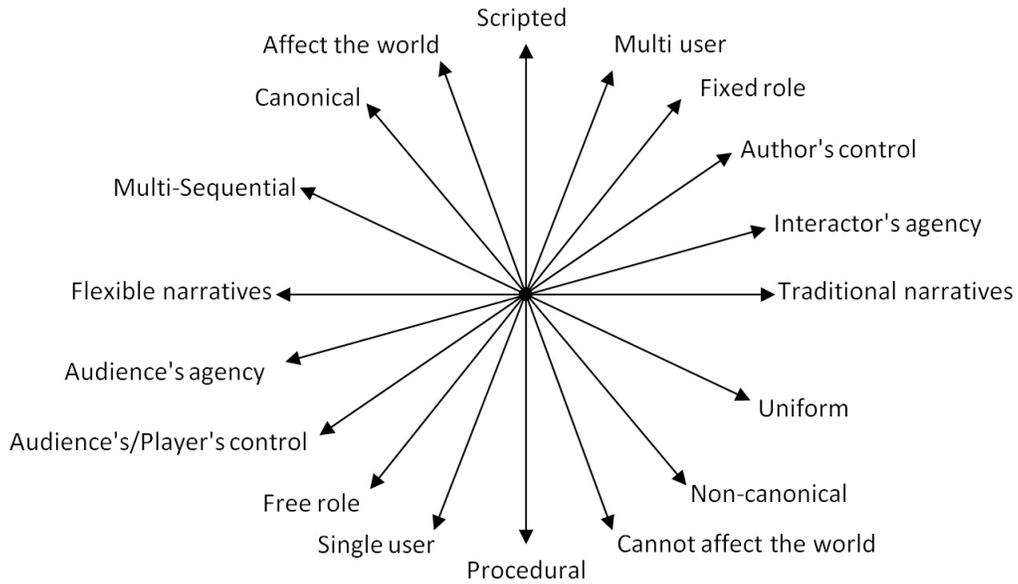


Figure 3: a set of semantic differentials

A second lens places artifacts in a three-dimensional plot diagram (Figure 4) where the X axis represents agency, the Y axis narrative complexity and the Z axis dramatic agency (control over the narrative). In the following diagram, existing artifacts were used as exemplars, but this type of representation is particularly useful when evaluating preliminary sketches.

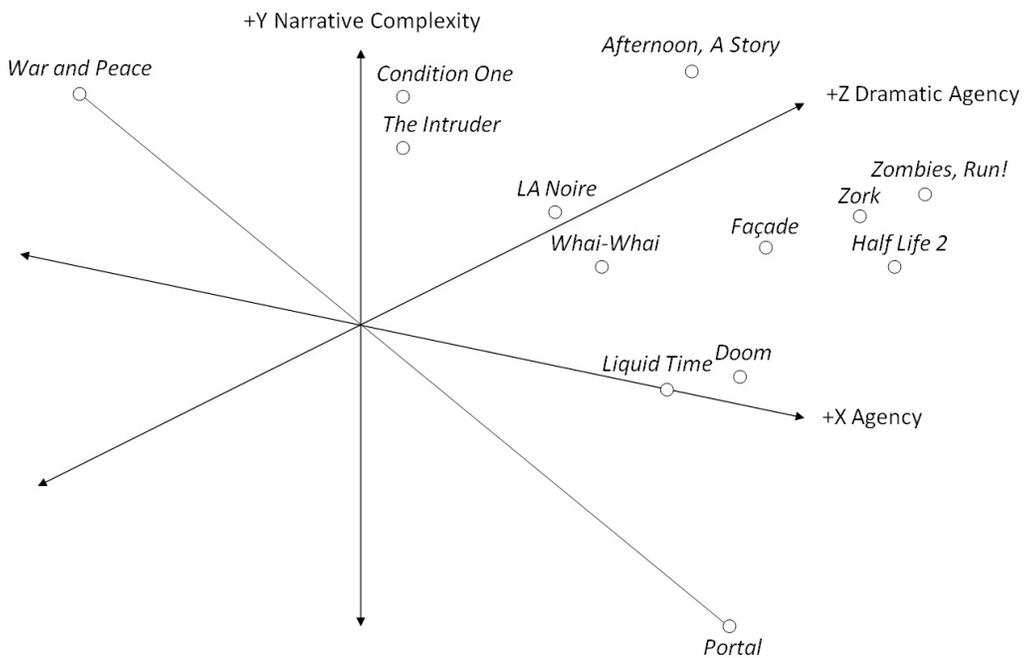


Figure 4: an example of 3D plot diagram

By positioning different sketches in a 3d space, designers are forced to evaluate each category in relation to the other artifacts. Iterations on the same concepts may be plotted inside the same space, visualizing how each proposal evolves.

A table of categories constitutes a third useful lens for understanding the relation between artifacts. After having applied spatial reasoning to the ludonarrative field and finding relevant parameters through the mapping, designers may productively return to a more abstract level by using numerical values in comparing specific characteristics. For the following examples, a scale from 0 to 10 was used, with each value to be understood as relative to others and not as an absolute.

	Procedural Complexity	Complexity of Narrative Design	Agency	Meaningful Engagement
Façade	8	3	4	5
Half-Life 2	5	3	6	8
Zork	6	3	6	2
The Sims	9	1	10	3-7 (no consensus)
Spore	10	0	8	6

Table 1: an example of a table of categories

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As we argue for the importance of a closer dialogue between game researchers and practitioners, this work provides designers with an operational and extensible set of methods to conceptualize, visualize and evaluate their work in relation to ludic and narrative categories. We expressly frame it as a rapid sketching methodology, empowering game designers to reflect on ludonarrative features and moving another step towards creating a vocabulary shared among scholars and practitioners.

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