



Game noir

Description

[Limbo](#) is a grim, award-winning video game in black, white and grey, involving a small boy's dash through a lethal forest. At one stage the boy jumps across the corpses of similar little boys bobbing along in a river. Another game, [The Path](#), has similar narrative connotations, described as a short horror game updating *Little Red Riding Hood*. [American McGee's Alice](#) is an earlier game in which Alice returns to Wonderland on a slash mission. Such games inherit the intensity of the *noir* genre in film, trading emotional intensity in place of spectacle, evocation instead of lavish costumes and sets, mystery in place of clarity — sometimes blending into horror. Game *noir* also brings to the fore the role of narrative in the game experience.



There are two (at least) categories of games, and of computer games developers, it seems. The "ludologists" conceive of games pure and simple as mechanically-defined operations. Think of puzzle games like Tetris, and sports: soccer, ping-pong. There are components, moves, rules and challenges, but no story. On the other hand, the "narratologists" enjoy the story aspect of games. Think of computer adventure games (*Myst*, *Lara Croft*), *noire*, role play, Cluedo, etc.

Theorist of popular cultures, Henry Jenkins, outlines the differences and implications of these two positions, and insists that there is a narrative aspect to all games. At their most play-full, the designers and developers of computer games create spaces in which stories unfold and are revealed, and that get filled in, by other stories from outside the mechanics of the game.

I agree. I would say that even the most abstract and mechanical game fits within a narrative structure of some kind. Narratives (ie stories) are multiple, layered, and nested. Noughts and crosses (tic-tac-toe), one of the most "reduced" and banal of games, is caught up in stories. We could invoke the trivial point that such games have a start, a middle, and an end, thereby exhibiting a narrative structure. Imaginative players might even think of the lines and circles as characters in a story.

But there's also the narrative that unfolds as the players interact, the meta-narrative of the contest, jubilation, the complaining, the expressions of excitement and tedium. The narrative of the game might not be revealed until the game is recounted or remembered. Narratives don't only inhere within the mechanics of the game, but extend well beyond it, a factor to be considered in the design, critique and reception of any game.

Jenkins refers to a larger **narrative economy**, to which any novel, film, tv commercial, or game might contribute.

Increasingly, we inhabit a world of transmedia story-telling, one which depends less on each individual work being self-sufficient than on each work contributing to a larger narrative economy. (p.677)

So it's open season for game stories. Narrative can be spotted everywhere. Here are some suggestions for stories to which any game might be attached.

1. The assertions of psychologist Sigmund Freud are very useful in revealing even the most prosaic operations as narratives. The story of Oedipus tells of childhood trauma, of yearning for the cosy comforts of the mother, and the ambivalence of leaving and returning to this safe place. There's a story here about repetition as an enactment and re-enactment of trauma. Games exhibit repetition in abundance, a theme that Freud relates to concepts of the **uncanny**. Apart from all its other effects, the unsettling aspect of game *noir* is attributable to the role of repetition, the doppelganger, seeing yourself repeated "especially, we might add, in a corps (*Limbo*). But even the most basic puzzles participate in the *condition* of repetition.
2. Think also of progressing through game levels. There's a kind of quest, a rite of passage from one degree of difficulty to the next, induction into a higher mystery "for puzzles as for adventure games.
3. Even debates about game "realism," invoke stories about ever-greater progression towards a state of perfect simulation and immersion (*Hamlet on the Holodeck*). There's a utopian dream here: perhaps a return to an ideal state of perfect representation, perfect immersion in an experience unmediated by the artifice of the storyteller.
4. Games are richly social, even when played alone. They are social inventions. This narrative economy employs a host of actors: designer, developer, player, critic, publishers, as well as narrative devices and scenarios: victories, regrets, cheats, beating the game designer, false starts, and returns. And don't forget online multi-user games.

5. Games also fit into meta-meta-narratives of combatants, geeks, maniacs, and cultural tribes: eg [otaku](#).
6. Games invoke contest, that can merge into exploitation. Think of the [gold farms](#) in which game addicts would play *World of Warcraft* for virtual gold which is then passed on to their bosses for sale on e-bay to other players.

The narrative economy in which games participate is rich and diverse, and what are economies anyway but games of chance.

References

- Jenkins, H., "Game design as narrative architecture", in N. Windrip-Fruin and P. Harrigan (eds), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004. Also in Jenkins, H., "Game design as narrative architecture", in K. Salen and E. Zimmerman (eds), *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006, 670-689. Online: [1](#), [2](#).
- Murray, J.H., *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999.

Category

1. Play

Tags

1. computer games
2. games
3. ludologist
4. narratologist
5. noire
6. video games

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