Ludologists love stories, too:
notes from a debate that never took place

Gonzalo Frasca
Ludology.org
frasca@ludology.org

ABSTRACT
During the last few years, a debate took place within the game scholars community. A debate that, it seems, opposed two groups: ludologists and narratologists. Ludologists are supposed to focus on game mechanics and reject any room in the field for analyzing games as narrative, while narratologists argue that games are closely connected to stories. This article aims at showing that this description of the participants is erroneous. What is more, this debate as presented never really took place because it was cluttered with a series of misunderstandings and misconceptions that need to be clarified if we want to seriously discuss the role of narrative in videogames.

INTRODUCTION

This is an unusual article. My original intention was writing a paper on the role of narrative in videogames (through cutscenes and instructions) for conveying simulation rules. When I mentioned this to a colleague, he was shocked: he thought that, since I am known as a ludologist, there was no way I could accept any role for narrative in games. Of course, I told him he was wrong and that such idea of ludology is totally erroneous. That misconception is, I think, a direct consequence of the so-called narratology versus ludology debate. I believe that this debate has been fueled by misunderstandings and that generated a series of inaccurate beliefs on the role of ludology, including that they radically reject any use of narrative theory in game studies.

Since I guess that I have been in a privileged position to witness the development of this debate over the last four years, I decided to write down a list of the most common misconceptions that it generated. It is not my main intention in this paper to support ludology but rather making explicit all the contradictions that prevented this debate from taking place. However, I do not pretend to be totally objective neither: I do not favor narrative as a privileged means for understanding videogames for reasons that have been previously exposed by several authors and are beyond the scope of this article. Finally, I would like to make clear that I will be speaking only for myself and I am the only responsible for all the opinions expressed in this article.

NARRATOLOGY

Let's start by stating the obvious. The de facto definition of a narratologist in this so-called debate seems to be a scholar that either claims that games are closely connected to narrative and/or that they should be analyzed –at least in part– through narratology.

However, the widely accepted definition of narratologist in Humanities is: a scholar who studies narratology, a set of theories of narrative that are independent of the medium of representation. Examples of narratologists include Todorov, Genette, Greimas, Metz and Prince, just to mention a few. Any of these traditional scholars never worked with computer games. More recently, other narratologists such as Marie-Laure Ryan, have indeed analyzed them.

So, it seems that the first problem that we have in this debate is that one of the terms ("narratologist") has a different meaning outside and inside the game studies community. This of course can be the source of confusion. For this reason, Michael Mateas proposed the term "narrativist" in order to refer to a scholar who uses "narrative and literary theory as the foundation upon which to build a theory of interactive media." [14]. For the sake of clarity, any reference in this article to such scholars will appear as "narrativist". I will reserve the term "narratologist" to describe a researcher who focuses on narrative in any medium, including film, literature or videogames.

LUDOLOGY

Contrary to what has been claimed, the term "ludology" has not been coined neither by Espen Aarseth [3, 11] neither by myself [20]. According to research performed by Jesper Juul, the term was used as early as in 1982, albeit scarcely and with a different meaning. However, the expression seems to have started gaining acceptance around 1999, after my publication of "Ludology meets narratology", which was followed in the year 2000 by Jesper Juul's "What computer games can and cannot do", presented at the third Digital Arts and Culture (DAC) conference. My article proposed using the term "ludology" to describe a yet non-existent discipline that would focus on the study of games in general and videogames in particular. I was a call for a set of theoretical tools that would be for gaming what narratology was for narrative [8]. This need was shared by a large number of researchers, so the word caught on.

However, words have a natural tendency to take a life of their own. For instance, Game-Research.com's dictionary of game studies terms offers two meanings. The first one states that ludology is "The study of games, particularly computer games". This definition follows the one I presented in 1999, which was later expanded at Ludology.org, my research blog[1]. Game-Research's second definition is essentially different: "Ludology is most often defined as the study of game structure (or gameplay) as opposed to the study of games as narratives or games as a visual medium." Personally, I do not subscribe to this second meaning, which I find to be a simplification, as I will explain later.

WHO ARE THE LUDOLOGISTS?

The first time I heard the use of the term "ludologist" was at the 2001 DAC conference held at Brown University. It was used to describe Markku Eskelinen, Jesper Juul and

---

[1] I have been asked several times what is the difference between "game studies" and "ludology". The answer, as far as I see it, is none. Both terms describe our new discipline and I constantly use them as synonyms.

myself. Since our research work generally follows Espen Aarseth's, by extension the term has also been associated with him. Interestingly, Aarseth has never used the term "ludology" on any of his writings.

Additionally, the term has also been used to describe the crew of the *Game Studies* journal, which includes –but is not limited to– the people I just mentioned [15]). Finally, the term has also been specially associated with Juul and myself because of our research blogs (The Ludologist and Ludology.org, respectively). Other game scholars, such as Aki Järvinen, define themselves as ludologists. As far as I see it, a ludologist is simply a game scholar, whatever is his or her position on narrative and games.

WHO ARE THE NARRATIVISTS?

Another example of the non-existence of this ludological/narratological debate is the difficulty to find the identity of the narrativists. Mateas [14] clearly identifies the ludologists but fails to name the narrativists. Henry Jenkins claims that Janet Murray is usually referred to as a narrativist [11]. However, I am not aware of any article by Janet Murray where she takes a position in this so-called debate. It is true that Murray's approach to games is in the context of storytelling (and drama) but it would be inaccurate to situate her on the opposite of "studying game play from the point of view of their mechanics". I know this for a fact: we extensively discussed on videogame theory for two years while she supervised my "ludological" dissertation at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

Other defendants of privileging the use of narratological tools for game studies preferred not taking a side on this debate, but rather decided to situate themselves in "a middle ground position" (Jenkins, [11]), "a fruitful theoretical compromise between [narrativism and ludology]" (Ryan, [19]) or a "hybrid space" (Mateas, [14]).

This lack of narrativists really confuses me: it would seem as if they never existed.

LUDOLOGY VERSUS NARRATIVISM

I believe there is a serious misunderstanding on the fact that some scholars believe that ludologists hold a radical position that completely discards narrative from videogames (hence the title of this article). For example, Marie-Laure Ryan argues that ludology should not "throw away" the concept of narrative from it [18]. She even calls for the "development of a new ludology" [19] that includes it.

The puzzling thing is that, from its very beginning, "old" ludology never discarded narratology. When I suggested the term, I clearly stated that my main goal was "to show how basic concepts of ludology could be used along with narratology to better understand videogames" [8]. In case any doubts still remains about ludology's intentions of peacefully coexisting with narratology, I also added that my purpose was "not to replace the narratologic (sic) approach, but to complement it" [ibid.]. If I do not favor narratology as a main tool for game analysis it is not out of a caprice, but because

I already invested my early research years trying to use narratology for videogame study without much success [7]. Yes, I confess: I was a teenage narrativist.

It is hard to think that Espen Aarseth could have a radical posture against narrative, since he stated in *Cybertext* that:

> "[…] to claim that there is no difference between games and narratives is to ignore essential qualities of both categories. And yet, as this study tries to show, the difference is not clear-cut, and there is significant overlap between the two." [1]

Whoever reads Juul's "Games Telling Stories?" will see that he clearly points out the connections between games and narrative:

> "I would like to repeat that I believe that: 1) The player can tell stories of a game session. 2) Many computer games contain narrative elements, and in many cases the player may play to see a cut-scene or realise a narrative sequence. 3) Games and narratives share some structural traits." [12]

Markku Eskelinen is no exception: he uses narratology as a reference in his studies of games, simulations and cybertexts [4, 5, 6].

One thing is not favoring narratology as a preferred tool for understanding games and a whole different one is to completely discard it. Based on this information, the idea that ludologists want to discard narrative from game studies seems to be totally inaccurate.

RADICAL LUDOLOGY

Looking through the ludologists' work there is one claim from Markku Eskelinen from "The Gaming Situation" which could be interpreted as a sign of ludological radicalism. Rune Klevjer pays particular attention to it in his "In defense of cutscenes":

> "In his excellent article about configurative mechanisms in games, *The Gaming Situation*, Markku Eskelinen rightly points out, drawing on Espen Aarseth's well-known typology of cybertexts, that playing a game is predominantly a configurative practice, not an interpretative one like film or literature. However, the deeply problematic claim following from this is that stories "are just uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings to games, and laying any emphasis on studying these kind of marketing tools is just waste of time and energy". This is a radical ludological argument: Everything other than the pure game mechanics of a computer game is essentially alien to its true aesthetic form." [13]

To start with, Klevjer's quote is incomplete and, I think, it should be read in context.

Eskelinen actually said "In this scenario stories are just uninteresting ornaments […]". The scenario he was referring to is the one provided by elements for game analysis that he previously mentioned on his text. In other words, it seems that he was referring to what the focus of game scholarship should be. The author personally confirmed this to me when I asked him to clarify what he had meant. Even if the text's phrasing might be questionable, I find quite surprising that Klevjer seriously believed that Eskelinen wanted to terminate all videogames that include characters or stories and force us to only play "pure", abstract games such as *Tetris* or *Reversi*.

COLONIALISM IN THE LAND OF LUDOLOGY

Another possible cause for this misconception of ludologists as radicals may be due to what I will call the colonialist/imperialist issue.

I was surprised when the editors of *Screenplay* –a collection of articles on videogames and cinema– felt obliged to make explicitly clear that their enterprise was by no means to present cinema as a privileged way of studying games, nor that it was "designed to be an 'imperialist' enterprise, seeking to claim the relatively unsettled territory of games largely or exclusively for film-oriented approaches" [10]. The phrasing clearly references "Computer Game Studies, Year One", Aarseth's opening editorial for the first issue of the journal. In that article, Aarseth warned that: "Games are not a kind of cinema, or literature, but colonizing attempts from both these fields have already happened, and no doubt will happen again." [2] In that same issue of *Game Studies*, Eskelinen offers a similar remark: "if and when games and especially computer games are studied and theorized they are almost without exception colonized from the fields of literary, theatre, drama and film studies." [4]

I think Aarseth's and Eskelinen's concern with the "colonization" from other fields should be seen in the context of researchers that are working to provide independence for a new field of study. However, to claim that by doing this they reject any intervention from other discipline would be excessive. Aarseth clearly states this when he claims:

> "Of course, games should also be studied within existing fields and departments, such as Media Studies, Sociology, and English, to name a few. But games are too important to be left to these fields. (And they did have thirty years in which they did nothing!)" [2]

Susana Pajares-Tosca specifically responded to this same colonization issue in a blog post from the DAC 2003 conference:

> "[…] a lot of the papers dealing with games at DAC feel the need to position themselves in the ludology-narratology debate (which I personally consider terribly boring at this stage), and generally to speak against the "ludologists" of Game Studies. This is sad. Look at the journal (not only the varied academic board or editorial board, but specially the articles), you will find about everything, from genre questions to education to narrative questions to interactivity questions

to ludology to interviews with designers to AI... I am sorry, but this is not a religion not a school of thought, what unites all the articles we publish is that the focus is games, not an affiliation to a weird sect." [15]

THE DEFINITION GAME

Several academic misunderstandings can be caused by not clearly specifying the definitions that scholars subscribe to. Our so-called debate seems to be no exception. Apart from Marie-Laure Ryan [18], narrativists seem to systematically fail to provide clear, specific definitions of what they mean by narrative. It is true that defining narrative is not a simple task, but we do have access to a rich narratological tradition where we can look for support.

When ludologists claim that, in spite of certain similarities, games are not narratives, it is simply because the characteristics of games are incompatible with some of the most widely accepted definitions of narrative provided by narratology. For example, in "The Gaming Situation" [4] Eskelinen subscribes to respected narratologist Gerald Prince's definition and uses it to show differences between games and narrative ("the recounting (as product and process, object and act, structure and structuration) of one or more real or fictitious events communicated by one, two or several (more or less overt) narrators to one, two or several (more or less overt) narratees." [17]). The situation is quite different when games scholar Celia Pearce claims that the game of Chess is a narrative and has a "similar 'storyline'" than MacBeth, even if narrative works differently in both genres [16]. According to Prince's definition –to which Pearce obviously does not need to agree with– it is impossible for the game of Chess could be narrative since it is not a recounting, there is no narrator and no narratees[2]. Certainly, Pearce could have been using a broader definition of narrative but, sadly, she failed to make it explicit in her article. This situation is very common among narrativist texts.

In order for the debate to advance, it seems that narrativists need an alternative definition of narrative. However, this may not be an easy task. As Ryan admits, current, off-the-shelf narratological theories are unable to work well with games, so it would seem it is up to the narrativists to expand them in order to offer a solid backup to their claims:

> "The inability of literary narratology to account for the experience of games does not mean that we should throw away the concept of narrative in ludology; it rather means that we need to expand the catalog of narrative modalities beyond the diegetic and the dramatic, by adding a phenomenological category tailor-made for games [18].

For a real debate to take place, academic tradition requires to minimize vague approaches by trying to provide clear definitions. If those standards are not met, then

---

[2] Of course, a specific match could be narrated, but that is not equivalent to the match itself.

any debate can easily turn into a confusing conversation where everybody ends up speaking a different language.

CONCLUSION

My main goal in this article was to list at least some of the misunderstandings, mistakes and prejudices surrounding the so-called ludology/narratology debate. I hope this has helped to make clear the following points:

- the work of the so-called ludologists does not reject narrative, nor it wants to finish narrative elements in videogames.
- the accusations of radicalization of this debate are totally unfounded.

I think that it is understandable that, because of the early stages of our field, such misconceptions have arisen. This is why I sincerely hope that this article will serve to point out some of the common problems that prevent researchers from understanding each other when talking about games and stories. The real issue here is not if games are narratives or not, but if we can really expand our knowledge on games by taking whichever route we follow. So far, I am convinced that we should privilege other forms of representing reality, such as simulation, which are more coherent with the characteristics of games. But, of course, that idea is open to debate.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REFERENCES

1.   Aarseth, Espen. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1997.

2.   Aarseth, Espen. Computer Game Studies, Year One, in *Game Studies. The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 1:1, 2001. Available online at http://gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html

3.   Edge Mazine. Future Publishing, London. #109, 2001.

4.   Eskelinen, Markku. The Gaming Situation, in *Game Studies. The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 1:1, 2001. Available online at http://gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/

5.   Eskelinen, Markku. (Introduction) to cybertext narratology, in *Cybertext Yearbook 2000*, (eds.) Markku Eskelinen and Raine Koskimaa. University of Jyväskylä. Saarijaärvi, 2001.

6.   Eskelinen, Markku. Towards Computer Game Studies, in *First Person. New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (eds.) Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin. MIT Press, Cambridge 2003 (in press).

7.   Frasca, Gonzalo. El videojuego como medio para una narrativa interactiva: notas para una poética del joystick. Thesis. Orbicom, The International Network for UNESCO Chairs in Communication, 1997. Available online at http://www.orbicom.uqam.ca/in_focus/publications/archives/pdf/1997f.pdf

8.   Frasca, Gonzalo. *Ludology Meets Narratology: similitudes and differences between (video)games and narrative*. Originally published in Finnish as Ludologia kohtaa narratologian in, *Parnasso, 3:* 1999. English version available online at http://www.ludology.org

9.   Frasca, Gonzalo. *Videogames of the Oppressed: Videogames as a Means for Critical Debate and Debate*. Masters Thesis. Georgia Institute of Technology, 2001. Available online at http://www.ludology.org

10. King, Geoff and Tanya K. Cinema/Videogames/Interface, in *Screenplay, Cinema/Videogames/Interface*. Geoff Kind and Tanya Krzywinska (eds.). Wallflower Press, London, 2002.

11.   Jenkins, Henry. Game Design as Narrative Architecture, in *First Person. New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (eds.) Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin. MIT Press, Cambridge 2003 (in press). Available online at http://web.mit.edu/21fms/www/faculty/henry3/games&narrative.html

12.   Juul, Jesper. Games Telling stories? A brief note on games and narratives, in *Game Studies. The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 1:1, 2001. Available online at http://gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/

13.   Klevjer, Rune. In defense of cutscenes, in *CGDC conference proceedings*, (ed.) Frans Mäyrä. Tampere University Press, Tampere, 2002.

14.   Mateas, Michael. *Interactive Drama, Art and Artificial Intelligence*. Ph.D. Thesis. Technical Report CMU-CS-02-206, School of Computer Science, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA, 2002. Available online at http://www-2.cs.cmu.edu/~michaelm/publications/CMU-CS-02-206.pdf

15.   Pajares-Tosca, Susana. MelbourneDAC Weblog post. May 22, 2003. Available online at http://hypertext.rmit.edu.au/dac/blog_archive/cat_oddments.html

16.   Pearce, Celia. Towards a Game Theory of Games, in *First Person. New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (eds.) Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin. MIT Press, Cambridge 2003 (in press). Available online at http://cpandfriends.com/writing/first-person.html

17.   Prince, Gerald. *A Dictionnary of Narratology*. University of Nebrasca Press, Lincoln and London 1987.

18.   Ryan, Marie-Laure. Beyond Myth and Metaphor – the case of narrative in digital media, in *Game Studies. The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 1:1, 2001. Available online at http://gamestudies.org/0101/ryan/

19.   Ryan, Marie-Laure. "Ludology vs. Narratology? A critical investigation of the aesthetic properties of digital media". Web-based seminar contents for the course offered at the IT University of Copenhagen, October 1-4, 2002. Available online at http://www.itu.dk/Internet/research/phd/courses/Courses2002/LudologyvsNarratology/

20.   Svedjedal, Johan. Gaming for the academy, in *Axess, a magazne for the liberal arts and social sciences*. Translation by Paul Fisher. 5:1, 2003. Available online at http://www.axess.se/english/archive/2003/nr3/currentissue/digital_theory_games.php