Games and Narrative

Many modern games include some amount of narrative content. Early games often had minimal narrative because the focus of the game was on mechanics and the game technology was not sufficiently powerful to include complex narratives. However, many modern games include different kinds of narrative where such narrative content has been “baked into” the game structure and design.

A good example is the original Wolfenstein 3D on DOS and the modern version of the Wolfenstein game. In the original version of this game, the narrative was very simple. You played as an American solider, William "B.J." Blazkowicz, being held in a Nazi prison trying to escape. The retail copy of the game included a booklet that outlined the game story.

While the narrative of the original Wolfenstein game was not necessary in order to play the game or even showed up inside the game, it added context and interest for players that actually read the manual.

A modern version of Wolfenstein, Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus (2017), also has a game narrative. Like the original game, understanding the narrative was not necessary to playing the game. That is, the primary game mechanic was a First Person combat game and the challenges in the game focused on player combat skills. The difference is that the narrative presented in the New Colossus was integrated into the game and attempted to make the game more interesting and engaging for the player.
The story of William Blazkowicz (BJ) is told during the game and is done so using cut scenes and various other game situations. The player is presented with the story of BJ and, hopefully, shown the motivations and relationships between your character (BJ) and other game characters. This game narrative added an additional layer to the game mechanics, levels, and challenges. As the game progressed and the game story was presented, the player started becoming involved in the narrative and anticipating what happens with the story.

While not all games include narrative (for example, tetris focuses primarily on mechanics), many modern games have some level of narrative. Unlike the original Wolfenstein game in which the narrative is presented as written material, modern games build the narrative into the game. The game designers understand that the game narrative elements can be used to make the game more interesting and to better engage the player. What a game designer needs to understand are the following points:

- What is Narrative and Story?
- How does Narrative enhance a game?
- How Narrative can be added to a game?
- How to create Narrative that fits into a game?

One of the criticisms of game narrative is that computer games cannot be used to tell stories. The primary reason is that the vehicles for traditional narratives, such as books and movies, do not let the viewer participate in the narrative. In order to present a traditional story the author must control the presentation and pacing of the story. In a famous article Ian Bogost ([https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/04/video-games-stories/524148/](https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/04/video-games-stories/524148/)) argues that games will never be a good medium for presenting narrative because of the player participation in the game. That is, if the player is allowed to interact with the game then the game story becomes either impossible to present or must be inferior to a regular narrative story.

The assumption of this article, and other articles that assert that games are not a strong enough medium to support interesting or evocative narrative, is that video game narratives must copy traditional narrative. In fact, many elements of successful video game narratives are not linear in structure but rely on the player interacting with the game to present the narrative. While games may not be able to effectively present traditional narrative, this is not to assert that games cannot present meaningful and interesting narrative in other formats.

**What is Narrative in a Game?**

The term “Narrative” covers different kinds of material. The classic use of this term refers to a Story which appears in books, movies, plays, etc. Other elements that could be called a Narrative would include:

- Story Narrative – a structured set of connected narrative elements presented in the game
- World Narrative – a set of not-necessarily connected narrative elements that are used to provide a background context.
- Character Narrative – sets of narrative elements associated with a game character
- Quest Narrative – a set of narrative elements associated with a particular set of player choices within a smaller defined set of goals

These narrative elements can be used in varying ways in a game. For example, the game story could be a standard narrative structured into episodes or chapters that interlock and the player will progress through the narrative much like progressing through a book or movie. World narrative could be information that provides background context that enhances or flavors the game world. Character narrative would be information about one or more characters in the game such that the player understands the motivation and relationships between the characters. A Quest Narrative could be something like a Story Narrative but linked to a particular game quest or adventure and that would not be part of the overall game story narrative.

A couple of important concepts related to game narrative are:
- Game Story is not the same as Plot
- Protagonist + Goal + Conflict + Obstacles + [Resolution] = Story

A story is not a plot. You can outline the story as a plot but you cannot tell the story if all you have is a plot. For example, the plot for Moby Dick is something like “a white whale eats the hand of a ship captain causing the captain to seek revenge on the whale which resulted in the captain dying”. The story of Moby Dick is much longer and more interesting than the main plot. Characters are developed, motivations explored, action described. When creating a game narrative the designer needs to think of the Story and not just the Plot.

The second concept is that stories can be seen as a combination of the protagonist (the player) having a goal, engaging in conflicts, overcoming obstacles, and resolving the story. All of these elements can appear in games. What does not show up in this classic definition of stories is the game mechanic. That is, how the player interacts with the game and how this mechanic can become part of the game story.

**Narrative Structure vs Game Structure**

Narrative Structure refers to the order that the narrative is presented. Since narrative (such as plays) have a long historical tradition there are a lot of theoretical concepts behind narrative structure. The classic theory, from Aristotle, is that narratives have a three-act structure. The first act is the setup and introduction to the characters and the game. The second act is the conflict or main game action. The third act is the conclusion and resolution of the narrative. The theory is that most narratives can be put into this structure.

More complex narratives, while still generally fitting this three-act structure, might have additional parts, such as an “act” that is midway through act-two that is the turning point from the rising action to the start of the resolution. Other narrative structures might be more episodic with parallel narrative structures running in parallel to each other. More complicated narratives might include multiple endings (assuming some kind of viewer input).

Games also tend to have a structure. Game structure is focused on game mechanics, character leveling, exploration, and other in-game actions that the game designer wants to add to the game. For example, Adventure type games may have a linear structure because the player will be taken through a sequence of adventures, exploration, puzzle solving, etc that may build upon previous actions. For example, Portal and Portal 2 take the player through a series of puzzles that, in many cases, depend on learning how to solve previous puzzles. Because of this the structure of the game is very linear in structure.

Role playing games depend on the character leveling up by gaining experience points. These experience points can be gained by doing things in the game. To allow the player to level up the game creates a series of quests that the player can complete in order to gain XP. This game structure is a Quest based with a set of small adventures with a beginning, middle, and end.

Other kinds of game, such as strategy games, may be structured as a series of battles or a set of civilization building actions. These games have their own game structure that, in most cases, is based on the game type. The problem is how to make the traditional narrative structure fit the game structure. While Adventure Games would seem the easiest to accept a narrative structure (being a linear game), these other games can also get narrative content. The challenge is to try and fit the narrative structure into the game structure and to integrate the narrative content into the game mechanics and game systems.

**Story Narrative**

Stories are narrative elements that have some structure. The classic structure of stories is that a good story has a three-act structure. The first act is the setup which could include introducing the characters, setting up the world, describing the characters motivations, etc. The second act would be the challenges and conflicts the main character goes through
that ends in some resolution. The final act is where various narrative elements are cleaned up and resolved and the viewer/reader is given any hidden or unresolved information.

You can see this structure in classic forms, such as novels and movies. For example, in the original movie, Star Wars, the protagonist Luke Skywalker, is taken out of his regular life and starts an adventure (Act One). Luke engages with the Empire and Darth Vader and defeats both (Act Two). Finally, Luke takes on a new role and starts in a new direction (Act Three).

Applying this three-act structure to game narratives can also work. Many games that present a narrative as part of the game typically have such a three act structure. The introductory section is used to setup the story, introduce the characters, explain the world, etc. It can also be used in games to provide the player with a tutorial section. Many games include some kind of tutorial section that introduces game mechanics and the game world to the player. Such levels are specifically designed to teach the player how to play the game. Such tutorial levels could also be used to introduce the game narrative.

The main point of the narrative is the protagonist (the player) overcoming challenges and pursuing goals. This also describes the main point of the game. The third-act, in which the narrative resolves questions and ends the narrative, can also be designed into the game.

Story narrative is part of the game by having the game level design and the game mechanic support and follow the general game narrative. This assumes that the game story narrative is presented by the game in a structured and linear fashion. The narrative progresses side-by-side with the game. Examples would be most Adventure games such as Monkey Island, Tomb Raider, and games such as The Last of Us and the Uncharted series.

Games can present the story narrative in a variety of ways. These include:

- Cut scenes that display a video of the game characters
- Structured dialog sessions with Non-player Characters
- Text or voice-over elements presented to the player in a cut-scene
- Controlled Environmental Narrative that forces the player to find and read in-game-world information

The main problem with trying to structure the game around a specific story narrative is that in order present the narrative in a structured way the game must control or even remove the player input and player choice. Allowing the player to make fundamental choices in such games may result in the story narrative being disrupted. An example of such a game would be Virginia.

World/Environmental Narrative

One way to present narrative elements in a game is through World or Environmental narrative. This is where narrative elements are presented as small bits of story that are found in the world or environment and that describe the game world and perhaps characters. This way of presenting narrative is much less direct than structured story narrative. It leaves it up to the player to discover and assemble the various narrative “pieces” the game presents.

There are numerous examples of this kind of narrative presentation in games. For example, in many open-world games narratives include some of this world/environmental narratives. In the Witcher 3 game and the Skyrim game the player can find and read a number of books and notes that contain descriptions of the world, political issues, monsters, etc. When the player finds and reads this information they start to understand how the world works and the player’s character within the world.

Another example would be Bioshock where the player finds recordings that explain what happened to the city and what various characters had to do. These recordings are not mandatory to understand the primary game story, but they add “flavor” to the world and setup later story plot elements.
World narratives should not be required in order to understand the main game story. The reason is that in order to ensure that the player finds/reads/listens to such information the game would have to remove control from the player or very skillfully direct the player to such elements without giving the player the feeling of being forced. Another reason for not using world narratives as the primary game narrative is that the player may get all of the world narrative elements but retrieve them out of order.

Character Narrative

Many games include a substantial amount of Character Narrative. This is where various game characters, either the player character or game non-player characters, are described and given a history in the game. The purpose of such character narrative is to engage the player in the game by having them connect with and care or hate game characters. Such character narrative can be very effective in making the game fun or interesting to the player.

Character narrative can be done several ways. These include cut-scenes, dialog, and environmental narrative elements. Cut scenes could include scenes of a game character or dialog from other non-player characters. How other in-game characters treat the game character can define who the game character is. Another way is dialog with other game characters. When game characters discuss issues with the player, respond in particular ways, or act on the player initiated dialogs, the player starts to understand who their character is and their place in the world.

For example, in the Witcher 3 the player is playing an already defined character that is a mutant. When you walk your character through a town bystanders will randomly comment on your character and make disparaging statements. When your character engages in dialog with other character the dialog can enforce that fact that your character is an outsider and not trusted. Other games, such as Metro Exodus or Wolfenstein, include cut scenes that show how other game character treat your game character.

The purpose of character narrative, in which character focused cut scenes and dialog convey narrative, are designed to not only further the overall game story narrative but to give the player motivations to perform actions that are in accord with their character. When the player has to make choices, one the purpose of the character narrative is to make the player think “what would by character choose”.

Quest Narrative

If a game wants to tell a single narrative story it can do so by presenting the narrative as a single thread story. Other games, such as open-world games, will present a series of narratives structured around a quest. These games can use this quest structure to present, essentially, small stories with a beginning, middle, and end but contained with a quest. Many open-world games allow the player the follow quests in any order. If the overall game narrative was presented in quests then the game would have to ensure that the player completed the quests in a particular order. This could be done by blocking one quest until a prior quest was done or by making a quest too high-level to be done until the player has leveled up their character. However, some games create quests that can be done in any order but that include their own small narrative elements.

You can see this in classic open world games like Skyrim or Pillars of Eternity. The quest structure of the game means that the player can get and complete quests in any order. The quest may introduce new characters, have a new in-game story or narrative, and allow the player to learn more about the world and their game character. Sometimes a narrative can be presented through multiple quests that are linked in a particular order.

While many games present a single narrative arc they also present a quest based game structure. In this case the quests are divided into story-based quests that are linked into the main game story and non-story quests that are used to
develop the game character or the game world. An example of such a game would be Skyrim or Witcher 3 or Borderlands.

**Designer vs Player Designed Narrative**

A basic question for the game designer is whether to design your game so the narrative is Designer Based or Player Based. This means that the game could be designed so the player will follow the narrative arc as presented by the designer or that the player can control the narrative arc and direction. Given that game designers want to allow the player to make choices, the tendency is to give the player choices about the narrative. This is why there are many games that have multiple endings or have diverging narrative paths.

Designer Narrative would present a single narrative arc that the player follows through the game. The player might be allowed to make strategic decisions within the game or given choices about what order the narrative can be accessed, but the overall narrative arc is still fixed. Examples of such games would be Monkey Island, Tomb Raider, and many other adventure games. The player is engaged in the narrative because of environmental or character narrative elements.

Player Designed narrative can be seen on a continuum from limited player narrative design to complete player narrative design. Limited player designed narrative is seen in games with multiple endings such as The Wolf Among Us and the Witcher 3. Complete player designed narrative games include No Mans Sky. With games that have player designed narratives the player is given an open environment that allows the player to create various game elements. For example, the Sims allows the player to create characters and environments and also allows the player to create their own game narratives.

**How to Design a Game Narrative**

1. **Basic Narrative Structure**
   a. Game Structure Identification – Create the basic game concept document and choose a game genre. Choose a general game structure and outline the structure.
   b. Basic Narrative Story – outline the narrative that you want to include in the game. At this stage the narrative should be a simple plot.
   c. Basic Character Outlines – describe the main characters from your narrative and outline the character backgrounds.
   d. Basic World Outline – describe the game world and outline some world backgrounds.

2. **Customize Narrative to Game Structure**
   a. Fill out the narrative and divide up the narrative into pieces that roughly fit the general game structure. The narrative can still be a linear story but it can be broken up into smaller pieces to fit the game structure.
   b. Add additional narrative elements to better fit the game structure. This could include filling out narrative elements, removing elements, or creating new smaller narrative structures.
   c. Modify/add Game Characters and character descriptions and backgrounds.
   d. Modify/add Game World information and descriptions as needed to fit the game structure.

3. **Map Narrative to Game Mechanics and Game Systems**
   a. List the primary game mechanics and game systems.
   b. Write and integrate narrative around the game mechanics and game systems.
   c. Outline how game mechanic narratives will fit with general game narrative systems.

4. **Character Goals and Motivations**
   a. For the main game characters, list the character motivations, goals, and challenges.

5. **Character Dialog and Narrative Structure**
   a. Start developing the player character dialog and other NPC dialogs.
   b. Map the dialog elements to the Narrative and game Structure.