Methods of Storytelling: How Narrative Is Becoming a Necessity to the Success of Video Games

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Abstract

Video games have told stories since the 1950s, and our methods to create stronger narratives have progressed over the years. Games like *God of War, Tomb Raider,* and *Red Dead Redemption II* have pushed player's expectations of games to new levels. Players still desire interesting combat, trendy characters, and original music but additionally expect an immersive narrative and compelling story. Methods like linear and nonlinear storytelling, dialogue, cutscenes, settings, characters, and conflict are increasingly necessary to keep players enraptured in the game and playing until the very end.

That said, there are gaps in the current video game narrative. Aspects like character gender and inclusion have made little to no progress since video games' early days, and narrative still takes a backseat to gameplay. Fortunately, there are some steps developers and writers can take to help women feel more included in the community and heighten the importance of narrative in this unique storytelling format.

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Video games have been telling stories since the late 1950s, following the release of a game very similar to the 1970s version of *Pong.* Although *Pong* does not offer an all-together thrilling adventure, it sets the stage for game development, story inclusion, and inspired arcade games like *Pac-Man* and *Donkey Kong.* Players required more immersion and narrative as games progressed, leading to veritable masterpieces, such as *God of War* and *Red Dead Redemption II.* These games have become exceedingly popular due to their combat systems, art styles, music, voice acting, and story. Video games utilize specific storytelling techniques, such as linear and nonlinear narrative, dialogue, cutscenes, and narrative structure, including characters, setting, and conflict, to present the player with an enjoyable yet challenging interactive story (Bateman, 2007; Bryant & Giglio, 2015; Despain, 2008; Marx, 2006; Rogers, 2014; Skolnick, 2014).

Linear and Nonlinear Storytelling

Linear and nonlinear storytelling are two methods one can use to tell a story. These methods both revolve around interactivity – putting the player in control of a character's choices. The heavier the story is, the less player interactivity and vice versa (Marx, 2006). Both methods offer different pros and cons to the story, as well as to the gameplay.

Linear storytelling in games is a specific sequence of events the player encounters (Marx, 2006). The story I plan to write will be one type of linear storytelling, a formal narrative that forces the player to complete the game in a very particular manner (Bateman, 2007). Of course, this poses a problem regarding interactivity because the player will have less freedom of choice and will instead follow a predetermined path to reach the end of the game (Skolnick, 2014). One example Skolnick uses of linear storytelling is *God of War*. I will use the most recent release from the series in this example. In *God of War,* Kratos, former Greek God of war, and his son

Atreus are completing Kratos's late wife's last wish to spread her ashes on the highest peak in Midgard. Along the way, they meet various monsters and gods of Norse mythology (Sony Interactive Entertainment America, 2018). This game follows a linear storyline, and all players experience the same narrative, which could prove troublesome if it was not so rich in story or did not convince the player to care about the characters. This lack of freedom could be off-putting to some people, especially if done incorrectly.

Another excellent example of linear storytelling is the *Tomb Raider* games. In these games, the main character, Lara Croft, is, in simple terms, an archeologist tasked with finding an artifact or relic while simultaneously being pursued by someone who wants to use the relic for dishonorable purposes (Square Enix, 2016; Square Enix, 2018). At no point is the player allowed to stray from the path given to them by the game's writers. The only way to change the story's outcome is to get Lara Croft killed, which will either result in the player replaying the section or shutting off the game entirely.

Conversely, nonlinear storytelling in games is a sequence of events solely dependent on the player's choices (Bateman, 2007; Marx, 2006). This autonomy means that the player co-writes the character's actions, and the more freedom the player has, the more accountable the writer is (Marx, 2006). Of course, nonlinear storytelling depends heavily on the player's choices for the character. These choices must be honest and lead to some consequence; otherwise, the player will have no reason to choose a direction in the first place (Bryant & Giglio, 2015; Marx, 2006).

My favorite game, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, exemplifies nonlinear storytelling. In this game, you play as Geralt, a genetically modified human known as a Witcher, who fights monsters while simultaneously attempting to save his foster daughter Ciri from the enemy

known as the Wild Hunt (CD Projekt Red, 2015). Players have the option to go about completing the game in many different ways. For instance, they could conclude all the side quests before beginning the main story or neglect them altogether. Nonplayable characters (NPCs) have individual dialogue options, and sometimes, players might have the opportunity to refuse to kill a monster entirely. These unique choices result in three distinct endings for Ciri and three endings for Geralt's love interests. Even though this game has a lot of choices, it ends with a minimal amount of conclusions; thus, the balance between story and gameplay is exceedingly evident.

Another recent nonlinear game is *Detroit: Become Human*. In this game, the player controls three different androids enslaved to humankind. The player's goal as the characters is to bring about an android uprising with the request of being treated with basic human rights (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2018). Each character has the potential to be killed or survive, and they could end up in dozens of different places. It is currently unknown how many different endings there are to this game, and they range from good to terribly depressing depending on the players' choices. *Detroit: Become Human* is an example of a nonlinear game that relies on gameplay but has a relatively predictable story.

Whether one chooses to create a linear or a nonlinear story, there are drawbacks, and it is essential to remember that the power of a story comes from its structure, while the power of gameplay comes from its freedom (Bateman, 2007). The writer will have to decide if they want to take the player on a story-based journey, one where the player will have little to no control over the ending or one where they have freedom but sacrifice the story's potential impact.

Dialogue and Cutscenes

Dialogue, as used in any form of storytelling, is critical to video games because it emotionally conveys exposition (Bryant & Giglio, 2015; Skolnick, 2014). There are a few

different types of exposition used in video game dialogue, and each method's purpose varies.

Character exposition is the dialogue that teaches the player who the character is and what they

are all about (Skolnick, 2014). Think of this as a conversation between Lara Croft and her friend

Jonah Maiava – who only recently started joining Croft on her adventures in 2013 – about her

parents' disappearance. This conversation would reveal some of Croft's backstory about why she

became an archeologist and how her parents, particularly her father, played a role in this

decision. Emotional exposition is the dialogue that shows the player how the character feels at

any particular moment. This one is self-explanatory; Croft would display anger or excitement

through words. Lastly, gameplay exposition is – not always, but is, for this example – dialogue

that conveys goals, instructions, or hints. It could be Croft telling Jonah her plan – a clue to the

player about what they will be doing next – or an NPC giving instructions as to where Croft

needs to go to find the artifact she is looking for. Dialogue is an excellent way to show the player

more of the story and guide them along their way.

Cutscenes are another method specific to video games that advance the story and reveal

critical pieces about the character or their goals (Marx, 2006). These non-interactive cinematics

either move the narrative forward or provide crucial audio or visual information (Bryant &

Giglio, 2015; Marx, 2006). They are used to humanize characters, display conflict, or show a

reaction to something that just occurred (Bateman, 2007; Bryant & Giglio, 2015). All the games

I previously mentioned used cutscenes in one of these ways.

There are advantages and disadvantages to using cutscenes. They can advance the story,

reward a player for doing well, offer a tutorial, foreshadow, or even show off an item the player

recently obtained (Bateman, 2017). When a cutscene starts, most players understand it is a

moment of the story they must pay attention to (Bryant & Giglio, 2015). Cutscenes could also

have a negative effect, for they can disrupt the game's pacing, force failure upon the player, steal

rewards, remove the player's choice, provide too much information, or deny the player the role of

the main character (Bateman, 2007). Because of this, there must be a balance between gameplay

and cutscenes. The writer does not want their player to feel left out of the game as if they are

watching a movie – they did decide to play the game after all – but they also do not want to

neglect giving the player information they might need. Cutscenes should be necessary, and the

information provided must be significant enough not to be presented elsewhere. They should be

short, one to three pages of script, with minimal dialogue and specific camera angles that allow

less use of the animation team and voice actors (Marx, 2006). The budget for these projects will

always be more significant than cutscenes.

Narrative Structure and Design

Narrative is how a game communicates the story to the player through setting, character,

and conflict (Bateman, 2007; Despain, 2008). A narrative designer creates the story and designs

the mechanics through which they tell it, which molds the gaming experience (Despain, 2008).

Delivery methods of narrative include text, dialogue, images, camera angles, cutscenes, and

scripted events (Bateman, 2007). The most crucial rule applied to narrative is to show and not

tell. It is better to show the player the story – let them live it themselves – than to tell them what

will happen (Skolnick, 2014). No one wants to play a game that plays itself. Nonetheless, there

are essential aspects of narrative that should not be excluded, including act structure, setting,

characters, and conflict.

Acts break the narrative into three parts – setup, conflict, and resolution (Bateman, 2007;

Bryant & Giglio, 2015; Marx, 2006; Rogers, 2014; Skolnick, 2014). Act one, the setup, gives a

backstory to the character and the world they inhabit. It provides the hero with a place to start,

shows us how they need to grow, and why they need to confront the conflict (Marx, 2006; Skolnick, 2014). Take one of my favorite games, *Portal 2*. The first act in this game is relatively short – the protagonist, Chell, awakens in a room at Aperture Science Laboratories and is informed by her robot companion, Wheatley, that the facilities are falling apart and they must escape (Valve, 2011). *Portal 2* is the second game in the series, so the writers already expect the player to know some character backstory. Still, this scene tells the player crucial information about the setting and their overarching goal. It also has an inciting incident – an event that sets the conflict in motion – when the facility starts falling apart around Chell (Marx, 2006). Act two shows the conflict and confrontation. Here, the hero has to overcome obstacles in front of her (Marx, 2006; Skolnick, 2014). In *Portal 2*, GLaDOS - a robot who wants to keep Chell in the facility to test her puzzles - puts these obstacles in front of the player. Halfway through the act, Chell learns that Wheatley is corrupt, and he and GLaDOS switch places as the antagonist and hero companion. Lastly, in act three, the resolution, the hero either succeeds or fails at their goal (Marx, 2006; Skolnick, 2014). Chell defeats Wheatley and escapes the facility. These acts break the story into different sections, and each part plays a specific role in telling the narrative. A successful act structure is the first step to a good story and a better game.

The subsequent aspect of the narrative is the setting. The setting is where the game happens, including the location, races, languages, and laws of physics and metaphysics (Bateman, 2007). It offers dramatic context, elaborates on the writer's imaginary world, and provides clues for the player (Bryant & Giglio, 2015; Skolnick, 2014). The setting can provide foreshadowing, warnings, backstory, and restrict the player's movement to a particular area (Marx, 2006; Skolnick, 2014). An example of this could be an empty location with many health packs – hinting that the next area is probably a boss – or an invisible skybox that keeps the

player from accessing the roof. The setting is a fantastic way to create suspense. By showing the player the danger – Rogers (2014) uses the example of a bomb under a table – but not the protagonist, an otherwise uninteresting conversation is suddenly fraught with danger. This 'bomb under the table' amps up the suspense factor for the player and makes the narrative more immersive.

The mention of a protagonist brings me to my following narrative method: characters. Characters can be who you play as, who you're fighting, or who helps you along the way (Bateman, 2007; Bryant & Giglio, 2015; Despain, 2008; Rogers, 2014; Skolnick, 2014). The player's character – the hero or the protagonist – has a specific goal or desire they are trying to obtain, which is blocked by the antagonist – the hero's enemy. To have a successful and relatable protagonist, the character must change and grow as the story progresses, take action to resolve their conflicts, have personal stakes in the result, take risks, and be willing to sacrifice everything for their goal (Bryant & Giglio, 2015; Skolnick, 2014). Players need personal investment in the protagonist to help the hero along the journey. The player will not continue playing without a reason to care about the hero.

On the other hand, the player has to help the protagonist fight the antagonist or the villain in the game. Like the hero, the villain must also have desires and motivations (Despain, 2008; Skolnick, 2014). Without something driving the villain, the player has no reason to believe they would go through all this struggle to reach a goal. Two of the most important aspects of a villain are that they must think they're the good guy and that their desires are not wrong; how they choose to go about them makes them immoral (Bryant & Giglio, 2015; Skolnick, 2014). For instance, a mother is not bad for wanting to feed her child. We only start to have a problem with

it when her method involves stealing from a store. Well-built antagonists are just as crucial to a story narrative as a well-built protagonist; we need them to make the story interesting.

It is important to remember that writers must love their characters and infuse them with a sense of life beyond their importance to the plot (Despain, 2008). What makes a good game is not always perfect characters but the imperfect ones who are human and do whatever it takes to obtain what they need. Characters are frustrating and surprising, and players need to bond with them (Bryant & Giglio, 2015; Rogers, 2014). The player has to watch the characters grow, see an emotional change in them, and relate to the hero they are playing. The best characters are ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances (Bryant & Giglio, 2015).

Lastly, perhaps most importantly, the hero must face conflict. Conflict, as described by Skolnick (2014), is where "someone wants or needs something, but someone or something stands in their way" (p.7). Most people imagine conflict as combat, which it certainly can be, but it does not just have to be physical (Bryant & Giglio, 2015; Marx, 2006). It can also be environmental or internal, like a giant mountain a character needs to cross over or a phobia the hero needs to face. Of course, the best type of conflict slows the protagonist down, creates interest in the story, and revolves around the game's antagonist (Bryant & Giglio, 2015). Every game I have mentioned thus far has this type of conflict, be it Chell with GLaDOS and later Wheatley, Geralt with monsters and the Wild Hunt, or Croft and whatever person wants to take the artifact from her. Conflict is a necessary aspect of an exciting story and successful narrative. Without it, the player would lose interest in the game and never complete it.

Gender

Most people know that games favor the male demographic (Despain, 2008). If women are acknowledged as a consumer – which is a big if – it is usually only for casual games, like puzzle

games, so developers will use specific colors to make them appear more feminine (Bateman, 2007; Despain, 2008). Women prefer collaborative and less violent games as well as greater story depth, which is severely lacking in games at the moment, so it is easy to see why women characters are stripped away until they are just visual basics with poor character design and overly female avatars (Bateman, 2007). This dehumanization inevitably makes the gaming industry seem sexist and archaic, which it is. We still have a way to go to improve that.

There are some ways to make steps towards video games being more accessible to women. Games could offer repeatable tutorial levels that do not impact the saved game (Despain, 2008). This addition would let people utterly new to video games and their controls feel more included and push them towards learning new moves – not everyone knows the right trigger is to shoot, for example. Two, writers should start using the pronoun she/her when referencing the player text (Despain, 2008). Referring to the player as a woman on a game box or in an online game description would feel less alienating to those wanting to join the community. Third, we should add more female representation (Despain, 2008). Not many games have female main characters. Women are usually resigned to the role of sidekick. Having a playable character that is a woman would help newcomers feel more at home. Lastly, women characters must be written better (Despain, 2008). We want intelligent and funny women. Most of the characters players can access lack a backstory, have ample cleavage, tight clothing, and a marketable fighting move. We want more from our heroines. Nonetheless, it is essential to remember that writers should not write specifically for women; instead, they should write in a way accessible to everyone.

Inclusion is also an excellent way to combat sexism in the industry. Currently, almost 50% of the gamer demographic is women (Sullivan, 2014), many of whom have experienced

sexism in video games in some way or another. The cyberbullying and filth women are subjected to daily because of it is nothing short of despicable. Creating women characters with authentic depictions and eye-opening narratives has the potential to normalize women in the industry. This representation could make interactions between players less hostile because men would have set different expectations of women due to new characters with more substance than looks and gimmicks. Stop oversexualizing women characters in video games, and maybe that will transfer over to the overt over-sexualization of women players by the rest of the demographic.

Gameplay Over Story

The literature points towards one undeniable fact – the story will always take a backseat to gameplay and design (Bateman, 2007; Despain, 2008; Marx, 2006). Without entertaining gameplay that is challenging and enjoyable, the player will not feel the need to complete the game. Luckily, the times are changing, and narrative and story are becoming almost as important as gameplay, character design, art, and sound (Bryant & Giglio, 2015). Yes, an exhilarating combat system with a unique orchestral background and cool-looking characters are all compelling reasons to continue playing a game. Still, as the times change, players request more from their games. Games like *Pac-Man* and the original *Donkey Kong* would not cut it anymore, and a shortage of a rich story and narrative is just as likely to create uninterest as lousy gameplay.

I want to write a game that begins to solve the problems of inclusion, over-sexualization, and lack of narrative. I plan on creating a woman character filled with substance beyond her physical appeal, an icon for other women gamers, not just a sexual fantasy. She will have attitude, rationality, emotion, humor, and a unique outlook. She will not be a character thrown in for one-liners and sex appeal to satisfy the male audience. She will have a story, a driving force

that pushes her toward her goal, and it will not be a stereotypical love story or an overreaction. I want the narrative to interest my players beyond gameplay and acting. I desire conflict and suspense, and most importantly, I want the players to participate in an adventure that keeps them guessing from start to finish. That's what I think a game should be.

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