

# Introduction

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*Beat Suter, René Bauer and Mela Kocher*

Stories are what the world is about. Somehow everyone can relate to stories. They are engaging, they are filled with references and bits of information and little gaps and secrets that inspire interpretation, imagination, feedback and follow-ups. And we don't just tell, we 'play' stories on a daily basis. Engaging with narratives is a familiar part of our everyday lives. Theater, music, dance and sports have prepared us for more complex forms of playing analog and digital games and taught us that narrative is not just something that we find in books and letters, but can appear anywhere in life – in political charades and propaganda, in enactments, or in complex digital role playing and strategy games. Increasingly, we have to deal with fake narratives, which means we have to sharpen our minds to separate fiction from fact, truth from lies, while involved in news games and political games and work-life games day by day. Against this background, it is not a coincidence that video games emerge as a central focus for both practical experimentation and analytical research.

Narrative and interactivity are no longer incompatible. We have become much more experienced in dealing with them in the digital sphere. In fact, they are very closely interwoven, both in games and social media as well as in real life. This is a good reason for taking a closer look at how narrative mechanics in the context of digital and analog action and behavior patterns work, and how they influence us. Games especially are a playground where we can experiment and find new ways of dealing with challenges.

If narrative is understood as a mode, it can take many forms. As Roland Barthes puts it at the beginning of his analysis of narrative: "There are countless forms of narrative in the world. First of all, there is a prodigious variety of genres, each of which branches out into a variety of media, as if all substances could be relied upon to accommodate man's stories. Among the vehicles of narrative are articulated language, whether oral or written, pictures, still or

moving, gestures, and an ordered mixture of all those substances [...]" (Barthes 1975: 237) In this essay, Barthes attempts to get to the bottom of narrative structures while analyzing meaning and functions. It was an attempt to broaden the horizon of what may constitute a narrative. With the advent of the new media, however, further aspects had to be considered. Further up the timeline, after the millennium, many game studies scholars consistently argued for the separation of narrative and non-narrative digital media, works, products or artifacts. "Gaming is seen [...] as configurative practice, and the gaming situation as a combination of ends, means, rules, equipment, and manipulative action." (Eskelinen 2001) Eskelinen goes as far as to say that: "[...] stories are just uninteresting ornaments of gift-wrappings to games, and laying any emphasis on studying these kinds of marketing tools is just a waste of time and energy." (ibid) But Marie-Laure Ryan brought the separated lines back together when she introduced the qualitative concept of narrative as one of two modalities. She proposed making a distinction between "being narrative" and "possessing narrativity". (Ryan 2004: 9) In her view, a work does not have to be narrative, but it can have a certain narrativity that is awakened in the viewer or listener or user (cf. Punday 2017), for example in a dance, a piece of music, an image – or as we may add, a game. Today, games also belong to Barthes' vehicles of narrative, since they are almost always able to develop a sense of narrativity in the player. Many of them may not be narratives per se in a traditional way, but they have and evoke some narrativity before, during and after play. Consequently, what Eskelinen debunks as marketing tools may be better understood as narrative mechanics and strategies that support the players' immersion in the game and are intertwined with gameplay mechanics and other important elements of game development. And of course, if we observe such narrative mechanics and strategies in a wider sense in real-life situations, it is obvious that they are often used as marketing tools and for manipulation and propaganda purposes in politics, economics, sports, etc.

Narrative mechanics are thus a certain kind of game mechanics that serve as motivational design for a game (or a situation in life). They influence the story through player actions that create events. Like classic game mechanics, they have rules, provide options and decisions, and help create the "Magic Circle" in which a game is played. With narrative mechanics, the player's actions have consequences for gameplay and narrative. Narrative mechanics can even become so powerful that they act as a container for a game like *The Last of Us* (2013), and are instrumental in finding a cure against the infection that ravages the world.

Video games represent “grands récits”, grand narratives: they convey values and emotions, they are meaningful, globally coded or related to specific cultural areas. They are established narratives, which, like memes and other digital metaphors and aesthetic propositions, are subject to certain sets of rules. In this sense, we understand them as a specific kind of (game) mechanics. This leads us to the following questions: What conclusions can be drawn from interactive narratives for the rules of society? How detached from other real-world circles of meaning are the “Magic Circles” of games and other symbolic orders such as political speeches and actions, urban architecture, religions or gender issues?

## CONTEXT

Over decades of debate, narratological and ludic positions have developed in game studies, with fixed assignments of meaning: on the one hand, the game as narrative, and on the other hand, the game as a set of rules. In several conferences, we examined narratives as game mechanics, and game mechanics as narratives, and thus their correlations and mutual interdependence: Which strategies and aesthetic practices has interactive storytelling developed over the last 15 years? In which ways have literary, philosophical and architectural paradigms established themselves in the “grands récits” of various computer game genres – from historical adventure games to today’s art games and open-world games? In turn, how have new technologies (VR, interfaces, gadgets like the Apple Watch, or social media software) created new types of narrative experience? And in what regard have they created the “Magic Circle” of games and, for example, produced new types of (post-)literature? Have the innovations in the video game industry affected the great tales of reality?

This book is a follow-up to the publication *Games and Rules* which focused on game mechanics as motivational design and tried to contribute to the clarification of terms and concepts related to game mechanics, rule systems and motivation design on a fundamental level, since the professional discourse is still characterized by controversy.

Although game studies scholars generally agree that the mechanics of a game organize the rule-based changes of game states due to interactions, the specific understanding and definitions of game mechanics diverge for the most part. Concepts of game mechanics are either associated with a reception-oriented gameplay or lean towards formalistic models of object-oriented software. While narratologists understand a game primarily as a storytelling vehicle, from a ludological perspective, narrative structures are usually regarded

as a (subordinate) part of game mechanics. An understanding of rule systems, needs, challenges, modes of reward and punishment, and thus the motivational design of interactive content such as digital games, is also linked to the various descriptions and aesthetics of game mechanics. In this way, rewards and punishments can unfold in the narrative system as elements of cut-scenes (narrative set pieces) or through dialogues with game characters, while at the level of game progress, they can also be accompanied by points deductions or allowances. Narrative tools today are increasingly mixed and do not interrupt the gameplay as much, as scripted sequences, ambient actions and evolving locations are used much more often. Beyond these micro-level functionalities, game mechanics and motivational design also have social and cultural relevance in that they address the functioning of systems itself.

## UNRAVELING THE COMMON THREAD

In order to break down the complexity and variety of concepts and approaches, the present volume with its 22 essays by 18 authors is divided into four parts, each being driven by a specific set of questions. The narrative/story spanning these book sections and their themes starts out with the key question: “What are narrative mechanics, their rules, their magic circle, their motivational structures?” (first section: “Playing with Narratives”). This leads into the question of “How do these narrative mechanics work in different game genres?” (second section: “Expanding the Narrative”), followed by a wider perspective: “Where do narrative mechanics go beyond the realm of games? How are they present in politics and culture? (third section: “Games, Politics and Society”). Echoes of these debates can be found in the case studies, which in turn address the question: “Where can we find traces and applied techniques of narrative mechanics in games, media and politics? And how exactly are they implemented?”

Laying the groundwork, the section “Playing with Narratives” contains basic texts on narrative mechanics. René Bauer and Beat Suter’s essay “Narrative Mechanics” outlines a theory of various narrative mechanics and their motivational strategies from text to film, to games and political narratives, based on different types of rules and connections.

Beat Suter then delves deeper into this typology in “Narrative Patterns in Video Games”. Narrative structures already become visible in the context (advertising, visuals, etc.) of a game and continue into the game itself, where specific forms of narrative are applied, from mere backstory to the classic

journey of the hero, fragmented quests and multilinear interactive narrative mechanics.

In “Teaching Narrative Design”, Teun Dubbelman puts the spotlight on the (also social) mechanics behind the development of narrative design. His understanding is based on the fact that narrative emerges from a cognitive process of “meaning making” – thus suggesting that the text consistently presents a tool for the design of the narrative, enabling the “interplay between mechanics and the other narrative devices”.

Chris Polus’ text “The Narrative Role of Sound in Games” shows how sounds or sound effects are always co-narrators, whether as “motivational sounds”, “hygiene sounds” or “nice-to-have sounds”. Sounds tell tales about the size of the rooms, the type of rooms, the materials and the interactions. In doing so, they also open up spaces of the imaginary.

The second section, “Expanding the Narrative”, focuses in on the question of the form and function of narrative mechanics by further exploring the intertextual system of games in a variety of game and text genres. The article “*Mukokuseki* and the Narrative Mechanics in Japanese Games” by Hiloko Kato and René Bauer shows how much games are a product of the interplay between various cultural narratives. *Mukokuseki* is a Japanese cultural technique that fragments cultural strands such as text, image, sound and mechanics and reassembles them in a new way, transcending the boundaries of cultural and national specifics. The result is not only the “typically Japanese” game as the basis for most games, but also an infinitely expanding intertext.

In “Characterization and Emergent Narrative in *Dwarf Fortress*”, an analysis of his open-world game, Tarn Adams evokes the realm of the “power of games as storytelling companions”. Narratives also arise here from the interaction with the game and the retelling of it. The inhabitants of *Dwarf Fortress*, who can only be controlled indirectly, become the protagonists, and thus, their core identity and their psychological and social make-up become the raw material for narratives.

In his essay “On the Evolution of Narrative Mechanics in Open-World Games”, Ulrich Götz examines some of video game history’s famous artifacts such as the *Colossal Cave Adventure*, and proposes that “it is not narrative, but rather, rule-oriented game forms that are dependent upon visual representation”. Analyzing spatial design and mechanics in different open-world games, Götz concludes that the reduction of exploration in favor of intensifying the narrative aspects seems advisable.

With “Open-End Storytelling in Pinball Machines”, David Krummenacher dives into the world of the open narrative mechanics of the beloved pinball

machine. The pinball box itself consists of a variety of visual narratives. These offers are continued in the pinball gameplay, where the player can unlock the various nested narratives. Therefore pinball machines appear as narrative open-world game systems “avant la lettre”, with a lot of potential also for today’s (digital) open-world games.

Considering *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP* as an heir of the Sword & Sorcery genre, being heavily influenced by the US pulp fiction author Robert E. Howard, Florian Faller emphasizes its “Mechanics of Inspiration”. Creativity is understood as a process of referencing, copying, transforming and combining which utilizes, mirrors, reflects and subverts narrative tropes, genres and ultimately mechanics.

As video game journalist Robert Glashüttner reveals in his contribution about “Narrative Approaches in Contemporary Video Game Reviews”, there are several strategies in the framing of game reviews dependent on the narrative features, following either holistic or personal approaches. Glashüttner investigates the motivation behind these approaches, and the resulting perception of the readers and its impact on their own gaming experience, as reflected in studies of *Death Stranding*, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and *The Last of Us Part II*.

The third book section, “Games, Politics and Society”, deals with narrative mechanics in society and politics. In ““We’re not murderers. We just survive!””, Eugen Pfister takes a closer look at the ideological function of game mechanics in zombie games. How is societal collapse depicted in their narratives? How sophisticated is the political self-awareness in these games, and in how far are discursive rules disclosed?

Discussing the game mechanics and autopoietic strategy in his science fiction novel *Quiz*, Günter Hack reflects on how, in a dystopian world, Situationist strategies have been implemented to consolidate the power of the spectacle in today’s mass culture. In his “What if?” thought experiment, corporations use the spectacle “in order to monetize the smallest movement of their subjects”, and work itself has become a *dérive*.

Margarete Jahrmann anchors her essay close to contemporary real-world events. “Ludic Meanders through Defictionalization: The Narrative Mechanics of Art” addresses highly topical developments during the Covid-19 pandemic. By staging interventions such as the “Social Distancer” in public space – which she defines as narrative space –, Jahrmann coins and subversively reframes “pandemic mechanics”.

Aiming to create games that have a positive impact on the world, Mary Flanagan discusses the ways in which embedded design facilitates and measures how game stories become real. Her text “If You Play it, Do You Believe It?”

identifies obfuscating, intermixing and psychological distancing as the three main methods of effective narrative mechanics for that purpose.

The last essay of this book section on society and politics consists of the radical semiotic reading “Ball Games and Language Games”. Martin Lindner discusses how Wittgenstein, football fan culture and pop culture come together, and how there cannot be any “empty signs”, and no escape from social meaning and consequences.

The essayistic discourse of narrative mechanics is followed by a fourth and last section with seven case studies of specific games. Six authors perform an analysis of the narrative mechanics of a particular game or game genre – contrasting and complementing the discussed theoretical explorations with a hands-on approach: “*Florence*” (Mela Kocher), “*The Last Guardian*” (Beat Suter), “Murder at the Museum” (Stefan Schmidlin), “*Even Missile Command Tells a Story*” (Beat Suter), “*Shave*” (Sonja Böckler), “*The Twitter Game*” (René Bauer) and “*Commander Kurz*” (Eugen Pfister).

The case studies also reflect on interconnections between games, the real world and our increasingly virtual real world. René Bauer analyzes the communication platform *Twitter* as a game and Eugen Pfister compares the Austrian chancellor to Commander Shepard from the video game *Mass Effect*. This may seem a bit odd at first, but today, the world is very much intertwined with games. We are in fact rather familiar with game mechanics and narrative strategies and apply them when playing games as much as when using (and abusing) social media, advertising a product, telling friends about a movie, communicating at work or being active in politics. It helps us paint a distinctive image of ourselves. At the same time, when we play or tell stories, we create an aesthetic construct, in our minds or in shared discourse, omitting things or emphasizing specific meanings.

Narrative mechanics thus contribute a temporary sense of meaning by bringing stringency to an increasingly complex and seemingly contradictory world. They can be used to create new access to the world, to pull things together, or to create entirely new “Magic Circles”, from playgrounds to cities to political constructs. Therefore, the world (like the games) appears more manageable and controllable again, or in other words, more rule-based. This is what makes narrative mechanics so attractive today, but equally dangerous, because they have long since become dispositives of power. And here, too, we need to look closely – which we aim to do, with the book at hand.

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