

Player story and similarities to author story

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In the field of game studies there are many discourses about the different arts of narratives in games. Author story and player story are the two big words in this discourse. The peak of the discourse was the ludologist against narratologist dispute in the early 2000s. I want to look at the question, "What is player story and what are the differences and similarities to author story?". As first I need to define author story and player story. Following I will compare the definitions and analyze the similarities and differences.

Narratives and Author Story

Narratives convey humankind since its early days. But what is narrative? There are some definitions. The Oxford Dictionaries defines narratives as: „A spoke or written account of connected events“ (Oxford Dictionaries). This definition concentrates on events, but also says that a story should be written or tailed.

The blogger Jay Shay defines narratives: „Narratives are sequences of events in which characters interact with each other and with their surroundings.“ (Shay) As in the above definition, it mentions events. It adds the characters, which interact and the place where they interact.

Jessy Schell says in his Book "Art of Game Design" about the story and narratives, "To understand this method, we have to take a good look at what a story is. It is nothing more than a sequence of events that someone relates to someone else." (Schell, p.265) Schell's definition adds to the events in the previous definition that it must be related to someone.

As we can see narratives are about events, which happens to someone in a certain place.

Tynan Sylvester says to Scripted Story, that "A game's SCRIPTED STORY is the events that are encoded directly into the game so they always play out the same way" (Sylvester, p.84)

This definition expands our definition to, scripted story are events, which happens to someone in a certain place, and are created by someone to happen in the same way every time.

Player Story

In the next step I should define player story. There are different names for player stories like emerging stories or emerging narratives. Tynan Sylvester defines it like this:

„Emergent Story is story that generated during play by the interaction of game mechanics and players“ (Sylvester, p.90). In this definition we get the aspects that the players story is a story created while playing and depends on player and gameplay.

Nick Dinicola defines the player story in his gamasutra article as „They are stories that emerge from the interaction between players and the systems that govern gameplay.“ (Dinicola). Dinicola's definition is similar to the definition of Sylvester and accentuates the origin of the players story on player and gameplay.

The definition of the blogger Jay Shay is „The qualities that differentiate emergent stories from linear/branching stories is that the gameplay itself becomes relevant. The things that you do in the game change the story, and in some cases may even DEFINE the story. The game IS the story; if you take out the game, there is no story“ (Shay)

Shea's definition concentrates on the gameplay and the game it selves.

Tom Cross's definition in his article is: „These interactions can produce an emergent narrative,

which, on the above definition, is something too complex to have been completely foreseen and provided for by the designers, and was produced by the user's interaction with the simulated gameworld."(Cross)

Cross writes that, player stories are narratives which depend on player and game. A new aspect is that the player story can't be planned by designer.

Elliot Wilson defines in his Bachelor Thesis, "Emergent Narrative (also known as Implicit Narrative) is the narrative the players infer as they experience the environment, however this narrative is not explicitly exposed to the user, it is implicit to the nature of virtual environments and the connections that players make between the causal events they experience."(Wilson p.2) Wilson's definition contains an interesting idea, that emerging narratives isn't easy to see for players, because it is show in his surroundings and isn't told to him as usual.

In all definitions we can find interaction of players and gameplay. Sylvester adds the dependency that the player story arise while the game is played. Tom Cross adds the unpredictable of the player stories. Wilson notices that player story is normally show through environment and events, which are different way than author story.

We can sum the definitions up by saying, players narratives is a narrative resulting from interaction between player and gameplay while playing, which can't be predicted or planned by designer.

Analysis of the Definitions and Comparison with other Aspects of Author Story

Looking at our definitions we can find some similarities and difference. In both definitions we have events which happens. There must be a person to whom this events happened.

The differences are that author story is created before the game and player story is arises while playing. The Origin of the author story is the author, while player story is made by interaction of the player and gameplay. Other difference is that author story is predictable and always happens in the same way. Player story can't be predictable and happens every time different. The way the story is presented differentiates. Player story can be seen in environment in the game and in decisions made in the game. Author story is told through dialog, texts, music, videos and pictures sometimes separated from the gameplay. (Shay)

There are other aspects of author story which is not in the definition. As the author story comes from the classical narrative, we can look if we can see some characteristics of classic narratives in player narratives. For this I will briefly look at "Poetics" from Aristotle and "The Hero with thousand faces" from Joseph Campbell.

In Aristotle book "Poetics" he names "Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Song" (see Aristotle p.10) as main elements of tragedy. Even as this about theater and not about games, I will try to translate it to games. The first thing we can say is that player is the character. Plot in player's story are the events which happens to the player while playing. Thought are the actions and thoughts of the player, that brings him to the events of the play. Spectacle is in our case the gameworld and the environment of players character and game. Song is a theatrical tool, which can be translated as game music to games, but is not a real element of players story because music is mostly recorded by production of the game and don't emerge in the game. The situation with the diction is almost the same as speech is mostly written and produced with the production of the game. The only exception is the diction in multiplayer games, where we have dialog between real people reacting on occurring events. We can see that not all aspects of tragedy can be translated to games and player story but a big amount of them.

Aristotle defines, that a tragedy must have " a beginning, a middle, and an end"(see Aristotle p.12). In player story we can find the tutorial as the beginning. The game after the tutorial would be the

middle. With the end we would have a problem, because if there are no scripted story like in sandbox games we have no end. On the other hand we have the moment in which the player stops playing as the end. In most cases this is also the moment where an event or a series of events have its ending. We can say that player story have the required beginning and middle, but you can't always say where the end is.

Now I will come to Campbell with Hero's Journey in his book "The Hero with a Thousand Faces". Joseph Campbell splits the story in 17 different patterns. I want to look which I can find in a player story.

The 17 Patterns are:

"The Call to Adventure", "Refusal of the call", "Supernatural Aid", "Crossing the Threshold", "Belly of the whale", "The Road of Trials", "The Meeting with the Goddess", "Woman as Temptress", "Atonement with the Father", "Apotheosis", "Ultimate Boon", "Refuse of the Return", "The Magical Flight", "Rescue from Without", "The Crossing of the Return Threshold", "Master of two worlds", "Freedom to live".

This Patterns can be found in many narratives, but normally not all of them are present in one story. For the hero's journey I would perhaps begin the player story not in the game, than before it, than the "Call to Adventure" happens mostly before the game. The "Call to Adventure" is the phase in player's story where the player chooses to start or before it buy the game. There must be something that calls the player to experience the game. Usually it is trailer, screenshots or review/preview of the game.

In player story there is no real "Refusal to Call" because, if player decides to play the game he will not refuse the adventure anymore.

The pattern "Supernatural Aid" can be transmitted to tutorials, which helps the player to learn the rules and controls of the world. In classical narratives it is a mentor which guides the character, and so the tutorials in games do.

"Crossing The Threshold" where the character is fully entering the adventure, can be compared to the first mission, quest or the first game after the tutorial. The player also leaves the safety of the tutorial to face the difficulties of the real game.

The game process itself can be seen as "The Road of Trials", as the player solves problems and performs actions to reach his goals. In player story many of the trials are self made as you make your own goals.

In hero's journey we have the "Woman as Temptress" as an attempt to make the character to leave his quest. In player story it is hard to find, but it can be an achievement which player wants to reach, even if it nothing have to do with the game. It can be also an item, that player wants to get abandoning his other goals in the game or leaving his allies alone.

In games players rarely die permanently, influencing the story. The permanent deaths presented in game are mostly scripted and part of author story. It is hard to find an "Apotheosis" in a player story. The examples which comes close to this are the loss of NPC companions in RPG games or allied competitors in different turn based strategy games.

In many multiplayer games there is maximum level, that can be seen as "The Ultimate Boon". The goal of the adventure. There is many more goals that can be seen as the final goal of the player story. It can also be the reaching of the end of the author story or getting all of the achievements.

Sometimes there is a "Refusal of the Return" in the player story, as the player doesn't want to return to his normal life. In this place I don't want to speak about game addiction. I want to think more about the "just one more turn" or "just one more quest" phrases. This phrases are often used by player of MMORPG and turn-based games, and reflects the "Refuse of the Return".

A the end of the game the player have mastered the game and he reaches a kind of "Freedom to Live". The player have learned and experience much, while playing the game. Now he is ready to move on and find new adventures in a new game or new adventures in the same game.

We could find many parallels between the hero's journey of the classical author story and the player

story. In above comparison I haven't used all the pattern of the hero's journey, because not every pattern can be found in player story or couldn't think of an example. Most of the examples can be found in multiplayer games and are hardly to find in singleplayer games as NPC are mostly scripted.

Conclusion

As we can see we have many similarities between the classical narrative author story and the player story. This was only a short and brief view on this subject, as you can go much deeper in comparing and analyzing using the same sources. There is much more to say and to study in this field. In my comparisons and analysis I have tried to look on the player story separately from the author story, and haven't include the pieces of player story resulting from the interaction with the author story. During my research I find papers handling about the problems of the player story, which is an interesting field to go further.

Source:

Print:

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(Nick Dinicola, <http://www.popmatters.com/column/173580-the-problem-with-emergent-stories-in-video-games/>, 22.12.2014)

(Tom Cross, http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/115255/Analysis_Story_And_The_Trouble_With_Emergent_Narratives.php, 22.12.2014)

(Jay Shay, <http://exploringbelievability.blogspot.de/2012/03/orchestrated-story-and-emergent.html>, 22.12.2014)

(http://www.thewritersjourney.com/hero's_journey.htm, 22.12.2014)