

# Gaming Stances and Strategies: Hybrids, Opportunists, and Cross-Fertilizations

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## Abstract

This paper addresses the narrative nature of digital games and explores the question from the perspective of game players. Rather than opting for one side or the other of the ludology/narratology dichotomy, players are more likely to draw hybrid strategies as it suits them in order to maximize their chances of making meaning from the text on offer. This paper explores the nature of some of these hybrid strategies.

## Introduction

Academic debate rages over whether digital games are best comprehended by means of the rules and assumptions of narrative or whether they are better understood through the nascent discipline of ludology, the science of game-playing (Jenkins, 2004; Juul, 2001). It is a very interesting question but not one that will be easily resolved. The only possible working answer is: it depends. Games are more or less narrative in nature; furthermore, players are more or less interested in the narrative components of any particular game in their own right, and also more or less inclined to view the game's narrative elements in heuristic terms as a route to furthering gameplay. The upshot of these variant contingencies is a hybrid landscape where sharp distinctions are more likely to be misleading than helpful. In this paper, I want to explore what we may discover by looking at the actions of players rather than developing a set of categories for classifying the texts.

Over the past eight years, I have investigated how individuals approach digital games as part of a larger project exploring the broad range of contemporary literacies. I have recorded the attitudes and behaviours of a total of 36 different game players, aged from 10 to 36, as they played one of the following games: *Myst*, *Starship Titanic*, *Black & White*, or *Shadow of the Colossus*<sup>1</sup>. In the case of 24 of these players, I have analyzed both the transcripts of their comments as they play and also the video record of the played screen, and have further drawn on their descriptions of how they play when they are not being recorded. With the remaining 12 (those who played *Shadow of the Colossus*), I have recorded their play but am still waiting for

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<sup>1</sup> 5 players aged 11 played *Myst* in 1998; 10 players aged 14 played *Starship Titanic* in 1998; 9 players aged 19-36 played *Black & White* between 2001 and 2003; 12 players aged between 18 and 21 played *Shadow of the Colossus* in 2005-2006.

the transcripts to return, so my comments on these players will necessarily be more general. This project remains a work in progress.

My research focus has always been on the decisions, strategies and actions of specific players as they interact with specific texts. All the games that I have selected to study are built around a strong narrative backbone. I have found, however, that simple narratological analysis has been helpful but not sufficient as a way of accounting for the behaviours of particular players. The boundaries between narrative and game-playing are smudged and blurry, and apparently of little import to the players themselves who dip into various repertoires to guide their decisions. Yet even if their play is contingent and opportunistic, it does yield to analysis in interesting ways. In this paper I will present some analytical and theoretical approaches. I will present them in the order in which they seem to me to be most useful for developing a clearer understanding of what is going on in narrative games, though this is not the order in which I discovered and established their utility.

### **Five topics**

I will address five topics that interlock to suggest a coherent way of exploring games:

- the question of the tense of game play,
- the role of player dispositions,
- the heuristic value of Rabinowitz's rules of reading,
- the strategic and technical surplus that is not accounted for by these rules,
- the significance of intertextuality.

Not surprisingly, given the variegated nature of my theoretical sources, my conclusions offer pointers to the development of a hybrid analytical tool.

### ***Tense***

Exploring the tense of an activity may seem like an arcane route into analyzing game play but I have found it surprisingly productive. Susanne Langer (1953), more than fifty years ago, made exciting use of the idea of verb tense as a way of looking at different forms of art. Novels, for example, represent a virtual past. Even when the narrative itself is composed in the present tense, the story itself is virtually past because it has happened *before* the point of telling. And of course, the time when the story is read or heard or otherwise interpreted is different again. A simple example from a children's book makes that point very clear. Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House in the Big Woods*, first published in 1932, begins with the phrase, "Once upon a time, sixty years ago..." (Wilder, 1932/1971, p.1). The events are firmly located sixty years before the telling – but our reading today is almost seventy-five years after that moment of telling and so we must extrapolate that we are reading about events that took place 135 years ago.

Not many stories are so schematic in laying out the timetable of story event, story telling and story reading but the distinction is implicit in most standard forms of print narrative. Jesper Juul contrasts this past tense of narrative with the present tense activities of game playing:

It is clear that the events represented cannot be *past* or *prior*, since we as players can influence them. By pressing the CTRL key, we fire the current weapons, which influences the game world. In this way, the game constructs the story time as *synchronous* with narrative time and reading/viewing time: the story time is *now*. Now, not just in the sense that the viewer witnesses events now, but in the sense that the events are *happening* now, and that what comes next is not yet determined (Juul, 2001).

It is still a virtual *now* in that the events to be determined by your CTRL key are fictional events – but Juul has pinpointed one way in which games and narratives operate on different premises. The game is open in ways that a print narrative is usually not (though the *Choose Your Own Adventure* stories do claim some of that *now* power that we see in games). Barry Atkins makes even more radical claims for the future-orientation of the game. He is speaking of gaze rather than grammar:

The screen does not represent the present, let alone the future, on which the player is focused. Rather, the screen represents the past of play. It presents us with a report that conveys information about the game state that is essential to successful play, but the player's gaze actually lingers elsewhere. . . . To the outsider the screen may appear more or less visually interesting, more or less aesthetically pleasing: To the player it is full of rich possibilities of future action, pointing always off to the moment at which it will be replaced by another image and then another. Its purpose, if it fulfills its function, is to insist on its own erasure as it prompts the player to move on and look elsewhere (Atkins, 2006, p.135).

Atkins' future tense is a refined version of Juul's:

The focus, always, is not on what is before us or the “what happens next” of traditionally unfolding narrative but on the “what happens next if I” that places the player at the center of experience as its principle [*sic*] creator, necessarily engaged in an imaginative act, and always oriented toward the future. In effect, the game gaze might appear to rest on the image on the screen, but the player sees through and beyond the screen and into the future (Atkins, 2006, p.137).

It is a truism of reception theory that print stories are interpreted differently by individual readers, but the openness of the game, I believe, makes room for more substantial player input. We need more analysis of players as well as their texts, but, as a starting point, we do have Richard Bartle's typology of player preferences, to which I will turn next.

### **Players**

Bartle, working with a group of players on a MUD, developed a typology of gamers, and suggested that player predilection actually alters the game experience. He raised an interesting question: Are MUDs:

- games? Like chess, tennis, AD&D [*Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*]?
- pastimes? Like reading, gardening, cooking?
- sports? Like huntin', shootin', fishin'?
- entertainments? Like nightclubs, TV, concerts? (Bartle, 1996)

Extrapolating from the verbally created world of a MUD to the visual interactivity of a digital game, we may follow Bartle's answer to this question.

- A game is a game like chess to those players who are most interested in *achieving* – in setting and accomplishing game-related goals.
- A game is a pastime like reading to those players who are most interested in *exploring* – in finding out as much as they can about the virtual world in which the game is set.
- A game is a sport like hunting to those who are interested in *killing* or otherwise having a major impact on other players.
- And a game is an entertainment like a nightclub to those whose highest priority is *socializing* with other players.

Bartle's set of four categories may very well need expanding and refining, but in the little set of nine players of *Black & White* who worked with me, I was surprised to identify representatives of each type. In any case, what his approach offers us is a different way of opening up the game to the contingencies of each instantiation of play. If the story occurs in the present tense of the play, and if different players bring different priorities to bear on how they establish themselves within that present tense, we are bound to have a more plural outcome not just of interpretation but of the very laying out of events.

### ***Rules of Reading***

So far, I have been opening up game play to a broad potential of individual instantiation. If games are so inexorably plural, is there any way of observing common elements of play? Peter Rabinowitz (1987) offers a useful tool, derived from 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century print narrative.

Rabinowitz describes what he calls the 'rules of reading,' which are really conventions that govern the verbs of reading behaviour. There are four sets of these rules: the rules of notice, the rules of signification, the rules of configuration, and the rules of coherence. I have always found them of great utility in looking at how readers act with print, and I was interested to establish that applying them to the playing of *Starship Titanic* and *Myst* clarified my observations in helpful ways.

- The rules of notice govern how we decide what to pay attention to. What is figure and what is ground?
- The rules of signification help us to decide *how* to attend to what we have decided is important.

In the case of Tom playing *Myst*, the rules of signification actually trumped the rules of notice. *Myst* begins very obscurely and the first clue to how to begin to make sense of the beautiful empty landscape lies in a letter dropped on the grass. It is white against the green and hard to overlook – unless, like Tom, you think you are in a game where collecting weapons is the aim. Tom, baffled by the strange territory of *Myst*, passed this letter half a dozen times without

noticing it – although the second it actually caught his attention, he immediately realized that it would be important.

- The rules of configuration apply to piecing different elements of the story together to make sense.

Janice and Madeleine, playing *Starship Titanic*, found a bomb on the starship. When they clicked on a sign that said, “Click here to disarm the bomb,” they initiated a countdown instead, and had to rethink both the signification of the sign they had noticed (it seemed trustworthy but wasn’t) and also their sense of how the shape of the game was developing.

- The rules of coherence largely apply in retrospect after the story is concluded. We use the rules of coherence in order to make the story the best possible.

People who go to a movie together often emerge from the theatre deep in discussion of the rules of coherence – how did the story work most optimally?

Of all the games I have studied, only *Shadow of the Colossus* has been played all the way to the end. The outcome of the story pleased some players, left others extremely dissatisfied, but all of them engaged in intense conversations about how the elements of the plot could most usefully be woven together.

So Rabinowitz’s toolkit has proved effective in supplying one lens for observing game play. From the earliest point that I attempted to make use of it, however, it was clear that in digital games there is a surplus of activity that cannot be accounted for under this rubric.

### ***Strategic and Technical Surplus***

Rabinowitz’s interpretive codes worked well as an aid to interpreting the actions of the players I observed, but it was clear to me from the outset that they did not cover every action. In my first pass at extending this analysis, I supplemented the four sets of rules of reading with a fifth set of strategic considerations. In subsequent work with more experienced players, I have also perceived the need to include technical considerations as well.

All the game players that I have watched immerse themselves imaginatively in the game world but also step away from that immersion to ask variants of the question, “What do I do next?” or, to put it in Atkins’ terms, “What happens next if I?” Janice and Madeleine, accidentally triggering the countdown for the bomb, display this stepping out in classic terms. When they push the button, a voice announces that the bomb is about to explode and the countdown begins.

Madeleine: Oh no, turn off, turn off!! Maybe we just set off the bomb!

Janice: Oh my gosh, look what we did!

Madeleine: What are we supposed to do? Type in a password or something?

Janice: Yeah, probably.

Madeleine: Mmmmmm.

Janice: Push the button.

Madeleine: On man, look what we did! I think we're going to explode!

Janice: We'd better go away. We'd better go far away.

For a short conversation, this exchange offers many points where the players step into and out of the story world. "Maybe we just set off the bomb!" is a comment internal to the story, but Madeleine's very next remark is strategic: "What are we supposed to do? Type in a password or something?"

Madeleine and Janice offered retrospective comments on their game play while watching the video of their performance. Their retrospective comments make it clear that, at the same time as they were responding and strategizing, they were also registering the signification that signs on the starship cannot be trusted and drawing on the configurative memory that they had been warned that something would go wrong.

Janice: It was just so bad –

Margaret: Did you feel the game was going to stop?

Janice: We thought that the bomb was going to explode and blow up the Titanic or something, because remember how they said at the beginning, how –

Madeleine: Something would go wrong – we kept on trying to touch that button to disarm it, but it's like, 'no, no, stop it!' and then it would start again. It would recount. I lost count and we'd start again.

Janice: It was hard to get out.

In this discussion, we can see the two girls drawing on their sense of story composition, described by Rabinowitz in the rules of configuration. They had been warned early in the story that something would go wrong; the recalcitrant bomb fit very nicely into the framework established by this gloomy prophecy.

Later again, the girls spoke once more about the bomb. In *Starship Titanic*, you assemble tools in a receptacle called the PET (Personal Electronic Thing). Janice and Madeleine had initially been oblivious to the role of the PET, but their alarm over the bomb caused them to explore their strategic options more closely and it was this incentive that enabled them to begin to use the PET. In short, they demonstrate movement between diegetic understanding of the story and strategic attention to what could be done to change its outcome.

Janice and Madeleine were not sophisticated computer users but when I worked with older players on *Shadow of the Colossus*, it became clear that, in addition to strategic consideration of how they might best approach the game, they also took account of technological issues. While they readily made use of game-playing strategies like switching to the map to freeze the action while they planned ahead, they also commented on the deeper technology of the game: the platform, the game engine, the design shortcuts, and so forth. As with Madeleine and Janice, they moved readily between immersive game play, strategic moves and discussions, and technological commentary. They also drew on a different resource: a rich vein of intertextuality.

## ***Intertextuality***

J.L. Lemke says, “Every text, the discourse of every occasion, makes its social meanings against the background of other texts and the discourses of other occasions” (1992, p. 257). Players of all the games I observed made use of their experience of other games. Sometimes, as with Tom and the letter on the grass, this experience interfered with successful play. More often, it was one further resource that opened up plurality in individual game play.

A group of three undergraduates playing *Shadow of the Colossus* manifested a particularly cohesive intertextual repertoire. They had been both friends and gaming buddies for many years and often played together. *Shadow of the Colossus* is a game that alternates relatively leisurely exploration with highly intense combat as each of sixteen colossi is first located and eventually defeated. During the exploration phase, which occurred sixteen times, this trio of players exchanged explicit references to other games, cryptic banter and catchphrases that they later described as arising from previous occasions of play, tag lines from other texts (“I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore,” said one as a colossus heaved itself out of the landscape), and technical insights from game play that had proved successful with prior games. Their intertextual comments covered conditions within the storyline itself, strategic suggestions, and technical options.

In other groups of three, where players had not met before the project, the intertextual suggestions played out differently. All players to some extent drew on connections to other games and to other stories, sometimes in terms of genre rather than specific detail. When strangers played together, however, they had to do much more explaining of their intertextual references; the group of friends could mention and enact clues and cues from other experiences almost simultaneously. The groups that were not friends, on the other hand, had the advantage of a wider range of repertoire, but a repertoire that was less often and less successfully transferred into action because a suggestion was only as useful as the way in which it could be articulated to others. As with print reading, however, it was very clear that background experience with other texts played a significant interpretive role in how this game was played each time.

But the intertextual interjections played another, separate role. In a game like *Shadow of the Colossus* or *Black & White*, the present tense mode of play often devolved into a mode of engagement that is best described as a kind of present participle. Some players spent an extensive amount of time simply “being” in the story, finding where to go, registering the qualities and resistances of the landscape. For those who enjoyed exploring, this kind of being was often a sufficient pleasure in its own right. For some of the more goal-oriented players, stretches of low-key crossing of landscape was a kind of interference with the good parts of the game. But some players took the opportunity of “being” in the game – retrieving gatestones in *Black & White*, looking for the next Colossus in *Shadow* – to draw on other, remembered textual play as one component in enjoying these relaxed moments of the game. Obviously, people draw on intertextual cues when reading and watching movies, but books and movies are edited more tightly than games. It is simpler to find a way of just “being”, just going round and round, in a game than in either a book or a film. Such leisurely moments are very much open to being “decorated” with embellishments from other texts, and some players clearly enjoyed such an approach to the game.

## Discussion

When a text is created uniquely out of a set of options, the predilections of the players and the intertextual repertoires are different and lead to often very diverse outcomes. Nevertheless, even with this wide-open landscape of possibilities, players at all levels of age and experience manifested a tendency to establish certain kinds of pathways, following Rabinowitz's interpretive shorthand and also stepping back for strategic consideration. More knowledgeable players also relied on technological understanding as part of their strategic repertoire, but even those lacking in such background articulated tactical decision-making processes and responses to the events in the plot. Madeleine and Janice were two of the most inexperienced players I have worked with, yet they drew both on their broad story knowledge and also on their limited game knowledge as it seemed useful in order to make headway in the confusing world of *Starship Titanic*. Furthermore, a dramatic spur from the diegetic action of the story prompted them to consider innovative strategies that would help them to save their avatars and further the story action.

Players of *Shadow of the Colossus* were much more experienced overall than the two young teenagers. They spoke of other games as sources of insight into how to deal with the puzzling aspects of *Colossus*, and they talked in terms of plot, character, cultural background (the game is distinctly Japanese in style and tone), strategic decisions, and technological finessing. Many of them made sophisticated points about gameplay; several of them, however, were explicit that the story mattered more to them than any amount of gameplay. Rather than perceiving the game as mainly game or as mainly story, they were clearly opting for "the best half of both."

Players at all levels, from 11-year-old Tom to the undergraduates who played *Shadow of the Colossus*, some of whom were gaming for 12 hours a day at times, also drew on other texts in order to both illuminate their strategic decisions and also to enrich and embellish the text at hand.

Understanding a narrative digital game as a hybrid text, even if this understanding is reached at the most tacit and intuitive level, means that players are able to draw on a variety of interpretive repertoires. The present-to-future orientation of the game as played means that interpretive options are less closed than in a linear text such as a print story. I use the term "less closed" rather than "more open" quite deliberately. Even though the instantiation of every game is different, very few games are wide open. In a game that is played via a disk or cartridge, the options are always already laid out and thought through in advance by the game's creators; the player may assemble a singular configuration but is not really inventing new material and the commonplace description of a player as a kind of a co-author seems to me to be exaggerated. (Multiplayer online games work on different rules of engagement and are more genuinely open-ended – but even they are constrained by the limitations of the given fictional world.)

So, in a less closed way, narrative strategizing helps a player to interpret the shape of the game. It might seem plausible that for more experienced players, strategic questions might become more and more invisible as options become familiar to the point of transparency. But the players I have worked with, even those most comfortable and fluent with the game controls, seem never to submit completely to the spell of the story as readers and film-watchers often do. It is as if the suspension of disbelief in game-playing goes hand in hand with an awareness that

the work is partly being done by the player and so attention can never be completely removed from the apparatus of play. I have never found Rabinowitz's rules of interpretation, flexible and useful though they are in focusing attention on interpretive approaches, sufficient to describe and explain all the behaviours and attitudes of game players I have worked with. Strategizing includes paying attention to questions of *how to play* even as the story unfolds, in ways external to the interpretive force of signifying and configuring which occurs during reading. Sophisticated players often include reference to the engine underlying the whole process.

Games are relatively new and in many ways primitive texts. Graphics are improving rapidly and gameplay is becoming more intuitive but we are still in the very early stages of familiarizing ourselves with a new mode of story telling. Whether the apparatus will be naturalized to the point of transparency as technology develops is an interesting question without a clear answer at present. My own instinct is that the "less closed" aspect of the nature of games will mean that players will always need a kind of strategy-orientation, at least during some moments of play. It may very well be that achieving a workable story in a game may always resemble driving with a stick shift rather than with automatic gears; and that attending to the mechanisms of putting the story together is something that will always be a part of the challenges and the pleasures of game playing.

## Conclusions

This paper reports a work in progress. When the transcripts of the *Colossus* play become available, much more fine-grained work will be possible. But even this coarse-grained report offers a look at game players who are making use of multiple repertoires, creating a hybrid kind of satisfaction that explores and utilizes both story and game components.

Whether we will continue to be aware of the hybrid nature of games over the next ten or twenty or fifty years is an open question. Controls will become slicker, which may make play more immersive. Graphics will become ever more compelling. I am not at all sure whether we will continue to think of our game-playing strategies in terms of cross-fertilization and hybridity or whether such an approach is a temporary historical phenomenon. As gaming conventions are naturalized, we may become less aware of their implications. In my current work, however, I see evidence of gamers drawing on multiple "toolkits" in ways that testify to their resourcefulness and skill. Understanding the role of different approaches as players bring games to life is an ongoing challenge.

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