

# Monstrous Textuality: Game Fiction between Postmodernism and Structuralism

Tamer Thabet  
Brock University  
[tthabet@brocku.ca](mailto:tthabet@brocku.ca)

## Abstract

It has been argued that computer game narratives demonstrate features of what has been called 'textual monstrosity'--a feature common in the characterization of postmodern narratives (Gibson, 1996). Is this a mere illusion? A product of the unique way they are structured? This work argues that game narratives are not as chaotic as the postmodern claim might dictate by taking a close structural look at game narratives vis-à-vis the work of Barry Atkins, revealing what is a quite rigid textual prearrangement and organization in game narratives. This piece is also simultaneously a call to action, a short manifesto calling for a step back and the adoption of new perspectives on game narratives.

## Author Keywords

Computer games, monstrosity, postmodernism, structuralism, textuality.

## Introduction

This article argues in favor of structuralist thinking about computer game fiction, advancing Barry Atkins' idea of the "postmodern temptation"--a concept thoroughly discussed in his book *More than a game: The computer game as a fictional form* (2003). In his work he elaborates on the shortcomings of hastily labeling game fiction as postmodern fiction, remarking on such a characterization as incorrect. The following pages set out to both explore and question the validity of considering computer game narratives as the digital manifestation of a postmodern monstrous text. In this paper, I expand Atkins' rebut to such an assessment, adopting his strategy in *both systematically recognizing and denying* (Atkins, 2003, p.10) the monstrosity of game fiction--a manifesto of sorts in pursuing a more critical structuralist approach to game narrative across the board.

This idea emerged as an aside observation in a larger project that deals with the form, structure, and interpretation of the fiction communicated through computer games. While reflecting on Atkins' explanation of how tempting it is to admit game fiction as postmodern fiction, the realization was made that game fiction would even be more tempting to consider as a form of postmodern textual monstrosity. And so this article presents a preliminary questioning of game fictions' monstrosity in an attempt to provoke a debate that explores the subject and calls for new perspectives.

Given the limited scope of this work, I have selected to discuss here the first-person shooter genre in providing at least one example of game narratives under which we might apply the scrutiny of the ‘postmodern temptation’. This also ensures that the perspective presented here is focused enough to offset the complexity, novelty, and abstraction of the subject and yield comprehensive results, as well as avoid the woolgathering that would almost inevitably result from combining different game genres (such as third-person and isometric games) in an as yet unfamiliar storytelling medium with the abstract concepts of literary theory. The use of other game genres will also invariably yield different results due to the variation of game camera position, player input, camera distance from the main character, and other considerations.

It is a good practice to conduct this kind of research with reference to a game story example so as to avoid losing touch with the subject of research while tackling the theoretical abstraction involved. The game story I have chosen to serve as an example of textual monstrosity is *BioShock* (2K Boston/2K Australia, 2007), which offers a first-person game narrative.

### Illusory Textual Monstrosity

*Merriam-Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* eloquently lists the characteristics of the “monster” and of “monstrosity” (1986). Paraphrasing a collation of definitions from both entries reveals that the monstrous denotes abnormality of form or structure, deviation from the normal or acceptable, great complexity and departure. The last characteristic implies departure from the normal, departure from the safe zone of conceptions, a zone conveniently established by culture to fence off whatever requires a painstaking process of comprehension and acceptance. All the previous attributes of the monster apply to something other than a person, an animal, or a plant. In this essay, we address the characterization of game narratives as “monstrous”.

Game narratives can often *seem* as savage and invertebrate monsters, resisting discipline, untamable by most narratological methods. Narrative theorists such as Gibson (1996, p.212-35) have already set out to describe textual monstrosity in the context of postmodernism: texts that defy structuralist thinking, systematization, and classification (also see Herman & Vervaeck, 2005; Currie, 1998; Roemer, 1996 & Heise, 1997).

However, Atkins (2003, p.8) rightly warns from the temptation to simplistically classify games as postmodern storytellers. The postmodernist way of identifying textual monstrosity is based on the text’s derailment from structuralist regulations, mainly in terms of textual time and space. The savage text for postmodernists is very difficult to date and does not demonstrate a separation of past, present, and future (Herman, 2005, p.111), a deliberate chaos so as to escape the neat temporal diagrams of structuralism. The same goes for space: no fixed centers, but rather a lawless and constant spatial self-transformation into other spaces (also see Punday, 2003). Nevertheless, as will be argued here, such textual anarchy does not apply to game fiction.

Atkins (2003, p.12) ascribes the “postmodern temptation” to theorize about game narratives to the kind of language surrounding them. For example, terms such as “game”, “play”, and “non-linear” are common in postmodern, hypertext, and game studies, which does not change the fact

that they refer to different concepts. The root of Atkins' opposition to label game fiction as postmodern fiction can be found in the problematic language used to treat game fiction in some of the early works in the field of game studies. Atkins traces this language to the terminological vocabulary that surrounds both computer games and computer-dependant texts (such as hyper-text and simulation), which seem to have been influenced by Jean Baudrillard's writings on simulation that seem to have heralded the era of computer games (Atkins, 2003, p.12). Atkins further explains that when we attempt to locate computer games within Ihab Hassan's list of binary oppositions representing different modernist categories and their postmodernist equivalents (Hassan, 1995, p.146-56), such as purpose versus play, design versus chance, and readerly versus writerly, we find that game narratives lean more towards postmodernism (Atkins, 2003, p.13). However, game theorist Atkins firmly warns us that we should be cautious with such terms because it is premature to apply them to computer games: "such terminology does not always survive its transportation to the specifics of that experience" (2003, p.15).

Despite that such temptation still stands, computer games demonstrate a different kind of monstrosity: an orderly "monster" resisting the system for the sake of changing it rather than demolishing it. Because of their distinctive interactivity, game narratives do not subscribe to existing literary analytical approaches because the various schools of literary theory are not practiced in dealing with readers being real partners in the storytelling. The kind of interaction in game narratives alters most of the fundamental concepts known in literary theory such as authorship, narration, focalization, time, space, and most importantly, the conception of audience, or the person at the reception's end of the fictional communication; game players read, watch, hear, and play, thus – in a certain way – take on part in telling the story. If we provisionally assume that playing a story is, or is equivalent to, the act of reading, we will find that the reader/player takes more roles in game narratives: he/she is given a limited authority on the events, takes on an active part in the narration by projecting his/her own narrative voice (metaphorically), and is responsible for directing the protagonist by impersonating the character in the virtual space of the story, and thus he/she actively progresses and unfolds the plot. During this unique reception process in game fiction, this "reader" becomes both the performer and the audience, and consequently, both acts of telling and reading are interdependent and synergistic. The overlap, synergy, and interdependency of telling and reading are attributed to the nature of narration in games: narration is composed of player's interaction in association with the game system's narration.

### **Textual Anomaly**

Game textuality seems to represent a flagrant divergence from the long-established conventions of narratives, which is true. However, this textuality and the type of "reading" it offers are far from being chaotic. In fact, the text in a computer game does have a very strict structure. Whatever is conceived as a deviation from our disciplinary thinking is merely a consequence of our lack of understanding, which will end as soon as we understand this text in terms of its own textuality, or the way it communicates its narrative content. For that purpose, the best way to start is to declare the textual structure in games as a different and dynamic one.

Fictional communication in games is realized by means of an aggregation of textualities belonging to other media: visuals, sound, and written text. Those textualities are in effect the compo-

nents of a unique and predominant textuality by which the story is told: interaction. The visuals, the sounds, and the written text in all their possible forms are combined and governed by a program code to control their behavior, transforming them into a higher textuality called interaction. To set up the scene for what follows, let us keep in mind that interactivity – in the context of game narratives – is almost synonymous with “playability”. “Playability” should be regarded as a subcategory of “interactivity” specific to computer games, while “interactivity” remains a broad term that covers user’s interactions with new media in general.

It has been said over and over that game fiction is interactive, but at the same time, interaction has been deemed contradictory to narration<sup>1</sup>. In these pages, interaction and narration are synergistic rather than conflicting; That is, narration takes place by means of interaction. When the player plays, he/she performs a number of activities within the fictional world of the narrative as part of his/her impersonation of a character, and hence, the player tells by projecting a narrative voice into the text (again, metaphorically speaking). The player is co-narrator as he/she triggers the events and reports them in order to proceed with the plot. In Grant Tavinor’s recent study, *The Art of Videogames* (2009), he argues that the advanced digital graphics technology makes videogames aesthetically rich fictional worlds in which the player-character, the player’s epistemic and behavioral proxy in the game world, allows him/her to both perceive and act while exploring the fictional world of the game. This is due to the modality in videogames, which refers to the various forms of sensations – vision, hearing, taste, smell, touch. Games do not only engage a player in at least three of the sense modalities to provide him/her with an epistemic access to the facts of the fictional world, but also provide the player with the possibility of fictional action. Affordances, Tavinor maintains, are the responsive parts of the environment: “A fictional affordance in the case of a videogame is thus an interactive aspect of the fictive representation that determines what a player can fictionally do” (2009, p. 80). He describes these affordances as the *fictive means* provided to the player (p. 109).

The following examination demonstrates a very brief structural analysis of some textual aspects such as the narrative voice, focalization, and the levels of narrative communication in games, and is meant to be a sample of an extended work to recognize game fiction in terms of a structural framework. The purpose of such analysis is both to develop an understanding of the dynamics and prearrangements of the narrative elements in games, and to realize the centrality of the player in game narratives.

### **Dynamic Narrative Structure**

Literary narratology favors a clear separation between narrative levels. However, different narratologists use different terms to refer to these levels.

<b>Herman &amp; Vervaeck</b>	<b>Genette</b>	<b>Rimmon-Kenan</b>	<b>Bal</b>
Story	Histoire	Story	Fabula
Narrative	Récit	Text	Story
Narration	Narration	Narration	Text

*Figure 1-Four perspectives by different theorists on the distinction between narrative levels*

To prefer Herman and Vervaeck's terms:

1. "narration" refers to the way the story is told and the level on which the narrating agent is situated;
2. "narrative" is the level on which events and characters are presented to the reader and where the character's perspective "focalization" is central;
3. "story" is the abstract construct not readily available to the reader. On this level, the narrative elements are reduced to a chronological series.

Manfred Jahn uses different terms as well, however, as he provides us with visual means to understand the narrative levels. Jahn's visual model provides a framework, which can be readily shaped to more complex scenarios, and indeed, this is the time for us to adapt it in order to find out 'who speaks' in a game story. In the words of Jahn, "literary narrative communication involves the interplay of at least three communicative levels. Each level of communication comes with its own set of addressers and addressees (also 'senders' and 'receivers')" (2005, p. 441).

Now let us attempt to superimpose the player of computer games on the previous model so as to see which position(s) he/she assumes:

The most important role of the player is on the level of fictional mediation<sup>2</sup>. On the level of fictional mediation, the player narrates, and to be precise, co-narrates. The player triggers the events, and by doing so, he/she projects a narrative voice into the text. This voice depends for the most part on the player's play style and the options provided to him/her by the system. For example, the player may choose from an array of options and directions, decide on the order of events, or strategize for something to happen. Agency is a key factor in distinguishing the nature of telling in computer games for its huge narratological implications. For instance, the temporal and spatial dimensions of the story will be in the hands of the player, which will result in a personal "reading" that is subjective to a great extent. Needless to say, the character's development will be greatly influenced by the player's own personality. However, being a co-narrator means that the system will keep intervening in the narration by taking over the narrator's role in some specific moments. When the game system sets off a cut-scene, it takes away the point of view from the player and exposes him/her as a character. The events in cut-scenes are not to be told by the player (who is temporarily rendered a viewer) and typically represent transitional points in the plot. The system's narration is not restricted to the cut-scenes, but is also manifested in other

signs created by the system such as the messages that appear on the screen to guide the player and the messages that show what the player's character is thinking at some point, as if the system is mimicking the narrating voice of player's narrator-character and actually telling him/her what to say. The system's narration is also represented by events that the player has no control over, the events that the player triggers, and can be conceivably extended to the depiction of the whole fictional world before the eyes of the player.

“...the reader's imaginative adoption of a reflector's point of view is usually called 'immersion' or (a bit quaintly) 'transposition to the phantasm”

Bühler, 1990 [1934] in Jahn (2005)

In first person games, it is the player's point of view from which the action is presented. The focalizer, a role located on what Jahn calls the level of action, is usually the player through whose eyes the events are seen. The centre of perception, in most cases<sup>3</sup>, is anchored to the player's point of view, making him/her a permanent internal focalizer. This role assumed by the player lies on the level of action: the interaction between his/her character and the other characters. On this level, our player impersonates the protagonist and sees everything through his/her eyes. The POV mood<sup>4</sup> is the core of the experience where the player is subjected to whatever the character goes through and where the player loses awareness of his/her narrational role. Since the size and the purpose of this article do not allow me to include the longer analysis of the player's role, I have no doubt that my previous claims about the player as a co-narrator and focalizer could seem very blunt to state with such little argumentation, so I rely for the most part on my reader's common sense and remind that such mentioning of narratological roles in this article is to sample the validity of structural language in game analysis.

We may conclude that telling and reception in computer games are interdependent and represented by a nonlinear narrational movement in between the narrative communication levels, which calls for a new method to take into account the dynamic nature of such narration. This method does not have to be foreign to literary theory. Again, the previous notions about the player's co-narration and focalization are part of a much more detailed study that aims at concretizing the player's centrality in game narratives, and which also reveals that literary narratology alone, without employing theories from film narratology, is not sufficient to realize the ways in which the player co-narrates in relation to the game system's narration.

### Narratological Application

All the narratological claims made about game stories in the previous section call for a demonstration on a game example. *Bioshock* (2K Boston/2K Australia, 2007) is a first-person game that tells the story of Jack who, under mysterious circumstances, returns to the city of Rapture. The player finds himself/herself in Jack's body: the first-person perspective is a designed visual illusion that allows the player to see, hear, and move as the protagonist Jack; in other words, to perceive *as* Jack. The center of perception in *Bioshock* is anchored to the game's player making him/her not just the protagonist, but a focal-character, an internal focalizer.

Moving through the fallen city in Jack's body, the player, however, does not act as Jack, but as him/herself, since this kind of expected performance from the player is unscripted and the player – unlike the traditional actor in film or theatre – has no idea what will happen next. The player's actions and reactions in the game's world determine the plot's direction. Depending on the player's actions and choices (e.g. moral choices), *Bioshock* becomes a story of hero, a villain, or just an apathetic survivor who has neither committed atrocities nor saved other. The player acts as him/herself, thus creates his/her own discourse, and projects his/her own narrative voice in order to tell a story and therefore assuming the role of a narrator-character.

### ***Postmodernism and Structuralism***

"That postmodernism is indefinable is a truism" (Aylesworth, 2007). It is also true that "post-modern narratology has no fixed methodology" (Herman, 2005, p.109). Postmodernism is a narrative theory that is meant to be vague so as to depend on the personal insights and interpretation of the individual narratologist. It rejects hierarchy and separation of levels, and yet it is still tempting to use it as a conceptual framework for a highly structured fiction such as video games. This temptation might be attributed to the monstrous characteristic of postmodernist texts, or "savage narratives" (Currie, 1998, p.113)<sup>5</sup> that oppose structuralist regulation. The very monstrosity of computer game narratives can be disproved by focused comparison and contrast and by adaptation.

The previous narratological application is just a brief example of what we can do with narratological language and structures in order to understand a textual form represented by a piece of software set up to organize different textualities and regulate the freedom of its interactors. Narrative elements in games are constructed in a different order that admits the player to different levels of fictional communication allowing him/her to express and influence the fictional world, and yet these narratives are highly structured. Since game fiction insists on finding its own place and rules in structuralist schemas, what we need is to invest more in application and modification rather than giving up trying before trying.

## **References**

- 2K Boston/2K Australia. (2007). *BioShock*. 2K Games.
- Atkins, B. (2003). *More than a game: The computer game as a fictional form*. New York: Manchester University Press.
- Aylesworth, G. (2007). Postmodernism. In *Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Winter edition, 2007). Retrieved 28 December 2008 from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/postmodernism/>
- Currie, M. (1998). *Postmodern narrative theory (Transitions)*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

- Gibson, A. (1996). *Towards a postmodern theory of narrative*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Hassan, I. (1995). Towards a concept of postmodernism. In Thomas Docherty (Ed.). *Postmodernism: A Reader* (146-56). New York and London: Harvester.
- Heise, U. (1997). *Chronoschisms: Time, narrative, and postmodernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Herman, L., & Vervaeck, B. (2005). *Handbook of narrative analysis*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Jahn, M. (2005). "Narratology: A guide to the theory of narrative". English Department, University of Cologne. Retrieved 29 December 2008 from <http://www.uni-koeln.de/~ame02/pppn.htm>
- Laurel, B. (1993). *Computers as theatres*. Boston: Addison-Wesley Publishing.
- Manovich, L. (2001). *The language of new media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Murray, J. (1997). *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The future of narrative in cyberspace*. New York: Free Press.
- "monster" Def. 1 a, b, 4. (1986). In F. Mish. *Merriam-Webster's ninth new collegiate dictionary* (p. 769, 9th ed., vol. 1).
- "monstrosity" Def. 1 b. 3 a. (1986). In F. Mish. *Merriam-Webster's ninth new collegiate dictionary* (p. 769, 9th ed., vol. 1)
- O'Neill, P. (1994). *Fictions of discourse: Reading narrative theory*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Punday, T. (2003). *Narrative after deconstruction*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Pearce, C. (2004). Towards a game theory of game. In N. Wardrip-Fruin & P. Harrington (Eds.), *First person: New media as story, performance, and game* (pp.143-153). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Roemer, M. (1996). *Telling stories: Postmodernism and the invalidation of traditional narrative*. Boston, Rowman and Littlefield.
- Ryan, M.L. (2001). *Narrative as virtual reality: Immersion and interactivity in literature and electronic media*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Tavinor, G. (2009) *The art of videogames*. Malden MA: Wiley Blackwell Print.



---

<sup>1</sup> For more on the notion of the conflict between interactivity and narrativity, to which these pages stand in direct opposition, see Juul (2004), Pearce (2004), and Ryan (2001).

<sup>2</sup> The rest of his/her roles are explained in an extended study of Jahn's yet to be published.

<sup>3</sup> It depends on the genre; in some games an external camera is offered.

<sup>4</sup> Point of View: the camera is virtually mounted on the player's eyes.

<sup>5</sup> quoted. in Herman, 2005, p.111.