

Narrative Logics of Digital Games

The debate whether to locate the narrative of digital games a) as part of the code or b) as part of the performance will be the starting point for an analysis of two roleplaying games: the single-player game ZELDA: MAJORA'S MASK and the Korean MMORPG AION and their respective narrative logics. When we understand games as abstract code systems, then the narrative logic can be understood as embedded on the code level. With a focus on the player's performance, the actualization of the possibilities given in the code system is central. Both logics, that of code and that of performance, are reflected in players' narratives based on the playing experience. They do reflect on the underlying code and rules of the game system as they do reflect on the game world and their own performance within. These narratives rely heavily on the source text – the digital game –, which means that they give insights into the underlying logics of the source text. I will discuss the game structure, the players' performance while playing the game and the performance of the player after playing the game producing fan narratives. I conceive the narrative structure and the performance of the player playing as necessarily interconnected when we discuss the narrative logics of a game. Producing fan narratives is understood as a performance as well. This performance is based on the experience the players made while playing and refers to both logics of the game they use as their source text.

“Once upon a time, the question that captured our collective imagination (and ire) was this one: Is a game a system of rules, or is a game a kind of narrative?” (Bogost 2009) – Narratology is a semiotic approach to the study of narrative, which analyzes the relation between a story (the underlying concept) and its realization in discourse. The

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discourse can be a realization of a story in any medium. The question whether narratology is an appropriate approach to digital games is compared by Bogost to a scene from *The Blues Brothers* (1980) when “Elwood asks the bartender Claire at Bob’s Country Bunker, ‘What kind of music do you usually have here?’ And she responds cheerfully, ‘Oh, we got both kinds. Country and Western.’”

Ludology in contrast investigates digital games as games, which means the digital game is seen in relation to other types of games, its rules and structure are analysed and the activity of playing is understood as central for an understanding of the game.

Narratology as well as ludology are described by Bogost as two different formal approaches to games, not necessarily being exclusive. Bogost discusses different ontological turns in the study of video games. One of the turns he discusses is the end of the heated debate between narratology and ludology. Even though the dispute between narratology and ludology came to a compromise in the meantime, taking ludic as well as narrative elements into consideration, most still conceive those elements on different levels as Juul states in *Half-Real* (2005:1): “a video game is a set of rules as well as a fictional world.” The rules belong to the real while the fictional world is what makes the game unreal. Bogost (2009) concludes: “Whatever a game is, some part of it is more real than another. Here we can see a new turn in the ontology of games.”

Game Studies is a distinct term used for the same research interests that ludologists have formulated. However, in contemporary game research, game studies cover a broader field than ludology. Torill Elvira Mortensen, a scholar of media and game studies, clearly states that while ludology focuses on digital games as specific forms of games and nothing else, game studies is a broader approach and can be understood as a generic term under which ludology can be subordinated. She describes game studies as an inherently interdisciplinary field. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (2005), the edi-

tors of the *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, point to the fact that in order to study computer games, an extensive collection of scientific disciplines must be included, such as cognitive sciences, artificial intelligence, psychology, history, film studies, cultural studies and philosophy, which also includes narratology.

Narratology and Game Studies

One critique of an application of narrative theory to digital games is based on the difference between a reader or spectator and a player. Games need the player to actively engage with the game world and thereby construct the discourse. Playing includes the change of perspectives and the manipulation of the environment. Furthermore, the roles of the protagonist of the narrative and the player are conflated in digital games. The player is addressed in-game as a protagonist and as the player at the same time. Explanations and information given to the player in game are related to the background story but also to the rules of the game (“you first have to do x before you can do y”) and related to the out-of-game situation of playing (press the x button on your controller). In Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), the players themselves comment on all three levels as well, as the following quote from a chat of the game AION (2008) shows:

- Player A: /locate Narvi
Player A: /navigate Narvi
Player A: wtf [what the fuck] was the command again?
- Player B: narv narv
- Player C: locate or loc imo [in my opinion]
Player C: or try /tomtom :D
- Player A: /tomtom Narvi
Player A: XD

The chat above shows the following: Player A is looking for a command to trace a nonplayer character in the game. The slash plus command as in `/locate+name` is her attempt to find the character on the map, which the game uses to support the players' orientation. Usually these commands do not show in the chat window. They are only visible to others when a command is used that does not exist in the game. Therefore the player asks for help. The suggestion to use `/tomtom` is of course a joke and presupposes the knowledge that the GPS system *TomTom* is widely known. Additionally, the use of the emoticon “:D”, which represents a wide smile, underlines that this is a joke and not a serious answer. Player A reacts with an emoticon as well, which represents a crossed-eye smile: “XD”.

This example shows how players play with the different levels of reference a game conflates. They enjoy this typical game element by confusing these levels intentionally. The diegetic context, the meta-diegetic context, the player's actions as well as the external player's world are commented upon in game, which creates a metalepsis. Metalepsis is a term from narratology used to refer to the transgression between the internal storyworld, the external comment on this storyworld and the reader's external situation of reading. Britta Neitzel describes metalepsis as one of the central features of game play. She speaks of an ontological metalepsis, which lies at the fundament of gameplay and concludes that instead of being in control of the game characters and their actions, the player is controlled by them:

Playing and the played, the level of representation and the level of the represented begin to be connected in a circular, self-referential manner and to influence each other (Neitzel 2008:148, trans. by author).

This double role of the player, as an observer and external to the fictional world and as the main protagonist and therefore internal to the fictional world, is blending.

The debate where to locate the narrative of digital games a) as part of the code or b) as part of the performance will be the starting point for my analysis of the single-player game *THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: MAJORA'S MASK* (2000) and the Korean MMORPG *AION* (2008) and their respective narrative logics. When we understand games as abstract code systems which define the game elements, possible connections, paths and application rules for those elements, their narrative logics can be understood as embedded on the code level – the game structure (Pias 2002, Degler 2005).

The Logic of the Game Structure

The game structure and its narrative logic are based on the logic of game decisions. These decisions are primarily based on rules, strategies and settings for gameplay and secondarily on character, scenes and plot. Mersch (2008:32) describes gameplay as a dialogue with the machine and its interfaces. He states that teleology, rules and strategy are dominant in digital games. Narrative elements, however, are present in the background story, quests and cutscenes (Juul 2001:17). Narrative patterns are weaved into the game design and actualized by the player who follows the game rules. The discovery of alternative narrative paths and hidden storylines is an important element of gameplay. Finding hidden game worlds becomes more important than following a coherent linear story. This holds true for single-player games such as *THE LEGEND OF ZELDA* series (since 1987) as well as for MMORPGs. In both game types the hidden side stories can be found by exploring the game in ways that seem to be a deviation from the given tasks. By taking the time and yawing from the most obvious way to take, players are rewarded with side quests and/or additional rare items. Thereby the deviation from a task given seems to become a rule of a digital game itself. The different games of the *ZELDA* sequel follow different narrative strategies. While most games follow a linear development with one main story

line and a few hidden sidetracks, ZELDA: MAJORA'S MASK follows a circular movement. The game character is being transported back to the starting point over and over again after a period of three days (measured in game time), however, with additional knowledge about the game rules and new tasks to be fulfilled in the next time period. Circularity and the repetition of tasks are typical for computer games. Usually this could be considered a major difference to a narrative logic for which progression and change are central. The narrative logic of ZELDA: MAJORA'S MASK transfers the game rule "repeat an action as often as necessary to improve your skill or complete the task" onto the narrative logic of time travel. Being transported back to a moment in the narrative that is situated three days before but with the knowledge and experience gained beforehand is a central element for the ludic as well as the narrative logic in this single-player game.

In an MMORPG, the narratives usually consist of quests that have to be fulfilled. Not all of them are connected to one coherent storyline. Some follow a progression in an underlying story, some simply have the task to make the player familiar with the game interface and the rules and to help her to explore the game world further. AION uses cutscenes in addition to the textual information given in quests for the major storyline. The major storyline makes clear why the player's game character has to develop skills and become stronger to be able to defeat the enemy and protect the own faction. Depending on the faction chosen – the player can either start the game as Elyos or Asmodian, two factions which fight each other in the game – the storyline develops differently. Not only the perspective given in the background story of the game is different, but also some of the quests to follow and of course the cutscenes are adapted to the faction one plays. The cutscenes are integrated in such a way that they start to play at a moment the group one plays with finds itself in a safe place in game, so that the group play is not endangered by the cutscenes, which not necessarily all group members see at the same time.

Krzywinska (2008:127) shows for her example WORLD OF WARCRAFT (2004) how the worldness of a game is created by interplay of game-play, player agency, and myth – using the term mythic structures instead of narratives. She shows how the choice which faction to join in a MMORPG affects the experience of the gameplay as the myths/narratives related to each faction are different. This also holds true for AION. Additionally – in comparison to WORLD OF WARCRAFT – AION uses cutscenes partly as reward for fulfilling a quest, partly to give information about the myths visually and not only textually. Each narrative seen in isolation follows a linear progression. Even though tasks have to be repeated several times, the narrative elements in the game follow one sequence. The repetition is based on the game rule “collect experience points to make your character stronger”. The existence and availability of several quests mirror the co-existence of several narratives in the game. The sequence of which quest to finish first is a decision made by the player. When the player reaches a higher level in the game (which usually means that all quests in one game area have been finished), she is rewarded with new quests, bringing her to the next territory in the game. The narrative logic of those quests altogether can then be described as multi-linear. Many players decide to finish quests not by following their narrative structure but by the actions related to them. In case you have to collect items in one and the same area for several quests, all those items are collected first before handing them in and going on with the quests on the narrative level. Game guides offered by players even provide the fastest and most effective way to finish quests by neglecting the narrative structure of the quests completely. A narrative cohesion is then gained in AION only through the main storyline, which stays dominant for the narrative logic of the game by use of cutscenes.

Single-player games and MMORPGs can follow a different game logic. While single-player games are free in exploring new ways of storytelling (as ZELDA: MAJORA'S MASK does), they usually follow

a stronger linear narrative. ZELDA: MAJORA'S MASK teleports the player back to the start after the time of 3 days. Would MMORPGs follow such a narrative principle, the cooperation of players in the game would be disturbed. Therefore MMORPGs need to take into consideration that players cooperate in-game and need to be able to share a game world without those disruptions. As the cooperation is central, the narratives are much more fragmented than in a single-player game. The different chains of quests that can be followed do not provide one coherent narrative. Fragmentation is a typical feature of those narratives to support group or player decisions. The logic of performance has a deep impact on the narration.

The Logic of Performance

In digital games, the individual narratives are generated in play. Narration can be described as a playfield, which is activated/made possible through the players' performance (Mersch 2008:21). With a focus on the players' performance, the actualisation of the possibilities given in the code system is central. While the term narrative as part of the code refers to a structural element, the use of narrative as performance implies that narration is a process and dynamic. Opposite to Pias (2002) and Degler (2005), Juul (2001 and 2005) claims that the narrative logic of a game is inseparably bound to performance. Juul's example is time in narratives, which is structured according to story time and discourse time; the former refers to the time in which events told in the story happen chronologically, whereas the latter refers to the time and ordering of the narrative. Following Juul, the story evolves through the playing of the game and is therefore indistinguishable from its underlying structure. Several stories might be potentially possible – or one story with several endings and plotlines. Only the player's performance actualizes the story, which is therefore not a pre-given as it is the case in linear narrative media. In MMORPGs, an additional component lies in the interaction of players, who

can use the game world in ways not foreseen by the designers by producing *machinima* (game videos) and using the game as a stage not only for gameplay, but for theatrical performances in the game environment. This of course is a use of the term performance now for activities that take place after playing out of the game itself, but can still be understood as related to the gameplay.

The different possibilities of interacting with a digital environment have been described by Espen Aarseth in his book *Cybertext. Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Aarseth (1997) uses the concepts anamorphic text and metamorphic text to describe different functions of digital texts. The anamorphic text is a text in which a player has to change the text from an unsolved text to a solved text. This holds true for digital games. The player is usually confronted with a conflict (e.g. to save the world) and has to find a solution during her play session. Narrative and interaction are interdependent as the player's actions constitute the narrative. The narrative of a computer game establishes a conflict with a recursive structure. While background information given introduces the conflict, the solution has to be found in the interaction with the game. When the solution has been found, the problem is solved and the text is changed to a solved text. Digital games usually include several unsolved problems, which are all part of one major problem. The constant problem solving is what keeps a player active and engaged.

Metamorphic text, however, is transforming endlessly. The term metamorphic text is used by Aarseth to describe digital, dynamically changing texts. MMORPGs can be considered metamorphic in this respect as the gameworld is constantly updated and enlarged, but also as the players' activities in this game world change it dynamically over time. In addition to the inherent dynamic quality of MMORPGs both, single-player games as well as MMORPGs, function as metamorphic text by inspiring a whole net of fan narratives based on them. Each of the fan narratives is a rather static and linear text in itself as soon as the text has reached its final version, however,

the whole web of fan narratives, the constant metadiscussion about the fan texts as well as the discussion about the source texts can be understood as a metamorphic whole. Looking at their narrative logic from a structural approach, the game code includes narrative elements but the performative logics of games let those narrative elements appear as just one aspect of gameplay alongside many others. The underlying narrative logic of single-player games and MMORPGs is different as we have seen, which is reflected in fan narratives based on them. Producers of fan narratives such as fanfiction based on a digital game or *machinima* do not only treat the digital game as a source text, but additionally refer to their playing experience of the game, which highlights the importance of the performative aspect of their gameplay.

Fan Narratives Based on Games

Fan narratives based on digital games have been described as a metagaming activity of players (Salen/Zimmermann 2004:540). It is a sign of the intimate knowledge of the game, and of the desire to imprint oneself onto the text. Fan narratives rely heavily on the source text, which means that a reader of a fan narrative needs to know the source text at least to some degree. In the case of a digital game this does not only mean that the reader needs to know the main characters and the background story, but also about the game mechanics and rules. A fan text does not necessarily use the same setting and genre as the source text. While ZELDA is a sequel of role-playing games set in a fantasy world, some of the fan narratives use a different literary genre such as e.g. drama or poetry or different subgenres of fiction such as Science Fiction, Mystery, or Horror. Others keep the setting, time and genre of the original. Besides referring to different genres, a fan narrative can refer to different source texts of popular culture at the same time, the so called crossover, by e.g. combining protagonists and events from ZELDA with a storyline and characters based on *Lord of the Rings* (since 1954) as in the following example:

Link was dropped on the said dwarf. The sudden appearance caused the rest of the council to draw their weapons. The stranger rubbed his head, and muttered, "magic should be able to provide a softer landing", before opening his eyes. Link was surprised to find several arrows, swords and axes aimed at him.

"Uuh, hi?" he said weakly.

"Who are you, and how did you appear in the halls of Rivendell."

Link tried to answer but the dwarf he landed on, decided his life was more than being a pillow, "GETOFF."

Link quickly stood up, "I am so sorry, I never meant to land on you, sir, I come from the land of Hyrule."

"The land of I RULE?", a other dwarf said, "He is nuts" (Alex phoenix Wing 2008).

After this sudden introduction of Link in a scene of *Lord of the Rings*, Link's presence is taken for granted by the characters. Link applies his specific magic in the situations the group encounters in the following while the storyline follows the one of *Lord of the Rings*. Fanfiction gives an insight into the mechanics of interpretation, which is of course appropriation of the source text. Problematic when dealing with source texts is that the established textual content can be deduced from several sources and can also be interpreted in different ways as the example above shows. Which other source texts are used in the fan's narrative? The website fanfiction.net with its link to crossovers shows clearly which different sources the narratives based on ZELDA rely upon. Fanfiction.net names 191 crossovers between ZELDA and other sources such as *Harry Potter* (since 1997), *Lord of the Rings*, FINAL FANTASY (since 1987), *Transformers* (since 1984), *Naruto* (since 1999). Crossovers can include media such as novels, comics, movies, TV-series but also other computer games.

As fan narratives are texts which are constantly enriched with new storylines and told or retold through various media we face all aspects of intermediality. Intermedial relations exist between the

source text(s) and the fan narrative, but also between different fan narratives that are used as source as well. However, not only content of source texts is used and appropriated, we also find relations to the rules of the source text as in the following fanfiction:

“Link, you played the Song of Storms... of COURSE it’s going to start raining you idiot!” Navi yelled, shaking her head in disappointment. “Well, when I play the Song of Storms in Lon Lon Ranch, it never rains. How come it only rains when I play the song in Kakariko Village?” Link asked, completely dumbfounded. Navi sighed. “That’ just the way Nintendo made it Link. SO STOP ASKING STUPID QUESTIONS!” (Zeldagirl91 2009).

The song of storms, as other songs played by Link in ZELDA, has a magical effect. Strangely enough this effect is not effective in the place called Lon Lon Ranch. Whether this was intended by the game designers or is a “bug” of the game can be questioned. It seems to be incoherent regarding the game mechanics and is therefore a topic discussed by players. Another remark in a fanfiction refers to the impact the player can have on the story:

“Oh, hold on for a sec, guys”, called an ominous, loud voice from the sky. Everyone looked up. “Who is that?” demanded Krypton. “Oh, just me, the Ocarina of Time player. Listen, I decided that I don’t like Buttwipe’s name, so I’m restarting the game. Sorry, guys”, the player announced before the screen went black. When the screen came back into focus, Buttwipe was gone (Igor Lollipop 2009).

This example refers to the possibility of a player to start the game anew and thereby change the name of the avatar the player is playing with. In the case of ZELDA, even though the avatar always looks like Link, the player can freely name him. These two examples show how authors of fanfiction do refer to the game’s rules and play conditions in their narrative. With these references a metafictional level is

created, a contradiction between the fictional world of the game and the fanfiction on one hand and the extra-fictional reality of the game designers and the player on the other.

Fan narratives based on MMORPGs choose *machinima* as their form of expression rather than fanfiction. While there are over 14,000 fanfictions related to ZELDA, we find only 2,500 on all WARCRAFT games. AION, a game that was released in the US and Europe in 2009, had 6 fanfictions shortly after its release, but already 45,500 game videos on machinima.com. MMORPGs obviously are much more perceived as a platform for performance than singleplayer games are. The characters function more as a tool to interact with the game world and other players and do not have a pre-given personality. This seems to ask for filling this empty puppet with an identity actively. The game is already perceived more as a stage to interact with other players than a narrative. This opens up a space for own narrations performed in-game. Some player characters in MMORPGs even gain a star status on the server the player plays so that the character can be used as a representative of this individual player or a guild reflecting on own in-game experiences. Guilds for example use those *machinima* to recruit new players, but also to make their guild well-known to the population of the server. This is a huge difference to singleplayer games. The interaction with other players online leads to a different game experience and therefore also to different fan narratives.

The ontological metalepsis of games has to be taken into consideration when analyzing the narration, but also the players' experience in game play, which is reflected upon in fan narratives and gives an insight into the narrative logics of games.

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Biography



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Response

This is a paper that very sensibly begins with mapping out confusions and misunderstandings, and is careful in its definitions as it seeks to make its intervention in the discussions that surround narrative and games. To even use the word 'narrative' in a paper title is to invoke a history of contestation and debate, and this is certainly not naïve in mapping out that debate, however briefly. What we have here, then, is an invitation to rethink part of that debate in a particular context, largely circulating around the figure of Link and the game series ZELDA – and if ever there was a game that was both Country and Western, to borrow the example that Wenz in turn borrows from Ian Bogost, then it is ZELDA, games that wear their formal innovation as computer games on their sleeves even as they insist that narrative content has value, and that story is essential to their identity. In that particular fusion, the popularity of ZELDA amongst games players eclipses that of Country & Western among music fans, and were the contest ever to have taken place or still be waged, one can imagine both camps of ludology and narratology finding much to claim in it for their own cause.

But this is no formalist analysis of games as artifacts or simple revisiting of the history of a 'versus' that might be replaced by an 'and'. The questions Wenz raises include not only what we should study when we seek to understand the game artifact, but who we should study, and move beyond what might be termed the game text to its paratexts and metatexts. There is an inevitable risk in such a move, of course, and it is one apparent throughout this essay. Where the slippery boundary of where the game begins and ends lies is not always clear, and a sense of clear distinction of what can be fully claimed as either inside or outside the game perhaps still needs to be made.

For those looking at games at a detailed level as systems of affordances, then, this also raises a larger question of affordance – of how games allow, invite, or even demand repurposing by the player who (re)configures them through play. And in this it addresses the specificity of contemporary games – looking towards the crucial question of why they appeal through the possibilities they open up, as well as how they function and operate. Wenz’s games are springboards to player action and invention, and she claims that invention for the game as much as for the player, seeing narrative generated through (or even outside) conventional game play, however separated and distinct from the authorial design or intention of the developer, as belonging to her reconsideration of game narratives.

With due cognizance of the seminal work of Henry Jenkins in this area, Wenz then moves on to thinking through the significance of fan culture and the insights it offers back to the practices of play across games, and on the playful practices of gamers. As students and scholars of video games (or computer games, or digital games) we are inescapably new media scholars, but there is a danger sometimes here in over-emphasizing the new in what we do. To stray into the pre-digital for a moment, and yet remain with those games that inescapably inform some contemporary digital games, it is easy to see that some games have always been open to fan-like behavior, if not to literal fandom. Miniatures wargamers certainly produce an extended world beyond mere rule set, and players of the tabletop RPGs that followed *Dungeons and Dragons* reveled in the participatory co-production of something that always exceeded the rules set to construct something additional to what had been before. Wenz is right in picking up the key element of the new, however, and emphasizing the nature of change brought about by online fandom. It is the internet that exposes and allows distribution, and in a time of Twitter and Facebook updates almost demands incessant distribution that changes the public expression of the fan, if not the essential nature of fandom.

A crucial point here is the observation that: "Fanfiction gives an insight into the mechanics of interpretation, which is of course appropriation of the source text."

Following from this argument it might even be possible to wonder if we may go further, and consider whether all forms of digital play are forms of appropriation that would trouble classical models of authorship. But there also remains something of a lack of specificity here. Game fanfiction might be a sub-genre of a larger phenomenon of fan fiction production, but it is certainly a marginal practice in relation to game playing in mass consumer culture. Wenz is right to point to the extent to which the playing of games through activity is of a different order to fixed forms of narrative in other media (although one may take issue with any automatic assumption of conflation of the 'role of protagonist of the narrative and the player'), but it is harder to see statements that have applicability to all games, or even a majority of games and game genres.

Effectively there is a lot to unpack here in Wenz's examination of narratives associated with games: game as text in co-production between player and authored software; game containing text (the primary battleground of ludological/narratological debate); game producing text as post-hoc narrativization of game experience; game inviting the production of text. It is in the consideration of the last of these that Wenz's examples and thought are most interesting, and we can imagine a fruitful area of further scholarship to be undertaken in this intersection of the fan cultures that surround games and their own status as game artifacts to be played primarily for their ludic pleasures rather than the media expression they allow. This is where Wenz treads a fine line between the game studies she is careful to summarize and refer to, and the increasing scholarship on *machinima*, where the game is seen as distinct from the media productions it allows or enables.