

THE EXPERIENCE OF EMBODIMENT: VIDEO GAMES ARE BETTER WITH STORIES

Video Games Are Better with Stories

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The question of how it is games and narrative intersect is a particularly contentious one, especially within the field of game studies (Juul, 2001; Frasca, 2003; Pearce, 2005; Murray, 2005). This “divisive question” (Jenkins, 2004, p. 118) sits at the heart of the ludology/narratology debate that continues to recur among game studies scholars, a debate that seeks to define the specific relationship between video games and narrative—a debate that inspired Zimmerman (2004) to ask, “But what would it mean to take a closer look at games and stories?” (p. 154). Zimmerman’s question highlights the ways game studies scholars interrogate the intersection of games and stories as well as how this intersection informs the study and development of games. From the early days of cybertext and the ergodic debates to Ian Bogost (2017) recently claiming narrative is unnecessary, the question of how games function with and around narrative continues to haunt the field of game studies and the industry itself.

In *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (1984), Brooks explored the significance of narrative, arguing that its significance lies in its ability to summarize and retransmit plot and story “even when its medium has been considerably changed” (p. 4). Brooks argued that narrative “is not a matter of typology or of fixed structures, but rather a structuring operation peculiar to those messages that are developed through temporal succession, the instrumental logic of a specific mode of human understanding” (p. 10). Thus, narrative can then be understood as a way of making meaning and is a form of “understanding and explanation” (p. 10). For Brooks, narrative is a form of *design*—a way of using the logic of storytelling structures to understand and represent the world.

Because narrative allows for such meaning-making, we argue in this paper that narrative is indeed a vital aspect of game design, and that the continued resurgence of the narrative debate underscores the need for feminist game studies. That is, we contend that narrative produces player investment, it creates stakes and connection, and is thus as important an aspect of game design as the rule systems that control every action and response to reaction. While not every game may have a “narrative” in the style of a film or novel, video games allow for narrative layers that invite players to learn and experience through embodiment and enactment, and that recognition of the importance of considering *bodies* as part of play is inherently feminist. To be sure, intersectional feminist research highlights the ways bodies, like narrative, make meaning (Hobson, 2012), and such feminist praxis thus also highlights the ways bodies and narrative are inexorably linked. We argue that this linkage—this embodied narrativity—is an important consideration for game design because both

bodies and stories transmit messages, messages that players engage with as they play. We also argue that the messages games relay often reify hegemonic cultural codes, codes that need to be disrupted, interrogated, and challenged through feminist game studies praxis. As Shaw (2017) and others have proposed, the time is ripe for the inclusion of more intersectional feminist practices in game design and game scholarship, in order to better understand player positions in and around games. It is our position here that narrative is an essential part of that consideration.

Games enact narrative in a variety of ways, from the primarily linear experience of games like *Submerged* (2015) to open-world sandboxes ripe for exploration. But games, more than other media forms, particularly excel at emergent and procedural narratives, those stories that arise from player actions, decisions, and interactions in the game world. The *Civilization* series, which allows players to construct a history of the world from the perspective of a single growing nation, builds a narrative as the player progresses, expanding city by city to take over territory. The actuality of this progress represents one narrative (a growing nation), but some players may construct additional narrative overlays as well, envisioning their ruler as a benevolent emperor or a bloodthirsty warlord. In Undead Labs' *State of Decay 2* (2018), one narrative is baked into the game—players build a team of survivors in the zombie apocalypse, improving a defensible home base and completing quests—but players may construct additional narratives and interactions for their team of survivors, perhaps creating a merciful community that keeps weaker survivors (such as those with asthma or other stat-reducing conditions) around, or creating all-female teams. RPGs allow for similar flexibility; any player may build a Khajit archer in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* as a pragmatic choice, a path toward certain desired stats within the game's systems. These players may ignore or be unconcerned with the negative reception Khajit receive, as a generally ill-liked bestial racial minority within the game world, but for others, this becomes an important narrative element, part of perceiving the game world, perhaps even more important than stats. This an additional narrative overlay can offer a way to widen understanding of a game world, and the player's place within it.

In *Supersizing the Mind*, Clark (2008) related a study of *Tetris*. In the study, players moved blocks across the screen as well as rotating them as they fell, manipulating the pieces as much as possible before attempting to them in. Clark reported this manipulation was not in service of the goal-oriented pragmatic action of simply filling the space (or rather, not only for that reason), but rather as an act of learning/knowing—an epistemic act (p. 71-72). Moving the block—*experiencing* the block—gave players a wider understanding of the playing field, as it were. Through interactions with the block, and in visualizing it from different angles, players were able to see and experience the game more fully. Thinking of the *Tetris* study in terms of Brooks' notion of narrative-as-design then begs the question of empathy-based games. Does experiencing a moment of discovery, sadness, misery, joy, particularly in a character with whom the player relates in some way, translate to a similar widening of understanding? Are other game actions, particularly in narrative-heavy games, epistemic acts encouraged by game design? Consider *Depression Quest* (2013), a Twine-based game in which players navigate a character's struggle with depression. The key mechanic in *Depression Quest* revolves around text-based choices; players read a bit of story and are offered options. It's easy to determine the "best" option in any particular moment (the "winning" option), but until the character begins to go through treatment, these options are marked through as unavailable. As a person struggling with depression, the player character absolutely *cannot* make the "winning" choice. For a player, this may represent a moment of frustration; the best choice is right there! But in this way the game offers the opportunity

to understand the physical inability to simply “fix” depression, and as such promotes empathy through a hands-on experience not otherwise available. Like rotating the block in *Tetris*, the act of hovering over choices that cannot be made is a way of broadening an understanding of the playing field (and what lies beyond). Or, to return to the example of the Khajit archer in *Skyrim*, the choice of a Khajit character may be an epistemic act, an act of placement within an embodied world that allows for greater understanding of both lore and personhood alike.

Games allow for this connection in ways that films and books do not, but forging such connections requires something for a player to hold onto, to connect *with*. That ephemeral something is built from story, character, and experience. To return to the example of *Depression Quest*, stripping the narrative from the game and offering instead a disembodied puzzle of options about “solving” depression, absent the context of story, is unlikely to produce the same experience in a player than the experience situated within the story of a young man struggling to hang onto his job, his relationship, and his quality of life. Bogost, writing for *The Atlantic*, derided narrative as an unnecessary aspect of games, on the grounds that other media are better equipped to tell stories, but one of his examples, *Gone Home* (2013), hinges on an experiential aspect that would not be the same rendered as simply text or film. From the beginning, *Gone Home* toys with player expectations; the game opens in a storm, on a lonely porch, and a feeling of foreboding falls across the scene. As a game presented in first-person perspective, the genre expectation (particularly with the kairotic context of *Gone Home*’s release, as an early arrival among contemporary “walking simulators”) is one of action or encounter, but all the player encounters in *Gone Home* is the past. Actions here center on sifting through memory, studying artifacts and piecing together what happened in the player-character’s absence. Because there are so many hints of something bigger, the game’s eventual reveal of a simple, all-too-human storyline is startling. There was no environmental disaster. Nothing is coming for the player character. All that’s left to discover is experience, and perhaps understanding.

This understanding arises from the meshwork of system-software-player-more, of which the interplay of narrative-player is an essential part. A deep narrative is not required; when we play *Pong*, we are not just thinking of raw physics and math moving a dot across the screen but envisioning a match between players (Batti and Karabinus, 2017). But leaving narrative entirely (or nearly) up to emergent conditions (as with a *Pong*, as with a *Civilization* game, as with any number of shooting-based games, particularly multiplayer games) comes with its own set of problems. Cross (2009) referred to surprising, emergent moments as “a world where opaque, meaningless random occurrences between human-like entities, empty of content, can be called “narrative” because we’re imagining a user who, like a kid playing with dolls, fills in all the semantic gaps.” But for the player who finds themselves unrepresented in many games, filling in those semantic gaps—creating a personalized story from elements—may be one of the only ways they can enact a world that is welcoming rather than hostile, or a world that offers some understanding, even if thin, of what it is like to be something other than who they are in the “real” world. *Depression Quest* may offer some understanding of what it is like to struggle with depression. Playing as a Khajit in *Skyrim* may offer some understanding of what it is like to be a minority presence in a hostile world. If these games don’t offer robust, full-bodied views of what it is like to be different, it isn’t the fault of the concept: it just may mean we need stronger narratives.

Making space is vitally important in games if we want to continue to broaden the base of players

and potential audiences, and making space requires consideration of the player's position when we consider games. Taylor (2009) referred to this situational context of player-in-game as part of her assemblage of play:

Games, and their play, are constituted by the interrelations between (to name just a few) technological systems and software (including the imagined player embedded in them), the material world (including our bodies at the keyboard), the online space of a game (if any), game genre, and its histories, the social worlds that infuse the game and situate us outside of it, the emergent practices of communities, our interior lives, personal histories, and aesthetic experience, institutional structures that shape the game and our activity as players, legal structures, and indeed the broader culture around us with its conceptual frame and tropes (p. 332).

But there's even more at work with the interrelation of player and narrative than the application of assemblage theory. In *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (2017) questioned the idea of an objective sense of the world from the level of the construction of human thought and experience across the broad spectrum of global experience. Can one interpretation of a machinic, rule-based system, as evoked by each incarnation of the ludology/narratology debate, allow for subjective understanding?

When we tried to find the objective ground that we thought must still be present, we found a world enacted by our history of structural coupling. Finally, we saw that these various forms of groundlessness are really one: organism and environment enfold into each other and unfold from one another in the fundamental circularity of life itself (p. 217).

To extend this cognitive angle on embodied experience embodied experience to video games, then, instead of arguing that ludic and narrative elements are separate, we can envision these elements as circuits, with individual players completing loops, firing experience into being. For one player, the narrative elements may flicker and dim; for another, they shine bright, but the connections depend on the player and all the history, experience, and understanding they bring to the moment as connective tissue.

The particular system created by player-game connection can allow for the creation of experiences that push thought and understanding: play-within-narrative as an epistemic act, and one that deepens understanding of human experience. As part of an exploration of what games teach us, Koster (2013) outlined the way games teach and reinforce survival skills many humans may no longer particularly need (hunting, aiming, projecting power as a survival mechanism) in day-to-day life, and further categorizes these into types of games. Games use patterns to train skills, and rely on challenging patterns to stave off boredom, and as with any other skill, mastering these patterns requires practice. Games like *Gone Home* operate on a similar model, feeding story to players through the discovery of in-game artifacts and clues, but the skill trained here isn't survival in a physical sense. It's empathy and understanding—skills that should be practiced and honed like any other (Karabinus, 2016).

This practice of empathy underscores the importance of the ambient adventure, or the so-called "walking simulator," like *Gone Home*, or *What Remains of Edith Finch*, both games maligned as examples in Bogost's article on games' inability to grapple well with narrative. Bogost critiques the walking

simulator by invoking the same question often employed by critics attacking exploratory or environmental games in particular: is it a game? Does it *need* to be a game instead of something else? Why not a movie? Why not a book?

But the question is reductive out of the gate and can be asked of any game. Does *Skyrim* *need* to be a game? The main storyline is a standard fantasy narrative journey: a prisoner becomes a hero and saves the world, with the added bonus of occasionally stopping to help people who need someone to recover an artifact or a person; if you'd like, you can also pick flowers or take up blacksmithing as a sideline. But *Skyrim* only offers one thing dozens of fantasy novels cannot: embodied experience. Players may not *need* this, any more than viewers *need* any superhero film (these stories already exist in comics). But it is a choice to allow a different form of experience, one that may have something different to offer than other, similar experiences. Obviously, a film offers a different experience than a comic book, and a fantasy game allows for different, broader experiences than a novel. With examples like *Gone Home*, a short story could have accomplished the same narrative end but could not capture the slowly unraveling hands-on *experience* offered by the act of moving through a house and reconstructing events that occurred while the player character was away. A player in *Gone Home* can zip through to the end, just as someone skimming a short story, or can linger over every object and clue, as with the slow and careful reader, but the reader can never walk through the halls of the family home in quite the same way as the player (Batti and Karabinus, 2017).

Many ambience-dependent games could be restructured as linear experiences in other modes. This doesn't mean they should; the game experience allows for an embodied feeling that is not possible with any other form. Certainly, *What Remains of Edith Finch* could be a comic book, a film, or a novel-in-stories, but the shift to another medium would introduce a narrative distance the creators hoped to collapse through their choice of medium. *Life Is Strange*, after all, could have been a *Choose Your Own Adventure*-style book; the game's central time mechanic invites the player to test options, just as a *CYOA* reader might flip to various endings. But in *Life Is Strange*, similar to *Depression Quest*, the "right" choices are not always optimal or attainable, and in *Life Is Strange* in particular, the "right" choice in one moment may lead to a very bad outcome much later. Life is messy, unpredictable, and hard, and just as *Gone Home* uses experiential narrative to toy with expectations of a first-person game, *Life Is Strange* uses its central rewind mechanic to teach a hard lesson about attempting to "game" the system and "win," lessons that would be difficult if not impossible to experience the same way in other media forms (Batti and Karabinus, 2017). In these games, narrative is intrinsically tied to the ludic experience; without the developing stories and characters, there is no experience. Rewinding events isn't useful or impressive if there are no stakes, and stakes are *built* from stories and context. Isbister (2015) cited this connection to player-character as the "core innovation" of games, a difference unique to this media form that allows for evocation of powerful emotion (p. 13), and as we argue here, narrative is part of that connection.

Because narrative is so intrinsic to ludic experience, the game/story divide is an artificial one. Of course, Murray highlights the artificiality of this divide in *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1997); indeed, Murray argued, "The computer is not the enemy of the book. It is the child of print culture, a result of the five centuries of organized, collective inquiry and invention that the printing press made possible" (p. 8). Yet, while, for Murray "[g]ames are always stories" (2004, p. 2), she also believes that, we should work to understand how game-stories function

differently—we should “stop trying to assimilate the new artifacts to the old categories of print- or cinema-based story and board- or player-based game. We should instead think of the characteristics of stories and games and how these separable characteristics are being recombined and reinvented within the astonishingly plastic world of cyberspace” (p. 10). This ability to recombine and reinvent, this plasticity, means that Murray’s dream of the Holodeck isn’t a complicated dream of the novel. It’s a dream of embodied experience. Murray knew that the magic of games wasn’t just in the idea that we could control the action, but in a combination (see Taylor’s assemblage) of things: control (agency), immersion, and transformation.

This assemblage of embodied experience is what makes the experience of play so meaningful. Indeed, in *Literary Gaming* (2014), Ensslin, like Murray, stressed the importance of this assemblage because the “ever morphing existence of digital texts requires new concepts of materiality and textuality that are far less bound to the hapticity of the artifact as tangible product (book and print) but inextricably connected to its medial contexts and connotations. Textuality becomes a pluralistic idea and the work of art an ‘assemblage’ of instantiations” (p. 32). Because games’ textuality allows for plasticity in experience, games then have the potential to make room not just for a multiplicity of texts but also, and just as significantly, for a multiplicity of bodies. This is all to say that games have the potential for embodied inclusivity *because of* the ways narrative can allow for inclusive meaning-making.

However, the disciplinary and epistemological deprivileging of narrative in games has made it so that this potential for embodied inclusivity has not been fully realized. Indeed, such deprivileging seems emblematic of the kind of gatekeeping and border-policing that occurs in game studies. The examination of how the narrative systems of video games broaden our understanding of the world is something that a formalistic, exclusively ludic approach cannot afford the field of game studies. This limitation is what causes Murray to argue for a shift in game studies:

It is time to reframe the conversation...With students flooding our graduate and undergraduate programs around the world, they should no longer be confused by the appearance of an either/or choice between games and stories, or distracted by an unproductively sectarian discourse...No one group can define what is appropriate for the study of games. Game studies, like any organized pursuit of knowledge, is not a zero-sum team contest, but a multi-dimensional, open-ended puzzle that we all are engaged in cooperatively solving (Murray, 2005).

In short, game essentialism and formalism—an essentialism that disregards the impact of narrative—limit the field of game studies from fully interrogating all that video games are. But this essentialism is limiting not only because of its inability (or unwillingness) to examine the conversation between game and narrative; such formalism, in only caring about concerns like rule systems and procedurality (Bogost, 2007), is limiting in its inability (or unwillingness) to interrogate *bodies*—both the bodies that are represented in game worlds and the bodies of players themselves.

Aarseth (2004) discussed the body of Lara Croft in a way that demonstrates this lack of concern: “[T]he dimensions of Lara Croft’s body, already analyzed to death by film theorists, are irrelevant to me as a player, because a different-looking body would not make me play differently...When I play, I don’t even see her body, but see through it and past it” (p. 48). This brushing aside of Lara Croft’s body actively ignores the ways certain bodies are inscribed, the ways women’s bodies (like Croft’s) are often

fetishized and objectified, and the ways other modes of analysis—especially feminist analysis—can allow for a more comprehensive consideration of the function and role of bodies in games. Thus, game formalism enacts not only an erasure of narrative analysis but an erasure of *feminist* analysis as well, and ludologists make use of this form of erasure—this effort to make other forms of study marginalized and peripheral—in an effort to legitimize their own form of study in academia. Such efforts also, consequently, enact the erasure of members of the gaming community whose bodies, narratives, and representations are not taken into account because such erasure implies that their stories do not matter. Such erasure implies that their stories do not, or should not, exist in the first place—an implication worth pushing against in the name of welcoming new players into game worlds, and making comfortable those who are already here.

A situated, embodied look at the essential intersections of narrative and play within games—and thus, designing for a varied audience, and allowing space for players in multiple subject positions—requires careful consideration, for it creates a much more complicated lens through which we view the game space. As Carr (2007) wrote,

...when considered in combination, game structure (rules, programming, economy, components) and textual codes, connotation, narrative address and the variability of play modes all indicate that subject position in a game needs to be understood as a series of possible positions activated or dormant, taken up, dropped or ignored by a player from moment to moment. In other words, subject position is not a vacant seat established by the game that is offered to (or imposed on) the player-subject, who must then occupy this single position as a condition of participation. Resorting to the figure of the ‘ideal player’ might be one way to theories a consistent subject position, but I’m not sure how useful this would be.

That figure of the “ideal player” has too often been assumed as a figure of a (young/white/male) “gamer” that has proven inaccurate over the years; instead, better to privilege narrative, to carefully craft a world that supports it. For more open games, and game worlds, Alex Layne’s 2015 theory of procedural ethics already provides an answer for scholars that can be adapted for designers as well. Layne, in addressing Sicart’s critique of procedurality, wrote, “there have been limitations on how theories of procedurality have been implemented by focusing on only the most visible manifestations of procedurality.” This too is the central problem with focusing only on formalism and ludic systems or in stating that games do not need or should not privilege narrative: there is deep meaning in the way players interface with games that should be understood by scholars and designers alike, and the primary way into those spaces for players is through worlds, characters, and narratives.

Just as Shaw (2017) calls for a demarginalization of intersectional work in game studies, so too should game scholars and designers both continue to actively demarginalize the question of narrative’s essential role in the assemblage of play. When Bogost (2017) says games are best at “taking the tidy, ordinary world apart and putting it back together again in surprising, ghastly new ways,” we—as scholars, as designers, as players—should recognize that narrative stakes are the way into those “ghastly new ways” for many players; that is the loop that connects player to embodied action. Games like *Gone Home* and *Life Is Strange* in fact offer precisely what Bogost asked for when he said narrative is unnecessary: a focus on taking things apart and reassembling them in surprising ways, but they do it through ambience, exploration, and narrative. *Gone Home* is not about the act of walking through a house; it’s something else altogether, an enacted experience offering players the chance to experience

a story in a way that is impossible in other media. The Holodeck, after all, isn't a passive trip into a story, like an afternoon spent with a good book. The Holodeck requires active engagement, movement and consideration. Players must be the ones to take things apart. It is up to designers to offer the necessary pieces that allow players to come in and get comfortable. To find a way to come alive within the game world (Batti and Karabinus, 2017).

This is why feminist game studies praxis is needed; that is, because ludic formalism continues on in game studies, feminist game studies scholarship is required in order to untangle the intersecting forms of erasure, silencing, and privileging that occurs in video game culture and the study of it. Because certain modes of study, certain modes of knowledge production, have been privileged in game studies, we argue for the need for feminist game studies—that is, the need for a mode of games criticism that can work to dismantle the hegemonic knowledge production of game studies formalism and that can create a more inclusive disciplinary space for additional voices in games. Intersectional feminist game studies praxis is needed because it allows us to seek change, and these efforts toward change, Murray said, are goals she learned from the feminist movement: “I learned from the feminist movement that some truths about the world are beyond the reach of a particular art form at a particular moment in time. Before the novel could tell the stories of women who did not wind up either happily married or dead, it would have to change in form as well as in content” (1997, p. 4). The games industry, with all its vast potential and ever-increasing reach, allows for exploration of stories and experiences previously undreamed—unless we lock games down, excluding those experiences that don't fit certain parameters or appeal to certain audiences.

As Shaw (2017) reminded us in her call for feminist game studies praxis, inclusion is difficult; it means examining and reexamining our ideas, our roles, our positions. Drawing on scholar-activist Bernice Johnson Reagon's 1981 remarks at the West Coast Women's Music Festival, Shaw reminds us that the goal of this kind of work is to give everyone the chance to feel a stake in the world. Players need to feel a stake in their game worlds, too, and that stake is so often enacted through an embodied narrative connection. Formalism too often seeks to exclude those connections. By excluding those connections, formalism seeks to assert a so-called universality to games—a universal way of studying games, a universal way of playing games, a universal way of designing games. Because all these actions of play, study, and design are tethered to bodies, formalism also, then, asserts a universal gaming body; that is, it works off the assumption that those who play, study, and design games are all after (or, at least, *should be* after) the same thing and are thus all the same. This sameness and essentialism privileges certain epistemologies and certain modes of embodiment—that is, the positionalities of cisgender, heteronormative white men. We contend that the essentialism of game formalism is limiting in that prevents games from being designed, studied, and played in more fluid, exploratory ways. It prevents games from exploring all the possibilities of being. It excludes those who do not fit into hegemonic, normative ludic boxes. We argue instead for the need to include, in order to allow games to continue to grow and change with a changing world.

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