

Pen, Sword or Controller? A Foray into Theory on the Subject of Narratives and Videogames [Handout]

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Game, Play and Player

(Bernard Suits, 1967; 1978, 34-41; Johan

Huizinga, 1949; Jesper Juul, 2003)

Bernard Suits defines the game as an activity possessing the following elements:

- (1) it is directed toward achieving a prelimary goal ("specific state of affairs")
- (2) it possesses the lusory means of achieving that goal
- (3) it has rules that apply to prelimary goals (constitutive rules) and lusory goals (rules of skill)
- (4) it demands the player adopt a lusory attitude (the player must accept the limi-

tations set by rules and means in order for the activity to be possible)

Johan Huizinga defines play as a function of culture, one of the "great archetypal activities" of human society (23), which possesses the following characteristics (26-32):

- (1) it is voluntary
- (2) it is a "stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all its own
- (3) it proceeds within its boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules
- (4) it promotes the formation of social groupings ("play-communities")

Jesper Juul navigates the intersection of game, play and player by assigning these additional criteria:

- (1) Games are based on rules.
- (2) Games have variable, quantifiable outcomes.
- (3) Different values (positive or negative) are assigned to these outcomes.
- (4) The player invests effort to achieve the desired outcome.
- (5) The player is emotionally 'attached' to the outcome.
- (6) Games have negotiable consequences for real life.

The four affordances of the digital medium

(Janet Murray, 2012; 1997, 77-83)

- (1) **Procedural:** the computer's ability to represent and execute conditional behaviours
- (2) **Participatory:** we are able to induce behaviours due to the computer's ability to process our input
- (3) **Encyclopedic:** the computer's ability to contain and transmit information
- (4) **Spatial:** the computer creates virtual spaces that we can navigate

- An environment that is both procedural and participatory is *interactive*.
- An environment that is both spatial and encyclopedic is *immersive*.



Navigation of a virtual space, in the example of a hypertext is "a dramatic enactment of the plot" (1997, 83). This is, essentially, what playing a videogame is, as well.

Unit operations and the videogame narrative

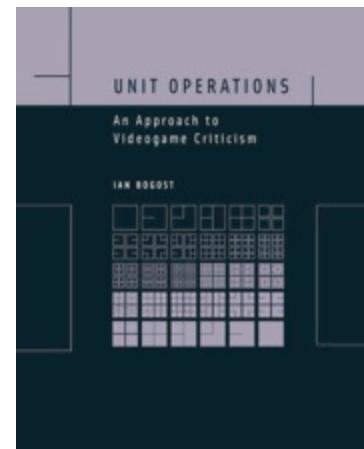
(Ian Bogost, 2006; Jesper Juul, 2001)

Ian Bogost developed his theory of "unit operations" as a way of performing videogame criticism in reaction to a particular approach to criticism that set forth a single literary authority. But how do we understand narrative from a unit operations approach to criticism?

For Bogost, the unique nature of the digital medium makes it impossible to perform a "systems operations"-style, traditional criticism on videogames. But when you deconstruct the structure of the game in this way, what happens to the narrative?

Jesper Juul would say that this is an example of how videogames are, in fact, non-narrative; he would at the same time, no doubt, emphasize that "game sessions"—the limited periods in which the player engages with the game—can create narratives. Game sessions seem to align with Bogost's units, so perhaps that is one way to interpret stories in games; it is, however, essential to emphasize the *connection* between units.

Using Bogost's own words, these discrete readings (or game sessions) in which the story takes place are linked together in networks. And these networks, when interpreted in context with one another, can provide insight on the common threads that bind them.



Narratology and the Medium (Gérard Genette, 1981)

Gérard Genette defines narrative as a trinity composed of:
(1) the narrative statement, or discourse;
(2) the story, as the succession of events;
(3) the narrating event.

The narrative statement represents the core element of narrative; it is the formal "discourse that undertakes to tell of an event or series of events". In other words, it is the book, or the play, or the film. The story is the order of events that are the subjects of this discourse, the "totality of actions and situations taken in themselves, without regard to medium". The narrating event is the *now* in which the discourse, is read, heard or viewed, and—perhaps—played. The interrelation of these three elements are what shapes the formal structure and temporality of any given narrative. There is nothing specifically

in Genette that precludes the application of this basic construction to alternative narrative forms—including the videogame.

The principal difference between a videogame and a novel is not in the narrative discourse, nor even in the order of events, which will include situations that are not "played", just as they are not "read" chronologically, situations implied in cutscenes, backstory, analepses and prolepses. The difference between traditional narrative forms and videogames is in the narrating event, which concerns the reader's (or player's) engagement with the narrative. The interactive nature of games allows the narrating event, the story and the discourse to converge at the point of engagement, when story events are not told so much as authored by the player. So, while for Genette and his analysis of Proust the narrating event is less emphasized than either the discourse or even the story, it is much more significant to the structure of the videogame narrative.

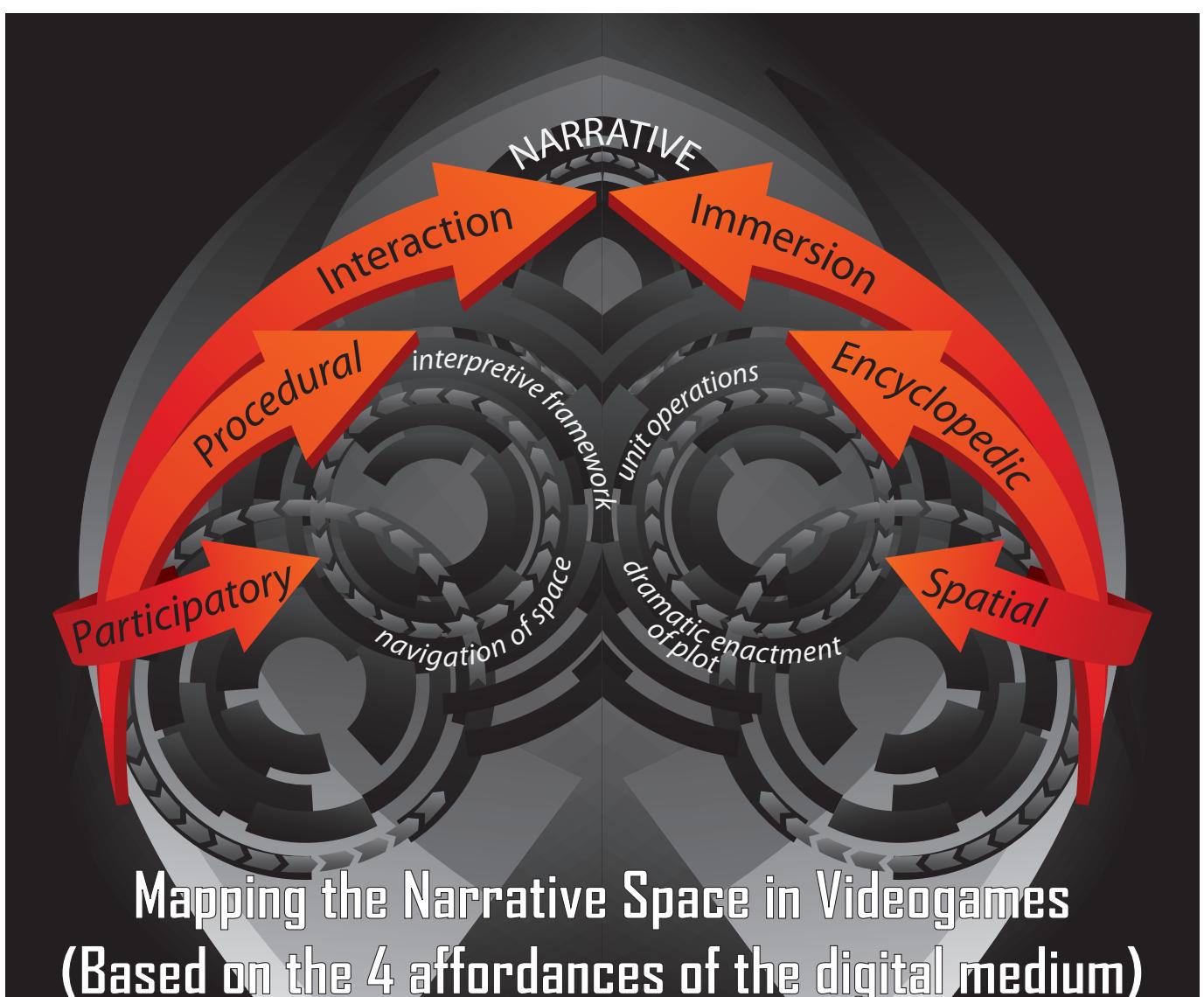


Figure. The relationship between interaction, immersion and narrative, adapting Murray's four affordances of the digital medium. (see also: fig. 2, p. 9, draft paper) Image from vectorartillustrations.com adapted in the design of this graphic.

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