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Abstract

Videogames as narratives exist on the margins of literary acceptance, and although digital texts are a growing genre, the term usually refers to a written text in a digital environment. From the perspective of a literary academic and a gamer, the conjunction of narrative and play in videogames is an exciting development in the interdisciplinary field of videogames. Environmental storytelling lays the groundwork for an evolution in narrative. Primarily using the landscape, videogames help to construct and to understand, a narrative. As the narrative content of videogames has become more sophisticated, so too has the scope to consider videogames as part of the evolution of narrative expanded, changing the way narrative is delivered and interpreted by a player. As part of this, revisiting the theoretical analytical tools of traditional narratives provides a useful point from which to begin the academic study of this evolution. This paper will address narrative in the role-playing game *Fallout 3*, drawing on the theoretical work of Gerard Genette. It will then consider whether a narratological reading of this videogame is sufficient for analysis, or whether further, videogame-specific analysis is needed to understand the role of narrative in a videogame.

Keywords: videogames, narrative, *Fallout 3*, narratology, Genette, environmental narrative.

Videogames as narratives exist on the margins of literary acceptance, and although digital media is becoming more popular, the term usually refers to written a text in a digital context. However, videogames can be a powerful storytelling device, which can be placed alongside other narratives, and analysed in a similar fashion. Such analyses establish, and maintain, the videogame's position in narrative studies, and furthermore expose areas where narrative studies cannot account for evolutions unfolding within this media, such as games that utilise the environment to deliver its narrative, as is the case with the 2008 videogame *Fallout 3* (Bethesda, 2008), the focus of this investigation. Therefore, this paper will firstly establish whether *Fallout 3* has sufficient narrative to be subjected to a narratological analysis, and if so it will use Genette's *Narrative Discourse* to interrogate it, while if not, it will ask whether there is a need for new definitions and theories within narrative studies to explain the unique capabilities of videogames as carriers of narrative.

Fallout 3 is part of the *Fallout* franchise of games set in a hypothetical future America, which has been decimated by a nuclear war. Each game is situated in a specific area of the US, with *Fallout 3* set on the East Coast, renamed the Capital Wastelands. The game is an "open-world" role-playing game, which allows the player to explore the landscape without restriction. This structure precludes the linear storytelling of most media: the player is free to discover any part of the narrative she wishes in any order, and this means that *how* it is

delivered to the player is changed. Frequently, game designers use a series of clues to guide the player in the direction they wish her to go, which allows them to retain authorial control over the narrative. Electronic open-world gaming, however, is frequently predicated on the structure of role-playing games, in which a player "assumes a persona that changes over time." and take the form of "epic open-ended affairs, with vast game worlds" (Waggoner 13). Quests feature heavily in these games, which may be "integral to the plot of a game, a prerequisite to a key element of the game, or an optional and peripheral series of tasks not related to the central plot of the game" (Ivory 252). *Fallout 3* is constructed around this structure, situating the player in a landscape with a central quest to complete, which involves the player traversing Post-apocalyptic America several times. As the player explores the landscape, she discovers smaller quests, allowing her to deviate from the main trajectory as often, or as little, as she wants to. Therefore, whilst the skeleton of the narrative is defined by the game designers, its detail has to be constructed by the player, complicating and refuting the traditional methods of narrative delivery, and requiring new methods of analysis.

This study begins with Aristotle's *Poetics,* a well-known, widely acknowledged basis of contemporary narrative theory (Genette *Narrative Discourse,* 163, 173), which offers a theoretical foundation for establishing and affirming the presence of narrative in *Fallout 3*. The game follows its central protagonist, "The Lone Wanderer," as she travels across the Wastelands searching for her father. The player is involved with this character from her birth to her death, which constitutes a personal narrative that the player enacts and interacts with. Alongside this, the game presents another, less obvious narrative, that of the nuclear destruction of the US and the decline of American society in its wake. It is this global narrative that shall be addressed in this essay, rather than the more explicit gameplay story of the Lone Wanderer's search for her father.

The basic structure of narrative in videogames bears a strong resemblance to that of other media, and *Fallout 3* is no exception to this rule. Narratology and the French theorist Genette can be used to examine the narrative structure of the videogame, and this study will consider the theories proposed in *Narrative Discourse* (1980) to do this. In his work, Genette provides a detailed analysis, employing the concepts of order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice to create a systematic theory of narrative. Beginning with voice, Genette employs this term when considering the narrative situation, which includes the presence (or lack) of the narrator, the point of view, the time of the narrating, and narrative levels (*Narrative Discourse* 213), all elements that construct a narrative. Beginning with how a narrative is delivered, Genette distinguishes between "narrative of events" and "narrative of words," stating that

"showing can only be a *way of telling*" (*Narrative Discourse* 166; original emphasis), and although he did not engage with audio-visual narratives in *Narrative Discourse,* this feeds into narratives that rely on images as part of their delivery, such as *Fallout 3*, rich in narrative information which is not told to the player via a narrator, but rather shown through the landscape itself. Genette further establishes that narratives can provide the reader "not [with] the story, but the story's 'image,' its *trace* in a memory." This trace, his continues, "so delayed, so remote, so indirect, is also the presence itself" (*Narrative Discourse* 167-168), and as such, constitutes narrative distance – the level of detachment the reader (or player) has between herself and the events of the narrative, via a narrator, time, and/or perspective, for example. This distance is key to *Fallout 3* as the player does not interact with the events of the global narrative itself, but rather with its residual traces, scattered throughout the Capital Wastelands waiting to be discovered.

Whilst "narrative voice," including the point of view, is one of Genette's five central components of Narratology, its emphasis on speech is limiting in terms of addressing visual point of view and, moreover, confusing in media that use both verbal and visual signs, such as narrative films that employ voice-over. Genettes term *focalization*, establishing two categories, *nonfocalised* and *internally focalised* narration (*Narrative Discourse* 189), can be utilised to clarify this. These concepts are also found in Tzvetan Todorov's narratological studies: Genette's nonfocalised narratives relate to Todorov's *Narrator>Character*, where the narrator "says more than any of the characters know" (*Narrative Discourse* 189), whilst internally focalised narratives correspond to Todorov's *Narrator=Character* and can be further split into two sub-categories, *fixed* and *variable*. *Fixed focalisation* occurs when the narrative is delivered by a single character, and is restricted to the knowledge of that character, creating a "narrative with [a particular] 'point of view' and with 'restricted field'" (*Narrative Discourse* 189), whilst *variable focalisation* describes a narrative constructed via a number of sources, such as the epistolary novel. This type of focalisation can be described as *Narrator(s) =Character(s),* and as with fixed focalisation, the narrative is restricted to the information possessed by the character or the narrator. Finally, the formula *Narrator<Character* can be used to designate those narratives where the narrator knows less than the characters in the narrative, which results in a more objective perspective. *Fallout 3* falls into the fixed focalisation category: the player knows the same information as the protagonist, and all the information that the player gains is limited to this (unless she leaves the fictional setting, and actively searches for extra knowledge outside the playing

experience). This results in the player endowing the character with specific qualities and personality traits, which then allows her to identify with – or as – the protagonist.

In videogames, as with other visual media, there are several ways that narratives are delivered to an audience that encompass combinations of mimesis and diegesis, including that of perspective. Whilst the third-person perspective is common in videogames, as it is in other fictional forms, videogames are able to utilise perspectives that are not as common in other media; first person games situate the player directly in the role of the protagonist, with the screen showing the player events and information as if she can see through the eyes of the character. This means that there is no gap between what the player and the character see, and establishes a lack of narrative distance. In games that employ the third-person perspective, the player generally sees the back of the character, and so is removed from identifying herself as the character (unlike in traditional media, where the third-person perspective is considered to be more objective, for a videogame this is fixed focalisation, usually restricted to the protagonist). The first-person perspective, then, allows the player to identify with the character more closely. *Fallout 3* offers the player a choice in perspective, a unique ability of videogames, either through the first-person or third-person, which gives the player an opportunity to choose the narrative distance she has from the character she is controlling.

Whilst offering an evolution in perspective, videogame narratives have much in common with other narrative structures. Teresa Bridgeman states that "temporal and spatial relationships are essential to our understanding of narratives, "and that "theorists posit two basic temporalities of narrative which are generally referred to as 'story' and 'discourse'" (58). In Genette's work, these correspond to "*erzählte Zeit* (story time) and *Erzählzeit* (narrative time)" (*Narrative Discourse* 33), with story time being the time frame in which the narrative occurs, and narrative time being the time it takes the reader to consume the entire narrative. Whilst this is the case through all media, it is in written fiction and videogames that the time to consume a narrative is particularly variable. In film and most other audio-visual media, a narrative has a predetermined time; a film, for example, has a total length usually given in minutes, and this is the time it takes to consume the narrative. Videogames contain the story time of the diegesis and the time it takes to play the game. However, videogames can also "tell two stories: the story story – the narrative story that is the sum total of a game's cut-scenes and dialogue and the gameplay story – the story described by the actions the player takes in the game world" (Allison), which result in a third timeframe of which Genette's theory offers no account. These temporal structures are related to the embedded and enacted narrative structures of other media addressed by Henry Jenkins in his discussion

of the classic detective story structure: "telling two stories – one more or less chronological (the [enacted] story of the investigation itself) and the other told radically out of sequence (the [embedded] events motivating and leading up to the murder)" (126), although this is significantly altered in his discussion of electronic narrative media.

Despite the narrative time of the game being presented as linear (there are no temporal disruptions, with the sole exception of the optional use of ellipsis to sleep), allowing the player to interact with the protagonist's personal narrative, the story time of *Fallout 3* is spread over two hundred years, and it is up to the player to establish the chronology of this global narrative, using clues and information found in the landscape as she explores it. Here already, the narratological devices Genette bases his temporal framework on are subject to change; although the main quest (and personal narrative) of the game must be completed linearly, meaning that its narrative has an established, authored beginning, middle, and end, the global narrative is not discovered this way. In constructing a narrative that allows the player to recreate it in any order she wishes, temporality becomes less important, and as such is not given the prominence granted to Genette's narratological analysis.

However, when the player begins the game, it seems that *Fallout* 3 adheres to most narratological concepts as well as to videogame tropes. It begins with a cinematic opening, a cut-scene that introduces the player to the narrative before she takes control of her character, and, much like film, establishes the game's principal features: genre, setting, plot, characterisation, atmosphere, point-of-view, and, of course, the conflict as well as uses the player's observation to establish several important narrative features of the game. The slideshow which precedes the opening cut-scene shows advertisements, ranging from consumer goods to a subscription to Vaulttech services (providing access to a safe "vault" in the case of a nuclear war), all "held in an optimistic, even hopeful, tone" (Iverson). This is juxtaposed with "intermixed, nationalistic propaganda sequences" (Iverson), forming the "official" prewar rationale of the gameworld. From here, the player is shown an old fashioned, valve radio playing the song *I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire*, and the camera pans out to show the radio in a wrecked bus, situated in a destroyed Washington, with the ruins of the Washington Monument central in the skyline. The song assists in generating the tone of the game, "summoning a utopian past only to mark it as the stuff of fugitive dreams" (Cheng 31), even before play begins. What we see in this setting are differences between the official rhetoric of the gameworld, and the reality of the one the player finds herself inhabiting. The peritextual information of the game establishes the differences between the official rhetoric of the gameworld, and the reality of the one the player finds

herself inhabiting. The second part of the opening cut-scene is delivered via a pre-scripted voice-over (narrated by actor Ron Perlmann) with visual sketches of war scenes, reminding the player that "War, war never changes" (Bethesda) and provides a brief synopsis of pre-game events including the "Great War," which creates the apocalyptic setting of the game. Addressing the player/protagonist by the personal pronoun "you," Perlmann's monologue provides the background for the character, situating her within this world and forming the basis of the societal rules she must abide by, as well as beginning to immerse the player in the gameworld, with or as the protagonist.

Beyond the narrative introduction that the peritext brings, the opening sequence of the videogame acquaints the player with the ludic elements of the game: following the "birth" of the player, she is given several tasks, taking place across significant childhood moments, which introduce the player to the control system, the dialogue and choice options, and the initial setting – The Vault. This first part of *Fallout 3* is linear and scripted, a sharp contrast to the rest of the game, and so allows the narrative and ludic elements to be introduced before the player is given access to the open world that comprises most of the game, and adheres to the narratological concepts set out by Genette, even as it provides ludic instruction to the player.

As *Fallout 3* is an open world, or a sandbox game, the player can explore any part of the landscape she wishes, in any order, after she has emerged from the linear, scripted introduction and entered "The Wastelands." The structure of the game is such that the story time, the total narrative that the player can discover, as opposed to that she "plays," is delivered through an embedded, or environmental, narrative. When Vault 101 is abandoned and the scripted beginning is over, it quickly becomes clear to the analyst that Genette's narratological analysis is no longer appropriate, and so game theory is the next avenue for exploration to explain the narrative structure of *Fallout 3*. Game scholar Henry Jenkins considers games to fit into "a much older tradition of spatial stories," and believes that "game designer don't simply tell stories, they design worlds" (Jenkins 3). Part of this involves creating narratives that are constructed within the landscape itself, for example, through the inclusion of audio files, visuals, collectibles, and interaction with non-player characters. Jenkins refers to this as "environmental storytelling" which "creates the preconditions for an immersive narrative experience," and given this, designers "may embed narrative information within their *mise-en-scene*" (Jenkins 5). This method of narrative delivery is also known as a "pull narrative," i.e., one in which the designers "rely on the player to *pull* the narrative" (Calleja 123) to herself, allowing her to choose her preferred way of interacting with it. This form of

storytelling has evolved from the perceived disconnect between games and narrative, and in embedding the narrative this way, a game is able to function on both the ludic and the narrative levels without either detracting from the other. For *Fallout 3*, this means that the game can be played as a "shooter," without the narrative interfering with gameplay, using the extensive landscape to explore and discover as much of the narrative as the player wishes.

Videogames use environmental storytelling in differing degrees. This ranges from using collectible items, such as books, to provide historical narrative information, as in the *Elder Scrolls* series, to using the environment itself to ask the player to interpret a fictional, historical event, as with *Fallout 3*. Scattered throughout The Wastelands are many micro-narratives, which range in size from vignettes that show the fate of a single family to more elaborate representations, such as readable journals and side-quests, and "while many locations do not offer much in terms of quest opportunities or loot they often present a variety of atmospheres and embedded stories" (Iverson), which aid the player's construction of the global narrative. Sarah Grey also perceives the atmospheric qualities of the landscape in this game, noting that it invokes "a sense of helplessness, pathos, and fear," encouraging the player to engage in "philosophical contemplation" (Grey). As an entirely constructed environment, everything in the game reflects the narrative the designers have invested it with with no exception, meaning that all the elements of the landscape have meaning, and is spread over more than 140 locations, which allows the player to discover the past narrative of this future Washington.

Narratives in videogames that utilise environmental storytelling in this way achieve narrative cohesion thorough four techniques, labelled by Jenkins as: evocative spaces, enacting stories, embedded narratives, and emergent narratives. Evocative spaces are those that "draw upon our previously existing narrative competencies" and "allow [the player] to enter physically into spaces" (Jenkins 5) that she can recognise from real life, and that precede her involvement with the game. Famous locations from Washington DC assist this in *Fallout 3*; the player is exploring a futuristic version of the area, and as such can find real locations that have become eroded or destroyed, engaging the player with familiar settings made strange by the effects of the war and the subsequent passage of time. Being placed in a recognisable landscape, the player is instantly given a real history of that place, as well as a series of emotions connected with its destruction.

Enacting stories reflects the difference between the narrative time and the story time as defined earlier, and utilises the micro-narratives of a game to provide memorable moments or emotional impacts that allow the player to connect these to the wider narrative. Jenkins

invokes the notions of "broadly defined goals" and "localised incidents" when referring to enacting stories (Jenkins 6). In *Fallout 3*, the global narrative is constructed within the geography of the landscape, so that the player comes across "obstacles [that] thwart and affordances [that] facilitate the protagonist movement towards resolution: (Jenkins 6). Each element is self-contained, and many can be left undiscovered, and will not affect the gameplay, should the player chooses to concentrate solely on that. For *Fallout 3*, then, enacting stories is large part of optional gameplay, allowing the player to personify the narrative experience. This is also a basis of emergent narratives; the outline of a narrative is placed in a videogame, and the content is created by the player herself through the micronarratives she interacts with.

Embedded narratives in videogames substantially differ from those of traditional narratives; in film and novels, an embedded narrative is one where a frame is used to embed a secondary narrative within the primary one, and is a temporal structure. In videogames, however, an embedded narrative is one that is constructed within the landscape or setting itself to create "affective potential or communicate significant narrative information" (Jenkins 9). As the player enters a space in a game world, for example a deserted house in *Fallout 3*, and looks around, she may experience emotions, such as sorrow, or feelings of loss, especially "where the space has been transformed by narrative events" (Jenkins 9). She must interact with the setting, and place her experience in each location it with other similar events and scenes to aid in the reconstruction of the global narrative.

This micro-narrative will be employed to highlight the techniques used to embed a narrative in a game through environmental storytelling, whose only purpose is a greater understanding of the people, places, and the remnants of the war that took place prior to the game. The discovery of the nameplate of the McClellan Family Town home gives the player an initial clue that this house has a particular relevance: it is the only home in the area with such a nameplate. The house itself is unoccupied, and exploration reveals a skeleton in a bed, with a teddy bear next to it, and a dead dog in the garden. There is also a dormant robot, Mr Handy, which the player can activate and ask to carry out household tasks, such as attempting to walk the dead dog, collect groceries from a long abandoned shop, and patrol the property. Most significant for this analysis, however, is the poem Mr Handy is programmed to recite as a bedtime story. The poem, called *There Will Come Soft Rains*, is a post-apocalyptic poem from 1920, which inspired Ray Bradbury's short story of the same name. In Bradbury's story, a computer-controlled house continues to perform its duties despite there being no trace of any human habitation. The house, the only surviving remnant of an urban landscape in a post-

nuclear environment, reads Teasdale's poem aloud, seemingly unaware that the recipient is long dead, and this is directly related to the actions of Mr Handy in *Fallout 3*, as the robot recites the poem to the skeleton. Hearing the poem, then, and recognising the superimposition of Bradbury's text onto the game allows the player to interpret some of the other pieces of information that have so far been anomalous, or unrecognised. For example, the address of the town house, 2026 Bradley Place can be seen to be a reference to Bradbury's story, which takes place in the year 2026, and the word Bradley is very similar to Bradbury. It is also worth noting that Bradbury's book *Fahrenheit 451* contains a character named McClellan, Clearly, the player either requires some knowledge of Bradbury, needs to find out the relevance of the poem to understand this relevence, but this is easily achieved through using Google or via any of the websites dedicated to Fallout 3, where players research and maintain a database of information on the game.

In each of these four ways that narrative is communicated in environmental storytelling, the onus of narrative construction is placed on the landscape itself, through its design and organisation, and of its discovery and interpretation on the player. *Fallout 3* utilises these to bring about narrative cohesion for the player over a global narrative that stretches back over two centuries, and can *only* be constructed through interaction with the landscape, through external means, such as discussion with other players, or via walkthrough guides of the game. The spatial design in *Fallout 3* allows the player to recognise the landscape, creating a series of evocative spaces, with the altered details of that landscape bringing about a fresh perspective on it. This is used in conjunction with embedded narratives, which allow the player to decipher elements of this defamiliarized landscape and to reconstruct the events that created it. Furthermore, the enacted spaces in the landscape allow the dual temporality of the narrative to be played out, with the character's movement through the space being instrumental in constructing both temporal narratives. *Fallout 3*'s landscape is designed to be filled with narrative, and with the possibility for the player to discover and interpret this narrative, should she wish to.

Yet unlike traditional narratives, videogames are not limited to using space as a setting for narrative; it is also a space for play. Nor are players simply viewers, hearers, or readers of narrative space: they enter it and travel through it. In order to make narrative progress, players must interact with and navigate the game space ludically; the narrative cannot progress without the player mastering the game space. This creates a new relationship of the narrative consumer to narrative space, a much-discussed concept in videogames. Direct interaction with the setting, rather than observation of it, heightens the immersion of the

player into the narrative, and ludic interaction as and with game characters allows more intense identification with fictional characters and with the narrative more generally.

Returning to Genette, it is clear that a narratological analysis of *Fallout 3* is not as simple as suggesting that narratology does, or does not, work in this study. The concepts Genette employs to construct and explain temporality in *Narrative Discourse* are problematic with regard to *Fallout 3*. This is not to say that temporality does not exist within the game, but rather that its construction is based on spatial, rather than temporal, concepts. Genette grounds a significant part of his theory in temporal movement, and whilst playing the game reconstructs past events, and therefore the narrative, it is not done through the temporal structure established by Genette. However, some aspects of narratology fit comfortably within this theoretical mould. The concepts of narrative voice and distance that Genette uses to analyse perspective, field of vision, and point of view are well suited to the videogame, albeit with a little amendment to allow for visual media (which Genette does not account for). Thus, traditional theory is sufficient to begin to explain and analyse videogame narratives, but some of their unique elements, e.g., the temporal aspects of videogame narratives, such as those found in *Fallout 3*, need theories that are specific to the unique capabilities of the videogame, and narratology limits the capacity of the scholar to analyse this and similar games.

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