

Story & Games

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The Plan

I. Classical Narratology in a Nutshell

A game-free extravaganza describing a theory of stories, their elements, and how they are told, leading to Julio Cortázar's "Continuity of Parks."

II. Understanding Games through Narratology

Some ways to apply ideas from narratology to understand games and to see how we can design better games. Main game: Adam Cadre's *Varicella*.

Narratology:

*The study of stories
and how they are told*

Narratology:

The (structuralist-inspired) theory of NARRATIVE. Narratology studies the nature, form, and functioning of narrative (regardless of the medium of representation) and tries to characterize NARRATIVE COMPETENCE [the ability to produce and understand narratives]. More particularly, it examines what all and only narratives have in common (at the level of story, narrating, and their relations) as well as what enables them to be different from one another, and it attempts to account for the ability to produce and understand them.

—Gerald Prince
A Dictionary of Narratology (rev. ed.)

Narratology is...

- I. Independent of medium**
- II. Considers all stories, not just fictional, literary, and artistic ones**
- III. Considers only stories, not non-narrative poems, buildings, etc.**
- IV. A descriptive theory, not a method for telling better stories or appreciating them**
- V. Fairly new, even in “classic” form (1960s), but the concepts go back to Aristotle**

Story and Discourse

A (the?) fundamental insight

The “story” — the content of a narrative,
the things that exist and happen in it

is *not* the same as

the “discourse” — its narration,
how the story is told

Aristotle: mythos/logos, Russian formalists: fabula/sjuzet

Tricky thing: “story” (content) is part of “a story”

Two Stories (Same Content)

1. *“Waiting,” an SMS story by Rob Metcalfe*

<http://www.the-phone-book.com/version13/storypages.php?ID=76>

Tony stared into the empty glass. He ran his fingers through his hair and checked his watch.

“Don’t worry” the barman said, “She’ll be here.”

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Tony stared into the empty glass. He ran his fingers through his hair and checked his watch.

“Don’t worry” the barman said, “She’ll be here.”

2. [*“Waiting” Rewritten*]

“Don’t worry, she’ll be here,” the barman said, after Tony had run his fingers through his hair and checked his watch, after he had stared into the empty glass.

More Stories (Same Content)

3. *“Rapunzel,” an SMS story by Kate Mahon*

<http://www.the-phone-book.com/version13/storypages.php?ID=124>

“Let down your hair!” he said. So she did. In no time at all she was entertaining men in her bedroom...

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4. [*“Rapunzel” Rewritten*]

She entertained men in her bedroom. This started shortly after he said “let down your hair!” and she complied.

Cinematic Narration

5. *“Suspense”*

[A man walks down the street and falls into an open manhole. The manhole is shown in a shot before the man falls into it.]

6. *“Surprise”*

[A man walks down the street and falls into an open manhole. The manhole is not shown until after the man falls into it.]

What is a Narrative?

Restaurant menus, ATM receipts, portraits, type theory proofs, shell scripts, etc.? Or is a “narrative” something more specific?

“... the representation of at least two real or fictive events (or one state and one event) neither of which logically presupposes or entails the other.” —Prince, Dictionary

Some definitions are less restrictive, so that one event is okay. “The king died” would be fine, no need for “and then the queen died of grief.”

A narrative is communicated by one or more narrators to one or more narratees.

Narrative as a Structure

Discourse
(Expression)

Structure of transmission
(e.g., order in which events are related; what is explicit, what implied) **(Form)**

Manifestation **(Substance)**
(e.g., verbal, cinematic)

Narrative

Events (Actions, Happenings) **(Form)**
Existents (Characters, Setting)

Story
(Content)

People, things, etc. as understood in culture **(Substance)**

What Events and Existents?

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Story-Time, Discourse-Time

- **Order**

- Normal order
- Flashback (w/ distance & amplitude)
- Flashforward (w/ distance & amplitude)

- **Duration**

- Summary
- Ellipsis
- Scene
- Stretch
- Pause

- **Frequency**

- Singularity
- Multiple-singularity
- Repetitive
- Iterative

“Waiting” Redux

7. *[Another Rewrite of “Waiting”]*

Tony stared into the empty glass. He ran his fingers through his hair and checked his watch.

“A woman stood me up once,” the barman said, “and it really bothered me. But then I stopped caring.”

Levels of Narration

(Unnamed narrator)

Story of Tony at the bar

(Narrated by barman)

Story of the barman getting stood up

Levels of Narration

Read by the people of CIS 564

(Implied narratee)

(Unnamed narrator)

Story of Tony at the bar

(Narrated to Tony)

(Narrated by barman)

Story of the barman getting stood up

Authored by Rob Metcalfe and nm

Levels of Narration

Read by the people of CIS 564

(Implied narratee)

(Unnamed narrator)

Story of Tony at the bar (Narrated to Tony by the barman)

Story of the barman getting stood up

Authored by Rob Metcalfe and nm

“Waiting” One More Time

8. [Yet Another Rewrite of “Waiting”]

Tony stared into the empty glass. He ran his fingers through his hair and checked his watch.

“Little Red Riding Hood met the wolf and then went through the forest,” the barman said, “but when she got to where she was going, it wasn’t her grandmother who was waiting for her.”

Levels of Narration

Read by the people of CIS 564

(Implied narratee)

(Unnamed narrator)

Story of Tony at the bar (Narrated to Tony by the barman)

Story of Little Red Riding Hood

Authored by Rob Metcalfe and nm

“Waiting” One Last Time

9. [The Last Rewrite of “Waiting,” I Promise]

Tony stared into the empty glass. He ran his fingers through his hair and checked his watch.

“Little Red Riding Hood met the wolf and then went through the forest,” the barman said, “but when she got to where she was going, it wasn’t her grandmother who was waiting for her.”

Tony looked up to see who had just entered the bar. It was Little Red Riding Hood.

Metalepsis

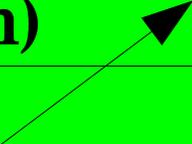
(Implied narratee)

(Unnamed narrator)

Story of Tony (To Tony, by barman)

Story of Little Red

Character from level
“below” appears here



Metalepsis

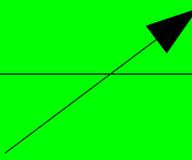
(Implied narratee)

(Unnamed narrator)

Story of Tony (To Tony, by barman)

Story of being stood up

Significantly less
startling



If we had extended (7) so that the woman who stood the bartender up had walked in, this would be surprising, but not the same sort of violation. Little Red appearing is *ontological metalepsis*. (Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*)

“Continuity of Parks”

Read by you

(Implied narratee)

(Unnamed narrator)

Story of wealthy man

(Reads his novel)

Story of hero and heroine

Authored by Julio Cortázar

Suggestion that a story
can kill a reader

Hero kills wealthy
man (implicit)

Misc. Other Matters...

- **Characters** (E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*)
 - Round vs. Flat
 - Static vs. Dynamic
- **Traditional segmentation**
 - Three acts (Drama)
 - Chapters (Novel)
- **Story types**
 - “A man goes on a journey”
 - “A stranger comes to town”

After the Break

On to the games!

Quicky:

Arcadia, GameLab (Eric Zimmerman
et al.), 2003

In depth:

Varicella, Adam Cadre, 1999

Story-Time vs. Play-Time

Time of Reading/Viewing/etc.

Discourse

Story

Time of Play

Status

Simulation

See Jesper Juul, "Introduction to Game Time / Time to Play"

Gamer Complaints...

How, in 2005, can there still be gamers taken in by **EXCLUSIVE SCREENSHOTS** of games that are obviously taken from cutscenes and have NO connection with what the actual game will look like? I blame the developers formerly known as **Square** for this. They're the ones who ran their entire ad campaign for **Final Fantasy VIII** with shots like this:



<http://www.pointlesswasteoftime.com/games/manifesto.html>

Gamer Complaints...

...for a game that looked like this:



<http://www.pointlesswasteoftime.com/games/manifesto.html>

Gamer Complaints...

...Let's ban all **IAC's** (Immersion-annihilating contrivances). These include:

Superimposing shit on the screen. And by "shit" we mean "words." **Fatal Frame 2** was one of the most awesomely atmospheric games ever made... until you took a snapshot of the second ghost and the words "**CORE SHOT: 396pts!**" popped up. Spooooooky!



"Mr. Frodo! Is that you behind ORC HEWER?"

Arcadia by GameLab

Arcadia by GameLab

- Is it “metaleptic,” and if so, how?
- What is the relationship between play-time and simulation-time?

Varicella by Adam Cadre

Varicella by Adam Cadre

- Is waking up “metaleptic,” and if so, how?
- What is the relationship between play-time and simulation-time?
- Are there cut-scenes?
- Who are the characters?
- What is the relationship between their roles as game-character and story-character?
- What is the relationship between user input, the program, and “plot” or the things that happen?
- How many of these insights apply to non-text video games?