

Finding a Way: Reducing Design Schema Friction in Narrative Design

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ABSTRACT

The Narratology and Ludology debate from the late 90s and early 2000s has in many respects abated. This is due to in part the agreement many theorists have come to regarding the need for recognising and studying game phenomena as cultural form in itself. The debate successfully championed games being treated as a unique phenomena. The two fields continue with their distinct inquiries, along with some interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary efforts which ensure their congruences are not lost. The same, however, has not happened in practice. Game designers and game writers do not have shared understandings, processes, or approaches. Indeed, the process of narrative and game mode integration during the development process is still awkward and difficult. This is *not* due to the two modes being incompatible however, as has been claimed now and in those early debates. Instead, this paper argues that incompatibilities are due more to the schemas of creation. The mental models we are taught and creative with are what thwart more integrated practices. To illuminate this problem and possible solutions, this research looks at how game writing is taught, the notion of design schemas, and offers existing models that reduce schema friction in narrative design.

Keywords

narrative design, game design, screenwriting, design schemas, serious games, narratology, ludology, learning design.

INTRODUCTION

How do game designers and game writers learn to do narrative design? If we consider the high number of games students enrolled in courses worldwide, what is taught in education is a key point of reference to help answer this question. There are (arguably) key texts that show up on curriculums worldwide: *Game Design Workshop* (Fullerton 2008); *The Art of Game Design* (Schell 2010), *On Game Design* (Rollings and Adams 2003), and *Rules of Play* (Salen and Zimmerman 2003); and while each of them have differences in their discourse and framing, there are patterns in the citations. They do what most game-, screen- and novel-writing books do: reference three act structures through Aristotle's *Poetics* (Aristotle 1997 [330BC]), Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell 2012 [1949]), and Christopher Vogler's development on Campbell's monomyth with *The Writer's Journey* (Vogler 2007).

A game writing approach is then explained as being different through pathing structures. These are the nodal diagrams that explain how a player can access different parts of a story in different ways. A linear, strand-of-pearl-like structure or a branching structure for instance. Then to bring in the concept of the hero's journey, there is a repositioning of the hero's journey as the player's journey, a

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“first-person character arc” (Freeman 2004). Famously, we’ve also seen how developer Jenova Chen applied this thinking to *Journey* (Chen 2013), along with many other practitioners. Indeed, students and professional developers alike utilise these touchstone narrative structures during development.

Developer and educator Jesse Schell goes further, explaining that “[b]ecause so many videogames revolve around the theme of heroism, it is only logical that the hero’s journey is a relevant structure for a powerful videogame story” (Schell 2010). But as we have seen with the development of different types of games (Hamari and Tuunanen 2014; Hartmann and Klimmt 2006; Kallio, Mäyrä, Kaipainen 2011; Lazzaro 2004), heroism is not a universal desire for play, and further to that neither is playing a hero that refuses the call to help others. But neither of these issues are the crux of the problem.

What is the problem then? The problem is, in practice, these narrative structure approaches have conflicting goals with game design approaches. Indeed, their differences can be seen as being distinct design schemas. Story and game design schemas are our ways of understanding stories and games. We learn them through experiencing stories and games, and as practitioners we are also taught them through articles, books, workshops and consultations. Schemas are not a recent concept (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), and have been applied to game design before. Game researchers Craig Lindley and Charlotte Sennersten, for instance, discuss *story* and *game play schemas* from a player perspective, where the former is about patterns that make stories comprehensible, and the latter is about the orchestration of cognitive resources to generate motor outputs (Lindley and Sennersten 2006).

Both myself and early narratology and ludology theorists have explored an alternate approach to narrative and game mode resolution: a transmodal approach to games where analysis of narrative and game transformations reveals the congruences and differences (such as Dena 2009; Eskelinen 2005; Frasca 1999; Frasca 2003; Juul 2001; Ryan 2006). But transmodal approaches focus on setting, props, objects, and characters, and so do not think about the players, or audience. We’re thinking about what players will see and ultimately (hopefully) will be affected by, but we’re not actually thinking about their experience. We’re thinking about the elements. We’re thinking about the end product as an isolated act in itself. While alternately, (ideal) game design is about thinking of the player’s actions: the various verbs that represent their activity, and playtesting to check the relationship between design proposition and effect.

What I highlight in this research are two approaches to narrative design that work for games and film (and TV) development processes. They are both from already-proven models and they are two approaches that intrinsically have a shared goal that aligns with best practices in both artforms. Both of them make the player or audience the focus.

BIO

Dr Christy Dena is Chair and Department Coordinator of Games at SAE Creative Media Institute, and owner of Universe Creation 101 where she is a designer-writer-director of apps, card and live games. She achieved her PhD in Transmedia Practice at Sydney University, Postgraduate Diploma in Creative Writing at Melbourne University, and Bachelor of Arts in Visual & Performing Arts at Monash University. Christy has lectured around the world, been published in numerous books, and runs an international professional lab for creatives working in the fringes: *Forward Slash Story*. Christy’s projects have won and been nominated for multiple awards, including the winning the WA Premier’s Book Award for Digital Narrative and the AWG Award for Interactive Media.

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