

The Gamelike Nature of Narrative Complexity

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Keywords

Narrative complexity, games, cognitive ludicity, mysteries, repetition

INTRODUCTION

Complex narratives, stories that are intentionally difficult to follow and challenge the narratee (the receiver of a narrative), have become a normalised part of contemporary media. Scholars across film (Buckland 2009; 2014; Kiss & Willemsen 2017), television (Mittell 2006; 2015) and narratology more generally (Grishakova & Poulaki 2019; Ryan 2019; Walsh & Stepney 2018) have all explored ways narratives can be thought of as complex. Many scholars have also suggested that narrative complexity is related to videogames. Panek (2006, 87) suggests “an element of non-filmic interactive storytelling exists in these films. Younger audiences who are increasingly comfortable with the burgeoning interactive medium of videogames may find [complex] narratives appealing for this reason”. Lavender-Smith (2016, 78) outright claims complex film’s “narratives are video games, encouraging recursive learning and exploration, training audiences to become digital cinephiles”. Cameron (2008, 173) states: “just as computer games have taken on codes and structural elements from cinema, [complex] narratives arguably constitute a set of films that operate like games, challenging viewers with temporal and narrative puzzles”. Theorists have also compared complexity to games more generally: Elsaesser (2009, 14) titles his personal description of complex cinema as “mind-game films”, defined as “movies that are ‘playing games’” by withholding crucial information from characters, viewers or both. Buckland’s (2009; 2014) and Kiss and Willemsen’s (2017) description of complex narratives as ‘puzzle plots’ foreground a gamelike quality also; Buckland (2014; 2015) even directly explores the ‘videogame logic’ of complex films *Source Code* (Jones 2011) and *Inception*.

This paper expands on the loose connotations elicited by other scholars by exploring how exactly narrative complexity can be understood as gamelike. Adopting a term from Astrid Ensslin (2014, 11), I argue that complex narratives are cognitively ludic, meaning they elicit a cognitive mode of engagement that can be, and has been, compared to games, but remains distinct from more literal ludicity. This relates complex narratives to textual games such as riddles and, most notably, mysteries. Both are centered on the puzzling question of ‘what happened’ – as Ryan (2015, 121) describes, the narrative “asks a question, the [narratee] tries to answer, and the [narrative] wins if the [narratee] must be given the solution”. This interaction only occurs cognitively however, and the extent to which narratees are invested in ‘solving’ complexity will vary – indeed, the pleasure of both mysteries and complexity arguably comes from the cleverness of the solution rather than ‘winning’.

Thinking about complex narratives in this way is beneficial in how it foregrounds specific gamelike responses complexity can elicit in the viewer. These range from an appreciation for both story and discourse, the need to learn how a narrative works

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2024

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before understanding it and the desire to rewatch or ‘replay’ a narrative to improve one’s comprehension. The first relates to Mittell’s (2006, 36) concept of the operational aesthetic – “enjoying the [narrative’s] results while also marveling at how it works”, with Mittell arguing this is a key goal across “videogames, puzzle films and narratively complex television series”. The second refers to the ‘narrative mechanics’ at play in complex stories, such as nonlinearity, multiple levels of reality and ontological looping; the intricacies of which must be understood before the narrative itself can be comprehended. This relates complexity to the self-reflexive mode of engagement involved in playing a game - being conscious of the rules and mechanics while simultaneously inhabiting and enjoying the gameworld within that ludic structure. A key example Mittell (2009; 2011) explores is that of the serialised ‘complex TV’ show *Lost* (Abrams et al., 2004-2010). Finally, complexity also encourages repeat viewings to ‘resolve’ the challenges to comprehension, much as the same way games are replayed to master their mechanics. Buckland (2015, 197) foregrounds this through his discussion of the film *Inception* and its ‘videogame logic’ in how its complexity encourages a cult following and repeat viewings to “master the complexity just as games are played multiple times to master their rules”.

Therefore, in this paper I argue that complex narratives can be understood as cognitively ludic – they can elicit a mode of engagement like, but distinct from, games. This is productive in how it foregrounds key gamelike ways that narratees can respond to complexity. These range from taking pleasure in both a narrative and how it is told, the need to learn how a narrative works before understanding it and the desire to rewatch to improve one’s comprehension. Expanding on this connection between narrative complexity and gameness is therefore not only beneficial in considering the impact on the narratee, but also in exploring the connection between contemporary modes of storytelling and games. As a future avenue of research, it also has consequences for how to understand narrative complexity in videogames itself.

BIO

Cassandra Barkman is a PhD candidate, recently submitted, at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, Australia under Prof. Angela Ndalians and Assoc Prof. Dan Golding. Cassandra’s research regards the investigation of complex and puzzling narrativity within the affordances of videogames. Cassandra is also the co-vice editor of student game studies journal Press Start, a copyeditor for the Journal of Games Criticism and a tutor in screen studies and media studies at Swinburne and the University of Melbourne.

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