Our Combative Past and Co-operative Future: Review of 'The Play Versus Story Divide in Game Studies: Critical Essays'

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Abstract

A review of Wilhelm Kapell's *The Play Versus Story Divide* (McFarland Books, 2016) tackling the major themes of its contributions, praising its approach and unique papers while addressing a few minor shortcomings.

Keywords

Ludology; narratology; collection; game studies

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Press Start is an open access student journal that publishes the best undergraduate and postgraduate research, essays and dissertations from across the multidisciplinary subject of game studies. Press Start is published by HATII at the University of Glasgow.

This excellent collection sheds new light on the story/play divide that resides in Game Studies as a discipline. So much so, that after reading, 'divide' seems much too strong a word. Kapell's clear and concise introduction reframes the ludology/narratology debate as one of cooperative dialectics rather than a petty academic skirmish. Often understood as a flurry of heated academic disputes in the burgeoning years of digital games studies, taking place face to face at international conferences and implicitly within publications, the ludology/narratology debate is frequently summarised as a "prize match" over the fundamental qualities of digital games: is it more important, scholars asked, to understand videogames as objects for play or as narrative texts (Bogost, 2006)? Kapell takes an alternate route, seeing through the dogma present on either side, summarising the fruitful fiction as follows: "For the ludologists the final position is rather simple: digital games are new. The cybernetic relationship between a player or players and the game program represents a new form of human activity and scholars should concentrate on game mechanics, the program/human interface, and decision trees. For narratologists digital games are merely one more stage that extends back at least as far as Aristotle's writings on drama if not, more generally, to the very origins of our species" (p. 2). Reimagining the play/narrative divide is central to this volume and Kapell's view – that of 'new' relationships between interactive systems balanced against a perhaps 'natural' human instinct to tell stories – is only the starting point.

The essays are organised in a daring manner focusing on ideas and the evolution of those ideas over time. Not constrained to a chronological or personality led-approach, the editor has "imagined a different decade or two in which game studies actually engaged in a spirited debate about the importance of narrative and play (p. 11)". This is certainly clear in the broad strokes of the articles presented; for instance, issues such as self-identity through the avatar and the 'magic circle' (the notion that human concentration and ability to suspend disbelief can be constrained to a specific space during play), both fundamental to the formative years of game studies, do not play a significant role until much later in the collection. Although necessary inclusions, implicitly outlining ludological and narratological approaches to game studies, make up the bulk of the first half of studies, from the halfway mark there are a number of unexpected entries that make this edition stand out. In all, the collection is balanced and informative; at times it goes beyond its remit and extends into the future of game studies, beyond divides and into exciting new paradigms of scholarly cooperation. The future it predicts is bright and I can only hope their foresight is accurate.

Lindsey Joyce, Andrew Wackerfuss and Emily Joy Bemebenck's papers open the collection with a balanced overview of some ideas still central to the heart of digital game studies. Joyce's analysis of indie classic Kentucky Route Zero focuses on how multiple protagonists and branching dialogue trees can enrich players' feelings of agency and potential for character development. It represents, largely, what one might think of when asked to imagine what a narratological approach to game studies might be; although the author mentions play practices (that the game is 'point and click'), the specifics of play as an experience are overlooked in favour of determining how play elements affect the delivering of a story. The conclusions reached are similarly what one would expect (multiple characters allows the player to feel more like a co-author than an agent within the narrative; the lack of feedback from the system increases immersion) but this serves as an excellent opening entry for the collection's narrative approaches. In comparison, Wackerfuss' much more ludonarratively balanced addition places enormous emphasis on the specifics of play, going to great length the detail the various modes and options of *State of Decay*. His argument follows that although a game may appear stripped of conventional narrative elements, a focus on play simply opens the door for organic narratives to flow. Fittingly then, Bembeneck's article on 'Multiplayer Online Battle Arena' (MOBA) game, *League of Legends*, a game of almost pure mechanics, attempts to push the definition of narrative in the face of an almost a-narrative text. Coining a definition of 'storyworld' over narrative space, Bembeneck proposes that games need only support the means for players to create specific connections between visual and statistical stimuli.

Moving on a quartet of papers is revealed that adds unexpected nuance and subtlety to what so often appears a two-sided issue. Rather than arguing for one side or another amidst the academic landscape the authors present methods of analysing videogame narratives within their ludic contexts. Eric W. Riddle reads Quantic Dream's *Beyond two Souls* as gothic fiction employing elements of that genre through restriction of agency, switching of perspective and various thematic devices. This thematic device, however, determines aspects of gameplay, at times restricting player freedom in a manner that some have found frustrating. Riddle reads this restriction gameplay as a defining characteristic of the text suggesting a genre of 'narrative heavy' titles. Although perhaps differing from traditional characteristics of videogames these narrative focused experiences continue to push games development in new directions, readjusting the balance between play and storytelling. Similar perspectives are taken by Mark Filipowitch and Vince Locke who focus on ideas of 'the self' and 'myth' respectively but take a combinatory stance on the ludo/narrative debate. Locke's ambitious claim that *Halo*, released just months after the events of 9/11, "capture[s] the zeitgeist of the early twenty-first century and help[s] us deal with the pressures and uncertainty of our time" (p. 95),

rests on the potential for games to empower through a complex blending of storytelling and play; importantly, with neither one or the other being foregrounded. Alexandra Orlando and Matthew Schwager present an engaging discussion of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* putting forth the contention that certain shifts in gameplay features can drastically change engagement with the narrative. Although killing is, to a degree, rewarded by the game through a series of on-screen alerts, when – in the final chapters of the game – these alerts are suddenly removed, the meaning of in-game killing shifts. Although previously framed as acts of skill, they are repositioned as acts of wanton destruction. Again, it is neither ludus nor narrative being focused on here but interplay between the two: "We should be framing our analysis beyond the ludology/narratology and treating each game as a product of diverse teams" (p. 108).

The five essays that make up the latter half of the contributions increase in complexity. Drifting away from questioning the importance of ludology or narratology in an obvious manner, these later papers ask more far-reaching and open questions while still revolving around a theme. Tom Apperley and Justin Clemens' paper on the biopolitics of gaming presents a "heuristic and probative tool" (p. 122) for the analysis of game avatars essential to both ludic and narratological studies. A small debate ensues as two papers debate whether play or narrative merits the most attention in the *Bioshock* series: although Amy M. Green mounts a strong case for the series as a forward thinking narrative text, Matthew Wysocki and Betsy Brey focus on the ludic potential of *Bioshock Infinite* and the possibility of gameplay outcomes. Although far from infinite they assert the importance of player choice and agency even in situations where that choice and agency may appear of minor importance; they write, "What is left to the players is how to get there. Players play for the variables." (p. 155). The final two essays are the truly standout entries in the collection: Nicholas Ware's analysis of *Street Fighter* pulls itself apart from the inside, staging narrative analysis and ludic analysis against one another. His conclusion, though perhaps somewhat predictable given the earlier trajectory of the essays so far, is that game studies must look beyond the play and story divide; not quite content to champion the same fusion of approaches as the other authors, however, Ware contends that we should instead be seeking "the next great dichotomy" (p. 168) in the future of game studies to spur further dialectics such as 'story vs. play' or the 'virtual vs. the real' that came before. Finally, Robert Mejia's entry, a rethinking of the magic circle, deserves special commendation for taking a staple of the game studies canon and reworking it into a contemporary, meaningful, materialist thought device. He writes, "This, then, is the reality of contemporary gaming: so that we might experience pleasure, somewhere, someone is suffering to produce the mediating substances required for the magic circle of gaming" (p. 183). Rather than focus on

games as objects of play or narrative along, Mejia looks to the wider implications of entertainment culture and its impacts across the earth.

Given the pains taken to challenge the idea of the ludo/narrative divide, to reframe it as something not really present, not really important and actually much more of a help than a hindrance, it is unfortunate that the collection's introduction and conclusion risk adding fuel to the fire. Kapell is forthcoming stating, "this volume comes down on the side that narrative is important – and that the occasional ludological attacks on narrative both miss the point and are driven overly much by a desire to prove the 'newness' of the field" (p. 5). Kapell is, at most times, objective and instrumental in diffusing what is often spoken of a schism dividing what could be a much more unified fields. Perhaps his tone in moments of blatant bias is meant in a form of fittingly playful jest. Nevertheless, for me – a self-confessed and unrepentant ludologist that does believe in the value of studying the undeniable 'newness' using new methods such as critical code studies and new theories such as post-human/new materialism – these playful jibes made the collection's bookending pieces a struggle. At the same time, it is worth mentioning the potentially self-congratulatory element of this whole ludological/narratological area of game studies. At points in the collection, without resorting to jargon, authors allude to certain historical moments within the debate without explanation; for example, in Riddle's essay he references the lack of apparent narrative of Tetris (p. 57). For the, lacking better words, 'initiated' this is a clear reference to the early study of the same game by Janet Murray, criticised in the often ludology-leaning Game Studies journal as missing the "actual game" for the "content" (Eskelinen, 2001). While there's a part of me that wants to smile along with the authors as seasoned games scholars, references of this sort may add to the somewhat problematic esotericism already surrounding game studies as a discipline. Readers sharing my own sympathies should perhaps be aware of this slight bias on the part of the editor, and not be put off by the introduction and conclusion, before embarking upon this otherwise excellent collection.

References

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