

# Understanding Meaningfulness in Videogames

by

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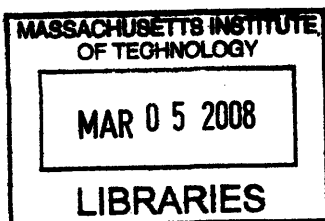
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Submitted to the Comparative Media Studies Program  
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## Abstract

This thesis explores “meaningfulness” in videogames. Academics, journalists, and others who write about games often discuss the concept of meaning yet seldom define it clearly. I am focusing on a variation of this topic: what it means for a gaming experience to be *meaningful*—literally: full of meaning. Meaningfulness, as I define it, refers to the quality a videogame has when one considers it socially, culturally, or personally important.

I attempt to answer the question: How do games become meaningful for players. I begin by stripping it down to the core ideas that interest me the most: narrative and emotion. Representing the debate over these terms helps illuminate the larger debate over meaningfulness. To accomplish this I examine different communities and their rhetoric. There are several major interpretive communities of games: academics, practitioners, journalists and consumers. The different ways these communities define narrative and emotion can be understood by examining their rhetoric. This reveals patterns that show the diversity of how meaningfulness is defined.

The different ways players construct meaningfulness through rhetoric can be mapped. Doing so illustrates patterns and trends in logic that may not be apparent on the surface, and reveals certain clusters of people who are united by shared rhetoric. This methodology provides a framework to understand the forces shaping opinions over what meaningfulness is and is not in videogames. Identifying this framework and exploring its usefulness is the major project of this thesis.

Thesis Supervisor: Henry Jenkins

Thesis Committee Members: Katie Salen, Doug Church, and Kurt Squire

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First of all I'd like to thank Henry Jenkins for giving me the opportunity to write about videogames at MIT in the first place. It's been an amazing two years in Comparative Media Studies, getting the chance to meet folks in the games industry, attend conferences, and just all around be immersed in a world where both game studies and game design are real, living cultures. Henry's been a major stabilizing force on this thesis, ruthlessly helping me trim down over inflated ideas into clear and focused arguments. Without him I am confident this thesis would be a mess.

I owe much gratitude to the rest of my thesis committee, most of whom were not regular MIT faculty and took the time out of their schedules to help me shape my ideas into the document you are reading. Many thanks to Katie Salen who was first to read though many of my drafts and whose sober feedback was instrumental in shaping my argument. My thanks to Doug Church who was gracious enough to met with me at E3 and over many e-mails in an effort to make my argument as industry-friendly as possible. And my thanks to Kurt Squire who supported my goals and encouraged me to not be afraid to state my opinions. The impact of these people on both the style and content of this thesis cannot be underestimated.

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# Introduction

What does it mean to say playing a videogame is meaningful? When a player cries during the final cut-scene of the latest *Final Fantasy*, is that what we mean by a meaningful gaming experience? What about when a group of friends get together to play *Counter-Strike* online, when having fun together creates a valued social event? And what about the players who enjoy *The Sims* so much they make photo albums of the virtual lives they create? Are all these people having meaningful experiences? If so, are they having different kinds? What separates different notions of meaningfulness in videogames? How can we understand what meaningfulness is better? And what benefits does understanding meaningfulness grant us as we try to comprehend what is fast becoming the 21<sup>st</sup> century's entertainment medium of choice?

Videogames are a young phenomenon, still experiencing the growing pains of developing their own aesthetics and critical discourse. Roughly three decades of commercial videogames have come and gone, but in that time both the industry and culture of gaming have mutated into a global force. Some argue that it will be to this century what cinema was to the last: the definitive medium of cultural output. Media scholar Henry Jenkins argues that:

Games represent a new lively art, one as appropriate for the digital age as those earlier media were for the machine age. They open up new aesthetic

experiences and transform the computer screen into a realm of experimentation and innovation that is broadly accessible.<sup>1</sup>

Others aren't so sure. In one of his final articles for *Newsweek* art critic Jack Kroll bizarrely stated:

Games can be fun and rewarding in many ways, but they can't transmit the emotional complexity that is the root of art. Even the most advanced games lack the shimmering web of nuances that makes human life different from mechanical process.<sup>2</sup>

Others may claim that videogames are not art but occupy an important cultural space all the same. Some say the question of art is even irrelevant. Whatever the discourse, it's clear that videogames represent a major center of cultural controversy.

## **What is Meaningfulness?**

My goal can be stated simply: to explore the forces that shape how people understand meaningfulness in videogames. I'm not here to tell the reader what meaningful is or is not, but rather illuminate the process by which people decide, either consciously or

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<sup>1</sup> Jenkins, <http://web.mit.edu/21fms/www/faculty/henry3/GamesNewLively.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Kroll 2000. By Kroll's logic there could be no such thing as a legitimate art form that involved technology, which would rule out everything from painting to music to cinema. This claim is so shockingly absurd that some people are turned off by the very idea of taking Kroll seriously. The reason I mention Kroll, and the reason I return to him later in my chapter on Emotion, is because, absurd or not, his comments did have an impact on the gaming community.

unconsciously, what meaningfulness is to them and how it relates to their conception of the videogame medium.

Meaningfulness is experienced when people encounter things that they find compelling, interesting, or in any other way valuable. In emerging media, the formal conventions by which experience comes about is not fully formed and therefore more ambiguous than in established media. The videogame world faces regular disputes over what separates games from other media, what unique experiences games affords, and what language should be used to describe these experiences. At a recent international conference on videogame research<sup>3</sup>, game theorist Jesper Juul gave a keynote with the subtitle “Looking for a Heart of Gameness.” Scholars consider gameness, let alone “videogameness,” an elusive concept. A multitude of voices currently try to describe videogameness, what it means, and why it’s important. What are the different ways people talk about their experiences of playing a game? What words do they choose? What words do they avoid? What do these questions have to tell us, if anything, about what meaningfulness is to the people playing, talking about, writing about, and making videogames today?

## **Communities & Rhetoric**

I’ve chosen to filter my discussion of meaningfulness through two concepts: narrative and emotion. Players often discuss narrative and emotion in terms of their ability (or inability) to generate meaningful gaming experiences. Players often speak of games

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<sup>3</sup> Level Up Conference 2003, University of Utrecht, The Netherlands. <http://www.gamesconference.org/>.

having stories or creating feelings that are memorable and important. Journalists recognize games like *Metal Gear Solid*, *Half-Life*, and *Final Fantasy* as having complex, emotional stories. Scholars explain how games like *Ico* or *The Sims* create dynamic characters and event chains that are moving and different each time. Players laud games like *Madden* or *Fifa* for recreating the immediate thrill of athletic competition but also for simulating the drama of a professional sports season. When a game becomes a special and valued experience for a player, it is often because narrative and emotion have intersected in ways that various communities recognize and find appealing.<sup>4</sup>

Discussions of meaningfulness, narrative, and emotion take place within videogame discourse. As a player, I have a basic familiarity with the gaming culture and how players negotiate narrative and emotion. Yet a systematic breakdown of the discourse helps organize information and provide additional clarity. This is why I identify four communities of players: academia, industry, journalism, and gamers. Debates over what make videogames meaningful happen in and between these major social arenas.

I analyze videogame discourse by identifying ambiguities in language. Often academics, industry, journalists, and gamers use terms without explaining their exact meaning. Ambiguous language can result in confusion, misunderstanding, and conflict between different individuals and communities. However, by paying close attention to what

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, this isn't true for all players. I do not consider narrative and emotion to be essential or comprehensive concepts that indicate meaningfulness. It's possible to discuss meaningfulness in terms of pure rule-systems, rhythm, ritual, or social behaviors. I am not devaluing such viewpoints or suggesting that the ones I've chosen are more important. I have chosen narrative and emotion as my focus since they are both popular topics in gaming discourse and of personal interest to me.



people say about narrative and emotion, one can begin to paint a picture of different polarized rhetorical camps, each expressing opposing ideas of what narrative and emotion are. The two poles of narrative are what I choose to call narration and simulation. Narration refers to the stance that narrative is a product of static, unchanging events like those in *Myst*. Simulation refers to the idea that narrative can also include dynamic, story-making machines like *The Sims*. Emotion also has two poles: simplicity and complexity. Simplicity rhetoric defines emotion in terms of basic sensations found in twitch games like *Doom*—fear, anxiety, etc. Complexity rhetoric defines emotion as sophisticated and nuanced like those feelings evoked by *Final Fantasy*—happiness, sadness, etc.

I use the rhetorical polemics of narrative and emotion to understand how players subjectively define meaningfulness. Most players land somewhere between the two sets of poles outlined above. When one player uses the term “narrative” they might implicitly mean it in a sense that’s closer to simulation than narration, or vice versa. By teasing out these underlying viewpoints one can begin to understand how a player’s personal orientation towards both narrative and emotion influences their opinion of what is meaningful.

## **Providing a Framework**

The different rhetorical stances on what narrative and emotion are provide a framework to understand the less obvious forces that are shaping meaningfulness in games. I

designed this framework to identify broader cultural factors that might be contributing to how players define meaningfulness. For example, different people might have different assumptions about the social construction of technology that affects how they judge what a meaningful “game” is. Identifying less obvious trends that go beyond marketing demographics lends an important perspective to videogame discourse. Seeing hidden patterns of thought allows us to focus on the real forces shaping videogame discourse and videogame culture. Being able to see the overall shape of videogame culture, its evolutionary trajectory dictated by the thought-trends that shape the popular imagination, better equips academics, journalists, gamers, and industry professionals to recognize and preserve its diversity.

# Methodology

I imagine two types of people reading this thesis: academics and people within the games industry. Historically, it's difficult to appeal to one audience without alienating the other. Academics expect a certain level of rigorous argumentative logic that's connected to wider bodies of scholarly research. This can turn off industry professionals who can become annoyed by theory that is too abstract or absorbed in debates that only academics know or care about, claiming, with some sense, that people with little or no experience in their creative field have no business writing about games.

My goal here is to outline my methodology, but in a way that will alienate neither industry nor academia. I want my ideas to be applicable in both the academic world of game studies and the commercial world of game design. I am providing a framework that will aid in understanding meaningfulness, and this framework should make sense regardless of the reader's background.

## **Dealing with Subjectivity**

In this thesis I am trying to understand subjectivity. I am not trying to make objective statements about what meaningfulness is, how it functions, or what it should and shouldn't be. I'm looking at how different people define meaningfulness for themselves, how people's definitions affect each other, where definitions overlap, where they contradict, etc. A firm grasp of how subjectivity informs the debates that shape gaming

discourse leads to a fuller, more nuanced picture of what meaningfulness is and how players experience it.

One writer who's done work on subjectivity is Stanley Fish. He's a literary scholar influential for his theories on interpretation and criticism of objectivity. He studied how people bring their own viewpoints—often unconsciously—to what they read thereby becoming authors of meaning. Fish's writing can be dense and abstract because he's addressing a community of literary scholars who have been debating textual meaning for years. I will avoid explaining his arguments in detail, but rather take his idea of “interpretive communities” and apply it to videogames.

The phrase “interpretive communities” explains itself: communities of people who interpret information in their own unique way. Different groups of people have different subjective positions and tend to form their opinions according to a common framework. Fish supports the idea that meaning is socially constructed, that context affects (if not dictates) understanding. For him this was a way to resolve the confusion surrounding contradictory readings of literature:

Why should two or more reader ever agree, and why should regular, that is, habitual, differences in the career of a single reader ever occur? What is the explanation on the one hand of the stability of interpretation (at least among certain groups at certain times) and on the stability and variety of texts? The answer to all these questions is to be found [in] the notion of

*interpretive communities*. Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around.<sup>5</sup>

The cornerstone of Fish's theory of subjectivity and how it functions in human communication is interpretive relativism. Interpretive strategies are sets of assumptions held by certain people when encountering new information, which can vary from person-to-person and from group-to-group. We can see this mostly clearly in religion, ethnicity, race, or politics where, for example, people belonging to different political parties can have wildly different interpretations of the same facts, yet within their separate perspectives are simply "seeing things as they are." Basing one's interpretive criteria on an unquestioned set of assumptions is common to any discursive landscape where differing opinions conflict, whether they be subtle matters, such as what qualities make a movie entertaining, or whether they be more complex, such what right and wrong is.

Concepts like subjectivity and interpretation should not come as revelations to the reader, yet a better understanding of these two concepts can elate some of the confusion surrounding videogames discourse. When journalists state with impunity:

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<sup>5</sup> Fish, 171.

[Videogame] technology has not yet been used to provoke ... meaningful emotions, such as sadness.<sup>6</sup>

and players simultaneously claim:

No matter how many times I have played [*Final Fantasy VII*], the sad parts are still sad and they still make me cry every time[.]<sup>7</sup>

there is an interpretive gap. If the BBC article is right, how is it that a player cried during *Final Fantasy VII*?<sup>8</sup> If a player cried, how can someone claim that games have never provoked sadness? Is one of these people right and the other wrong? This is a quandary similar to what Fish describes. He is speaking about the literary world, but Fish's ideas about subjectivity and relative meaning can be applied to any field, including videogames. Fish provides a starting point, a useful model to begin unraveling how and why such contradictions can take place, which ultimately provides a roadmap for understanding meaningfulness.

## **The Interpretive Communities of Videogames**

It is difficult to state with certainty that an interpretive community exists. Nor is it easy to claim that one community is separate from another, or even that specific individuals

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<sup>6</sup> BBC News, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/new\\_media/1652529.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/new_media/1652529.stm).

<sup>7</sup> Yaegashi, <http://forum.anipike.com/showthread.php?t=9073>.

<sup>8</sup> Many disregard *Final Fantasy VII*'s emotional content as it is mostly contained in non-interactive cut-scenes. I include examples like *Final Fantasy* because, to some, it is no less a game than *Pong*. "Gameness" is socially constructed, so debate over its legitimacy is part of the discourse I'll be looking at.

belong to a given community. Like anything, the network of associations that make up an interpretive community are themselves subject to interpretation. I don't claim the ability to prove what every interpretive community of videogames might be, yet communities don't need to be defined empirically in order to be useful:

The only "proof" of membership [to an interpretive community] is fellowship, the nod of recognition from someone in the same community, someone who says to you what neither of us could prove to a third party: "we know."<sup>9</sup>

Interpretive communities define each other, existing based on whether they are recognized by their neighboring communities. As one who enjoys the "nod of recognition" with many people I myself can attest to the existence of a few core videogame communities, communities that recognize each other, exchange information regularly, and will no doubt be familiar to anyone who is immersed in videogame discourse: academics, journalists, industry, and gamers.

### **Academics**

Academics refer to people writing about videogames who are employed by, enrolled in, or otherwise affiliated with institutions of learning. Another term for this could also be game scholar or ludologist.<sup>10</sup> Because the only context here is the world of videogames,

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<sup>9</sup> Fish, 173.

<sup>10</sup> Ludologist is an ambiguous term. In a general sense it can mean simply a scholar who studies games. However, in the colloquial world of academic game studies it has other connotations, most notably its association with the so-called Scandinavian approach to videogame theory which, some say fairly some say

“academia” or “academics” can be understood as short hand for scholars writing about games. Game scholarship comes in a variety of forms, ranging in methodology and focus across several disciplines, from the social sciences, to computer science, to cultural, media, and feminist studies. Examples of this discourse are found in lectures like those given at the 2003 Level Up Game Conference, papers or books such as Janet Murray’s Hamlet on the Holodeck, or on websites that maintain an academic focus such as GameStudies.org. The general body of scholars writing, lecturing, and researching videogames make up the interpretive community of academics.

### **Journalists**

The term journalist as I use it here should not be confused with just anyone who is employed in news or print media. Journalists as I refer to them are people who write videogame reviews, articles, editorials, and other opinion and news pieces about games that are consumed by the gaming and general public. Journalists can be people employed by mega websites such as Gamespot.com, print magazines like Wired, independent publications like Gamecritic.com, or even non-videogame publications such as Newsweek that happen to publish articles about games. On occasion I will refer to book authors such as J.C. Herz and Steven Poole as journalists since they come from journalistic backgrounds. People who write for publications, both on and offline, that identify themselves as a videogame information sources and follow a journalistic format make up the interpretive community of journalists.

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unfairly, has become associated with anti-narrativist thinking. For this reason I will not use this term to broadly refer to game studies, however the controversies over narrative that it’s associated with will be discussed in the chapter on Narrative.



## Industry

Industry could refer to a huge range of people involved in professional game production including producers, lead designers, level designers, AI programmers, system and mechanics designers, story and dialogue writers, 2D artists, 3D artists, sound designers, QA testers—the list goes on and on. However, as with academics and journalists I am not using the term industry so widely. For me industry people are those who are thought to have the power to shape the overall creative direction of a game. Producers, lead designers, level designers—in general these are the people whom I mean when I speak of the games industry as an interpretive community.<sup>11</sup> Often these job titles are simplified to “designer” as shorthand for people who are known to have a high degree of creative influence over the projects there are associated with (even though they may not technically be designers of levels, mechanics, etc.) Designers can be industry vets like Richard Garriott who gained a reputation back when computer technology was simple enough that one person could do all the jobs of programming, visual design, sound design, story/character design, etc. or they can be visionaries like Will Wright who is famous for bringing his personal design ideologies to the projects he oversees. People who occupy relatively high spheres of creative influence (either in relation to a single design team or the industry at large) and who express their philosophies of game design in venues like Game Developers Conference, Gamasutra.com, or books like Chris Crawford On Game Design make up the interpretive community of the videogame industry.

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<sup>11</sup> It's true that one cannot automatically assume these specific three jobs represent the greatest creative power in any development project. Naturally, this varies from project to project. However, for the purposes of this discussion I feel I need to make a general assumption about what the most powerful creative positions are often *assumed* to be. I believe this is a fair assumption that's supported by the public and industry perception of which development jobs have the farthest reaching creative influence.

## **Gamers**

Gamers, in the broadest sense, are anyone who plays games. All academics, journalists, and industry people could be considered gamers yet apart from these groups gamers represent a culture of their own. I consider gamers to be the non-professional, non-academic gaming public who buy and play games. Gamers can range from hardcore players of first-person shooters to more casual players of internet puzzle games. They can be a six-year-old who owns a Gameboy or an 80-year-old who loves Windows *Solitaire*. Whomever they may be, gamers are people who enjoy playing games, spend a considerable amount of time with them, and in some cases identify gaming as part of their lifestyle. Gamers express their opinions on games and game design on fan messageboards like those at Gamespot.com, weblogs like Ludonauts.org, enthusiast sites such as Penny-Arcade.com, and countless other venues across cyberspace. They represent the largest community and could be endlessly sub-classified along all sorts of criteria, most notably ranging from genre preference, age, and gender. Doing so is not the project of this thesis, however it is this diversity that separates them from the academics, journalists, and industry as the fourth interpretive community of videogames.

I chose academics, journalists, industry, and gamers as the main interpretive communities of videogames because, as someone immersed in the discourse they form—first as a gamer and more recently as an academic—they seem to represent the most broad, visible, and obvious groups of people one could identify. Their sheer size and complexity would be problematic if I were trying to make accurate conclusions about what each group thinks as a whole. However, I am not attempting anything like this. I define my core

interpretive communities broadly because one needs a place to *begin* analyzing conflicts over meaningfulness. Obviously, things are more complicated than academics, journalists, industry professionals, and gamers all simply representing a single, stable set of interpretive strategies that dictate how they each define meaningfulness.

Interpretive communities grow larger and decline, and individuals move from one to another; thus, while the alignments are not permanent, they are always there, providing just enough stability for the interpretive battles to go on.<sup>12</sup>

Interpretive communities are not static. In videogames people inhabit multiple communities at a time and often display different interpretive strategies within their own interpretive communities. Michael Mateas, co-designer of *Façade* which competed in the 2004 Independent Games Festival, might be considered a scholar, a programmer, and a designer. Academics like Markku Eskelinen and Henry Jenkins can be divided on the topic of narrative in games, as can industry people like Greg Costikyan and Chris Crawford. Gamers tend to disagree on almost every topic imaginable, whether they be what virtues PC games possess vs. console games, what level of graphical detail makes characters seem “real,” etc. In this sense my use of “interpretive” to refer to academic, journalist, industry and gamer communities is a slight misnomer. They may *not*, in the end, be what Fish would consider separate interpretive communities, unified by unique interpretations of what meaningfulness is. However, because of the regrettable lack of

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<sup>12</sup> Fish, 172.

groundwork on mapping out interpretive communities in games, it seems fair to begin from the most obvious categories and work inward. That is the project of this thesis, and specifically my reason for using Stanley Fish. Viewing academics, journalists, industry, and gamers as interpretive communities at least gives us a place to start. From there we can begin to build a context to understand how the various interpretive strategies at work crisscross these four groups.

### **Dealing with Ambiguity**

Once we have a general framework for understanding the subjective nature of gaming discourse, we need some tools to go in and examine that subjectivity in finer detail. For this I use another theorist, Brian Sutton-Smith. Although Sutton-Smith's studies on play and learning are, coincidentally, relevant to videogames, I'm more interested in how he articulates subjective difference when looking at how different groups interpret the same phenomenon. Sutton-Smith studied how different academic fields interpreted 'play,' a term made ambiguous by multiple, conflicting definitions. He argued that scholars from sociology, math, anthropology, literature, etc. all tend to interpret the activity and meaning of play relative to their field of expertise. This sounds a lot like Fish's idea of interpretive strategies. In Sutton-Smith's case, each strategy is aligned with an academic discipline, and thus could be thought of as different interpretive communities. What Sutton-Smith uses to navigate this ambiguity—and what I am interested in applying to games—is his use of rhetoric. He uses the term to describe how each field uses different logic to support its position.

It needs to be stressed that what is to be talked about here as rhetoric [...] is not so much the substance of play or of its science or of its theories, but rather the way in which the underlying ideological values attributed persuasively to the rest of us. As the term is used here, the rhetorics of play express the way play is placed in contest within broader value systems, which are assumed by the theorists of play rather than studied directly by them.<sup>13</sup>

As with Fish, assumptions are at the core of Sutton-Smith's understanding of how interpretation works. Assumption, however, is a more vague term than rhetoric. Rhetoric implies an argumentative line of reasoning which is *based* on assumptions. Rhetoric also suggests what Sutton-Smith calls broader value systems, more complicated networks of assumptions that extend beyond the immediate subject matter. It's easy to see how this fits in with the idea of interpretive communities. By understanding interpretive strategies as rhetorics that are connected to broader world views, one can explain why certain opinions are in conflict and make the first steps at mapping how they fit together.

Meaningfulness is ambiguous within videogame discourse, and academics, journalists, industry, and gamers exhibit a multitude of rhetorics in their attempt to justify a point of view. I will identify and examine some of these rhetorics and draw conclusions about

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<sup>13</sup> Sutton-Smith, 8.

what meaningfulness can be for a variety of people. I will look at some of the debates that are associated with meaningfulness such as narrative and emotion, examine the rhetorics that are involved, and identify the patterns that emerge. Finally, I will map out the landscape these different interpretive strategies reveal, illuminating variety of ways meaningfulness is understood, which can provide a richer template of possibility both for writing about and designing more meaningful games.

# Meaningfulness

Meaningfulness is not a term often used by people who discuss videogames. I chose it because it is the only term that includes all the ideas I want to focus on. I think it is an accurate subject-heading for several debates going on in videogame discourse right now: debates over whether or not games can be artistic, whether they can move people, whether they can tell compelling stories, affect human behavior, shape perception, etc. These debates seem to have a basic similarity, one that is difficult to articulate, but this is precisely why I am writing. This thesis is an exploration of how it might be articulated; calling it “meaningfulness” is a nice place to start.

## **An Inclusive Definition**

For accuracy’s sake, and to avoid alienating people who might define meaningfulness in their own way, my use of meaningfulness is widely inclusive. I will be focusing on debates centered around storytelling and emotion, yet these are not the *only* debates that could be considered debates over meaningfulness. When journalists address meaningfulness they often phrase their questions in terms of art, expression, or any other concept that suggest an ability to touch people on a profound level. An article from MSNBC states:

A game that can evoke complex emotions ... is the holy grail for some in the industry. Not only would it open gaming to a true mass audience, but it would confirm their vision of interactive entertainment as the greatest story-telling medium since the invention of film.<sup>14</sup>

One kind of meaningfulness is often associated with literature and film: the power of storytelling to create a moving experience. I am looking for a bigger definition, one that should encompass *any* notion of social or personal value. A player who is moved while playing *ICO* can certainly be said to have had a meaningful experience. A player who has had his or her political ideology challenged and expanded by *Deus Ex* might be the same. However, the term could also be applied to the meaningful sense of community *Counter-Strike* players feel online, or the feeling of intellectual triumph at solving a difficult round of *Tetris*. Inclusiveness is important because it avoids (at least automatically) reducing meaningfulness debates to questions of art and storytelling, as some of the more zealous academics, industry people, and journalists have done. In her influential book about narrative and videogames, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, scholar Janet Murray muses:

Will the stories brought to us by the new representational technologies “mean anything” in the same way that Shakespeare’s plays mean something[?]<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Tom Loftus, <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/4038606/>.

<sup>15</sup> Murray, 273.



Questions of art, expression, storytelling, and emotion are an important part of meaningfulness, but viewing meaningfulness definitively in these terms risks alienating those who would rather not view games as such. Game scholars Markku Eskelinen and Espen Aarseth would rather view games as formal rule systems, not stories. Gamer designers like John Carmack<sup>16</sup> would prefer that entertainment, not art, be the fundamental goal of game design. These are the types of people who might prefer a more flexible definition of meaningfulness, and I feel it is important to acknowledge such flexibility. This is so that my focus, which is only on a *specific* series of debates that fall under the term meaningfulness, does not seem reductionist. If one wanted to write a thesis on the meaningfulness of social play or formal rules that does *not* include concepts like storytelling and emotion that would be a perfectly valid enterprise. But this is not what I'm doing. I am choosing to examine how videogames become meaningful by the intersection of storytelling and affective human experience, not because I feel this is the *best* or *only* way to look at the medium, but because it is a lively area of debate which has much to reveal about how people define meaningfulness for themselves.

## **Key Debates**

My interest in meaningfulness shares a similarity to Murray's. I too want to know how videogames can "mean something" to people in the same way a great book, film, or play might mean something. However, I don't discount the idea that videogames might

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<sup>16</sup> In a talk at the 2004 Game Developer's Conference entitled "A Candid Look at the Issues and Rewards of Bleeding Edge Engine Development" Carmack stated: "I don't look at what I do as art. I am making a product for people. My job is to give them something entertaining. ... I don't think looking at it as art is a particularly positive direction to go..."

already mean something to people in this way. I don't believe in using Shakespeare, Hemmingway, Welles, or Hitchcock as a litmus test to judge whether or not games have reached a bar of aesthetic maturity. That bar is different for every interpretive community, and understanding where each aesthetic bar is and how it arrived there can be a dense, nuanced process. To simplify things, I've chosen two debates that I feel illustrate how these standards are reached.

Narrative and emotion are an interesting way to discuss meaningfulness because they are prominent concepts that are almost *always* intertwined. Debates over what narrative and emotion are, whether they share a causal relationship, or whether they are even compatible with videogames permeate the culture and inhabit every interpretive community. Some harbor a fascination with what they see as their potential to transform the medium.

Narrative construction in game development is in its infancy, yet already we have seen extraordinarily powerful narratives, capable of evoking a panoply of strong emotions, from fear to laughter. Imagine what developers will be capable of as the process evolves further.<sup>17</sup>

Others criticize the strategies games have used to achieve emotional impact, claiming that certain ways of storytelling are a problem and not a solution.

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<sup>17</sup> Matt Sakey, [http://www.igda.org/columns/clash/clash\\_Nov03.php](http://www.igda.org/columns/clash/clash_Nov03.php).

[E]motional response stem from the fact that the narratives in [games made by Squaresoft] ... are entirely linear. The characters do what they're going to do regardless of the player intervention. ... [T]he fact that they elicit emotional responses other than fear is a result of their traditional narrative structure rather than from any inherent "gameness."<sup>18</sup>

Some people don't even see a problem, citing the emotional experiences they've had as personal proof that games are meaningful enough right now.

I agree that the sophistication of storytelling, and emotion-inducing elements in games has plenty of room to grow, but I think they've always been there. [Out of this World] was released almost a decade and a half ago, yet I recall feeling confusion, despair, and most important a strong sense of empathy toward my game character and his "mute" guide.<sup>19</sup>

Why do some people claim that compelling stories with meaningful emotions already exist in games, while others treat such a phenomenon as if it were years away from being a reality? Why do some people claim that the existing marriage of narrative and emotion, if it is successful, is not desirable? What are the different ways these people are understanding narrative and emotion as concepts? What are the interpretive strategies they are using, and how do these relate to the communities I've identified? Can it be as simple as all journalists use one strategy, all gamers use another, etc.? This certainly isn't

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<sup>18</sup> Katie Salen and Amy Scholder quoting Warren Spector, p. 91.

<sup>19</sup> Top Hat, <http://www.gamecritics.com/forums/showthread.php?t=6757>.

true in the case of academics, who are sharply divided on the issue of narrative in games. Why on one hand do scholars like Eskelinen flatly proclaim narrative is linear, yet ones like Eric Zimmerman argue that it's not? And it's not as if the other communities are any more cohesive. Why do game designers like Hal Barwood claim that videogames should not try to generate the same emotions as other media, when industry vets like Chris Crawford have devoted years of their life to proving they can? Why can't journalists like those at MSNBC and Newsweek seem to agree on whether emotion is something primal or something sophisticated? Why do players all over the internet have thousands of different opinions about which games moved them, which didn't, which have great stories, and which don't?

## **Navigating the Landscape**

My purpose is to look at debates over narrative and emotion and illustrate how they inform an understanding of meaningfulness. What reasoning is commonly involved? What sorts of rhetorics of narrative and emotion can be identified? Who holds a rhetoric? Who rejects a rhetoric, and why? By examining these issues, what patterns become evident? What sort of landscape of videogame discourse will these rhetorical patterns portray? And how can knowledge of this subjective rhetorical landscape be applied to help preserve and expand meaningfulness in games? These are the questions I'll be answering in the following chapters.

# Narrative

Narrative is the first major concept I'm looking at in effort to understand meaningfulness. As one of the most debated concepts in videogames, it offers a potent way to examine how different interpretive communities justify their opinions. My use of narrative is short-hand for any story-related concept. Some individuals use the term narrative exclusively while others are more vague, referring instead to stories or storytelling. However one defines narrative, it often shows up in conversations where the stakes are determining the social or artistic value of videogames.

## **Narration & Simulation**

Videogame discourse offers us two stances on what successful narrative is: event-oriented or dynamic. When academics, journalists, industry, and gamers argue that narrative is either one of these they are invoking what I call narration rhetoric or simulation rhetoric.

Narration is a way to describe viewpoints that see narrative as static or fixed. The term narration comes from writer/theorist of new media Markku Eskelinen. He defines narrative in very specific terms, stating:

There must be two things or components that constitute a narrative: a temporal sequence of events (a plot, if you want to water down the concept) and a narrative situation (with both narrators and narratees.)<sup>20</sup>

Eskelinen emphasizes the “narrative situation”—the act of narrating a story or the experience of being narrated to—in his discussion of games, claiming “we can’t find narrative situations within games.”<sup>21</sup> Eskelinen uses this definition to *discredit* the idea of narrative in videogames thus illustrating the traditional viewpoint that narrative is a “thing” (i.e. a story) which has been recounted and exists as a set sequence of events. Though all may not define narrative as narration, it remains a useful word to understand the rhetoric that sees narrative as linear and fixed.

Simulation functions as a summary of the different viewpoints that see narrative as emergent and non-linear.<sup>22</sup> Connotations of emergence are can be found in the work of game designers/academics Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, who state:

A simulation is a procedural representation of aspects of “reality.”<sup>23</sup>

Simulation sums up the idea that games can be procedural story-making tools, realms of narrative possibility, and spaces for co-authored storytelling. Salen and Zimmerman’s

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<sup>20</sup> Eskelinen, 37.

<sup>21</sup> Eskelinen, 37.

<sup>22</sup> In common usage simulation often indicates genres like god, war, or flight sims though it sometimes serves as a catch-all for the basic fundamentals of interactive world design. The latter meaning is closer to my use of the word.

<sup>23</sup> Salen and Zimmerman, 439.

emphasis of “procedural representation” suggests a narrative dimension to the rule sets that represent the logics of a system. Rule-systems can represent ‘realities’<sup>24</sup> that result in stories or story-like experiences. Salen and Zimmerman’s definition of simulation coincides heavily with game designer Mark LeBlanc’s definitions of narrative: “stories [can] emerge from the dynamics of the system.”<sup>25</sup> Seeing rule-systems as spaces where stories can emerge through play makes simulation a useful word to understand the rhetoric that sees narrative as dynamic and non-linear.

Narration and simulation rhetoric often define debates over narrative. People tend to use one line of reasoning or the other to assert their belief of what narrative is. Much of the discourse in and between interpretive communities involves debate over language that I will untangle as I go along. Zimmerman states that people involved in discussions of games have “different agendas and projects and different uses for the same vocabulary.”<sup>26</sup> What follows is an attempt to identify these agenda and projects by taking examples from several interpretive communities and seeing if they favor narration or simulation rhetoric. The goal is to recognize patterns in rhetorical alignment and that will clarify why there is such disagreement over narrative and why certain people feel it is an important part of meaningful game design.

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<sup>24</sup> Reality is a sticky concept. Often reality is based on some notion of realism: the world as experienced through human perception. However, it can mean abstract or imaginary ‘realities’ as well. This is why, as Salen and Zimmerman state, *Sim City*, *Dungeons & Dragons*, and even *Tetris* can be simulations of several kinds of ‘reality,’ ranging from economic, to fantastic, to mathematical.

<sup>25</sup> Katie Salen and Amy Scholder quoting Mark LeBlanc, p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> Katie Salen and Amy Scholder quoting Eric Zimmerman, p. 175.

## What is Narrative?

How people define narrative is one of the key ambiguities in videogame discourse. We've already seen two viewpoints that illustrate the dialectic between linear and non-linear narrative clearly, yet gaming discourse is filled with others. We can start with a more in-depth look at Eskelinen and Salen/Zimmerman's arguments and find out what interpretive strategies they use. Not surprisingly, both Salen/Zimmerman and Eskelinen cite different theorists in explaining their reasoning.

Eskelinen's bases his definition on narrative theorists Gerald Prince and Gerard Genette, from whom he derives what he calls a "minimalist" definition of narrative. Limiting narrative to the basic elements of events and narration is necessary, he argues, in order to isolate the essence of both narrative and games:

Most naïve comparisons between narratives and games usually result from too narrow, broad or feeble definitions of the former: usually it comes down to discovering "plots" and "characters" in both modes – games and narratives. However, we should know that's not good enough...<sup>27</sup>

One wonders who these comparisons are too narrow or too broad for. Readers of Prince and Genette, perhaps? What about people who feel that narration is not a fundamental component of narrative? Eskelinen generalizes that the grouping of narrative and games

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<sup>27</sup> Eskelinen, 37.



springs from commonalities that are arbitrary; however, they are only arbitrary if narration is a defining element of narrative. Salen and Zimmerman, who get their definition from literary theorist J. Hillis Miller, perceive different core elements of narrative: situation, character, and form. Situation, which Salen and Zimmerman liken to temporal events, is the only element that has an equivalent in Prince/Genette. Otherwise, they are unique. Nowhere is there a mention of narrators or narratees. Rather, character and form are abstract enough to be defined flexibly. Salen and Zimmerman explain their choice of Miller for this reason:

The cleverness of Miller's definition lies in the fact that it is so inclusive, while still rigorously defining exactly what a narrative is. Miller's model helps us understand exactly which components of a game come into focus when we consider them from a narrative perspective.<sup>28</sup>

Salen and Zimmerman chose Miller *because* he offered a broad viewpoint of narrative. It's an *inclusive* model that easily accepts simulation, so inclusive in fact that Salen and Zimmerman claim "all games are narrative by this definition."<sup>29</sup>

Why did Eskelinen choose Prince and Genette and why did Salen and Zimmerman choose Miller? Why is one choice an exclusive and the other an inclusive definition of narrative? Stanley Fish might suggest that these aren't decisions at all, but embedded assumptions shared by the interpretive communities of each. Yet if this were true other

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<sup>28</sup> Salen and Zimmerman, 397.

<sup>29</sup> Salen and Zimmerman, 397.

academics would agree with Eskelinen, and industry people should have a different viewpoint altogether. The interpretive strategies based on narration and simulation rhetoric break down more organically, often criss-crossing communities like academia and industry. Game designer/theorist Greg Costikyan, for example, echoes Eskelinen when he states:

A story is linear. The events of a story occur in the same order, and in the same way, each time you read (or watch or listen to) it. A story is a controlled experience; the author consciously crafts it, choosing precisely these events, in this order, to create a story with maximum impact.<sup>30</sup>

Costikyan doesn't use the term narrative but story, yet the logic of his argument is identical to Eskelinen's.<sup>31</sup> Costikyan is echoing narration rhetoric with a different word choice showing that people can express the same rhetoric using different language, as Zimmerman does when he claims:

[Story] for me is about a series of events that constitute the plot of a narrative (but not the whole narrative experience itself.)<sup>32</sup>

For Zimmerman story and narrative are not interchangeable. Zimmerman's use of story implies the fixity and linearity of narration, whereas narrative is more expansive. It is common for people to identify with both rhetorics but reserve different language for each.

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<sup>30</sup> Costikyan, <http://www.costik.com/gamnstry.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere in "Towards Computer Game Studeis" Eskelinen uses narrative interchangeable with story.

<sup>32</sup> Katie Salen and Amy Scholder quoting Eric Zimmerman, p. 150.

Zimmerman seems to be saving the word narrative for the inclusive connotations of Miller while offering up story as concession to narration rhetoric. Game designer/producer Warren Spector, on the other hand, treats story and narrative synonymously, and, like Costikyan, he defines them in terms of narration.

Story [and narrative], to my mind, implies authorial control, linearity, moment-to-moment richness, a clear direction of message flow...<sup>33</sup>

However, Spector doesn't claim rule-based dynamics are opposed to *storytelling*:

Simulacra<sup>34</sup> implies shared authorial responsibility [...], the ability to democratize the storytelling process and put author and player on equal footing.<sup>35</sup>

For Spector story and narrative are linear but storytelling is not, a viewpoint is reflected by game designer/theorist Chris Crawford when he says:

“[S]tories are linear—but we’re talking about interactive storytelling, and that gerund implies a whole lot more than just plain old stories, Storytelling is a process, whereas story is data,”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Katie Salen and Amy Scholder quoting Greg Costikyan, p. 146.

<sup>34</sup> A variation of the term simulation.

<sup>35</sup> Katie Salen and Amy Scholder quoting Warren Spector, p. 147.

<sup>36</sup> Katie Salen and Amy Scholder quoting Chris Crawford, p. 164.

It seems that what Crawford and Spector call storytelling Zimmerman calls narrative; but what Zimmerman calls story Eskelinen calls narrative. Shifting of terminology can be confusing, but it also makes clear just how similar the underlying ideas about narrative can be: underneath everyone is repeating the same rhetorics. The logic of Zimmerman, Spector, and Crawford's arguments suggests simulation even though their terminology differs. The logic of Costikyan and Eskelinen is that of narration though they don't use the same words. People who exhibit the same rhetorical logic can be grouped together to form different territorial configurations. In the case of narrative there appear to be two sides: narration and simulation. The people who share the same rhetorics of narrative could be called *interpretive clusters*: groups that lack the cohesive identity of fully formed communities such as academics, journalists, industry people, or gamers yet are united by a set of interpretive strategies.

## **Inclusive Viewpoints**

Narration and simulation represent the poles of narrative debate. Some take an essentialist stance towards narrative, claiming it can *only* be narration or *only* be simulation. However, there are those who have no problem accepting narration and simulation the same time. Mark LeBlanc sums this up in his dual view of videogame narrative:

Embedded narrative (a story written by the game developers and 'embedded' within the game)

And:

Emergent narrative (stories that emerge from the dynamics of the system)<sup>37</sup>

Emergent narrative is easily understood as simulation rhetoric. Embedded isn't as self-explanatory, but the fact that LeBlanc considers it interchangeable with "authored" narrative<sup>38</sup> positions it in the logic of narration. Embedded and emergent narrative shows how games can employ multiple storytelling strategies yet remain "games." Unlike Eskelinen, LeBlanc doesn't assume narration negates gameness but considers it another valid way of generating narrative. LeBlanc's inclusiveness is echoed by journalist and author J.C. Herz who also describes two kinds of narrative:

One [story] is the sequence of events that happened in the past, which you can't change but is a very good story. The other is the sequence of events that happens in the present (e.g., you are wandering around trying to solve puzzles), which is a lousy story but highly interactive.<sup>39</sup>

Herz describes embedded/emergent narrative with different language. She claims the "good story" is the unchangeable, narrated one, and the "lousy story" is the one that

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<sup>37</sup> Katie Salen and Amy Scholder quoting Mark Leblanc, p. 18.

<sup>38</sup> "Formal Design Tools: Emergent Complexity, Emergent Narrative," Game Developers Conference 2000, <http://algorithmancy.8kindsoffun.com/gdc2000.ppt>.

<sup>39</sup> Herz, 150.

arises from the rule-based system. Rather than claiming narration and simulation are incompatible, she suggests their combination is useful—even necessary—for maintaining an illusion of interactive narrative that is “plausible enough.”<sup>40</sup> Herz does not view narrative in essentialist terms, but seems to acknowledge that each narrative strategy has acceptable limitations, nor does she seem to be “waiting” for the videogames to come of age. Steven Poole, another journalist who’s written about games, shows similar inclusiveness:

For the purposes of talking about videogames, the “back story” is the diachronic story, and what happens in the fictional present is the synchronic story—an ongoing narrative constituted by the player’s actions and decisions in real time.<sup>41</sup>

Herz and LeBlanc, Poole also doesn’t seem to have much of a problem with the coexistence of narration and simulation, claiming it’s “not a sign of [narrative] impoverishment.”<sup>42</sup>

## **Interpretive Limitations**

Debates over narrative in games hinge on *inclusiveness*. How inclusive should a definition of narrative be in games? Which people accept only narration? Which accept

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<sup>40</sup> Herz, 150.

<sup>41</sup> Poole, 93.

<sup>42</sup> Poole, 95.

only simulation? Which accept both? People like Markku Eskelinen and Greg Costikyan seem to only accept narration, which leaves them limited to meaningful narratives that are linear. And because Eskelinen and Costikyan hold an essentialist point of view that finds linearity at odds with gameness, their potential to experience meaningful narrative in videogames is virtually non-existent. People like Warren Spector and Chris Crawford seem to prefer simulation, which leaves them relying on emergent narratives to satisfy their desire for a meaningful experience. Because simulation rhetoric is compatible with games these desires can theoretically be fulfilled, which makes Spector and Crawford less limited than Eskelinen and Costikyan. However, it's people like J. C. Herz, Steven Poole, Katie Salen, Eric Zimmerman, and Mark LeBlanc that seem to face the greatest possibility for meaningful narrative experience, accepting both narration and simulation rhetoric and considering them part of games.

# Emotion

The second major concept I'm looking at is emotion. Emotion is an essential companion piece to narrative, often assumed to be the missing link between storytelling and meaningfulness, sometimes functioning as a general catch-all for any type of human feeling, such as fear or joy, and at others implying highly specific concepts, like empathy or revenge.

## **Simplicity & Complexity**

Videogame discourse offers two stances on what successful emotion is: simple or complex. Though not necessarily expressed with these exact words, the logic of simplicity rhetoric and complexity rhetoric can be found in multiple arguments. Take the following statement by game designer Will Wright:

The earliest games appealed primarily to our more primitive instincts. These instincts originate in the central the central portion of our brain, our so-called "reptilian" brain stem. Over time, the emotional palette of games has broadened beyond instinctive issues of survival and aggression to include the more subtle mechanisms of empathy, nurturing, and



creativity. We still have a long way to go, however, to reach the outer cerebral cortex.<sup>43</sup>

Wright sees emotion in evolutionary terms. Animal feelings are simple and human ones are complex. Although we share some feelings with animals, we are capable of affective experience that is uniquely human. This is a clear example of the simplicity/complexity dichotomy. Wright suggests a move towards sophistication is a challenge for the future, implying a value judgment that games *should* move towards emotional complexity, a view reflected in this MSNBC article about emotion in videogames:

When it comes to emotions, most games touch our simpler instincts: Keypad-throwing anger at missing a jump in "Ratchet and Clank" or an "I-Feel-Good-Uh" triumph of scoring a touchdown in "Madden 2004. A game that can evoke complex emotions -- longing, despair, empathy -- is the holy grail for some in the industry.<sup>44</sup>

Some emotions are complex, others are simple, and they are easily distinguishable from each other. Furthermore, complex emotions seem to be better or more interesting. Complexity rhetoric is a useful way to refer to the view that feelings can be more or less categorized according to a hierarchy of sophistication and that the more sophisticated the emotion the more meaningful it is.

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<sup>43</sup> Wright, xxxi-xxxii.

<sup>44</sup> Loftus, <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/4038606/>

Simplicity rhetoric is a useful way to refer to the view that emotion is organic and visceral. Rather than define meaningfulness in terms of emotional sophistication, simplicity rhetoric emphasizes other qualities, most often intensity, as in this statement made by Ubisoft president Tony Kee at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival:

Movies and games have the same goal: to satisfy and mesmerize audiences. Whether or not the final product is a film or a game, a good one inspires strong emotions: tension, fear, elation and frustration.<sup>45</sup>

Kee's vision of the shared social impact of gamers and film involves "strong" emotions, not necessarily complex ones. Although Kee doesn't mention hierarchy of low and high emotion, he does mention specific feelings—those similar to the ones labeled "simple" in the MSNBC article. One can imagine that, if confronted with the idea that an emotional spectrum exists, Kee might claim that the feelings at the lower end are no less meaningful than those at the upper end. This is arguably what game designer Hal Barwood suggests in the following statement:

[G]ames tackle an end of the emotional spectrum which is not commonly dealt with in normal forms of drama. ... We ought to recognize this and realize that just because we can't make people cry doesn't mean we don't have an emotional affect. Or for that matter that we don't, in some mysterious way, enlarge the spirit of those who play our games.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> David Adams quoting Tony Kee, <http://pc.ign.com/articles/463/463367p1.html?fromint=1>.

<sup>46</sup> Barwood, <http://web.mit.edu/m-i-t/conferences/>.

Barwood's comments suggest a distinction between "types" of emotions. He even suggests videogames are incapable (or at least have difficulty) generating certain feelings. However, he states that other emotions<sup>47</sup> are potentially more meaningful than the seemingly more sophisticated emotions of drama and literature. Sadness—the ability for a game to move a player to tears—is one of the most common feelings associated with complexity. Barwood's rejection that evoking sadness is possible, combined with his vision that other types of emotions are just as important, illustrates the rhetoric of simplicity. Videogames speak to immediate, visceral feelings that have their own brand of meaningfulness which can hold its own against traditional media.

## **What is Emotion?**

Simplicity and complexity rhetoric are usually assumed rather than stated. The logic of simplicity and complexity is reiterated, often vaguely and within a variety of different communities where the specific emotions listed as being on either side of the dichotomy bare striking similarity. In his book Creating Emotion in Games screenwriter/videogame consultant David Freeman states:

[N]o doubt all of us, if we think about it, can recall one or more times we were moved while playing a game (with emotions other than frustration, fear, excitement, that is.)<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> This quote is taken from a panel discussion Q&A, so the specifics of Barwood's argument are spread out over several impromptu exchanges, where he does occasionally mention feelings like fear and excitement as examples of what games can do easier than sadness or tears.

<sup>48</sup> Freeman, 8.

Freeman assumes certain emotions (such as being moved) as his default, feeling it necessary to explain how simpler emotions are not included in his definition. One gets the overwhelming feeling from his book that the “emotion” of the title is meant to be understood as highly nuanced affective experiences, not just Darwinian thrills.<sup>49</sup> Freeman describes these thrills clearly, citing frustration and excitement, two feelings also mentioned in this article from BBC News Online:

Excitement and frustration are probably the two most common feelings when playing a game but the technology has not yet been used to provoke more meaningful emotions, such as sadness.<sup>50</sup>

Frustration and excitement are often cited as lower, more simple, or, in this case, less meaningful emotions. Take this player critique of the classic shooter *Wolfenstein3D*:<sup>51</sup>

Supposedly, we should really feel fear from the zombies, pity and sadness for the German Shepherds we shot, mystery from the hidden levels we would discover... I don't know about anyone else, but I, for one, experienced none of these emotions while playing the game. The only emotion really present is excitement...

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<sup>49</sup> Freeman is a Hollywood-trained writing consultant for professional videogame companies, and his book is squarely aimed at bringing the depths of human drama associated with movies to games. His advice often emphasizes the importance of tragedy, sadness, and other types of inner pain as part of complex characterization that, he argues, game designers need to master in order to create more meaningful gaming experiences.

<sup>50</sup> BBC News, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/new\\_media/1652529.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/new_media/1652529.stm).

<sup>51</sup> *Wolfenstein3D* is famous for inventing the FPS (First-Person Shooter) genre as it is known today. In the game the player rampages through a Nazi-setting killing everything and everyone in an attempt to single-handedly topple the Third-Reich.

The writer concludes by stating:

[T]he emotional attachment I felt for this game was just a couple steps above Pong. That's not saying that I didn't enjoy playing it, just that I wasn't emotionally involved in it.<sup>52</sup>

As with the BBC article excitement is lower than sadness. One moment the writer claims excitement is an emotion, which he did feel, yet afterwards says the game was not emotional for him. Excitement is assumed to be fundamentally different from sadness because it apparently “doesn’t count” in determining the overall emotionality of the experience.

None of the above examples use the terms complex or simple, but the logic of complexity rhetoric is evident in every one. Some emotions are higher than others, and the higher ones are better, more interesting, more meaningful—however one chooses to express value. Similarities in logic create rhetorical undercurrents that shape debate and are echoed (with slight variation) in separate communities, though seldom by people who seem aware they are in a debate over meaningfulness. However, events can happen that stimulate awareness and heighten discourse. Shortly before his death, art critic Jack Kroll of *Newsweek* wrote an article about emotion in videogames, stating:

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<sup>52</sup> Hogan 1994.

“Games can be fun and rewarding in many ways, but they can't transmit the emotional complexity that is the root of art. Even the most advanced games lack the shimmering web of nuances that makes human life different from mechanical process.”<sup>53</sup>

Kroll insists videogames lack that which he finds vital to art, yet he never clearly states what exactly “emotional complexity” is in this article. He is vague, relying on highly generalized descriptors to make his point,<sup>54</sup> yet Kroll is clearly subscribing to a hierarchical view of emotion. Complex emotions indicate art which means simple ones presumably don't.

Kroll's comments are significant because, though they show a general misunderstanding of game design, they represent a high position of cultural authority. Kroll's critique of videogames made waves within the gaming community, inciting responses from a variety of groups including this editorial response from ClanMacGaming.com:

Mr. Kroll smugly denigrates the entire video game medium as unable to transmit emotional complexity. This reflects Mr. Kroll's own understanding of the medium, not the medium itself. I'd challenge him to spend the hours to master a top role-playing game or civilization-building game without feeling a strong emotional connection to the world he

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<sup>53</sup> Kroll 2000.

<sup>54</sup> Kroll argues: “Moviemakers don't have to simulate human beings; they are right there, to be recorded and orchestrated. The digitally created medieval Japanese warriors in *Kessen* ... have none of the breathing presence, the epic gallantry, of the knights in Akira Kurosawa's 1985 film ‘*Ran*.’”

created or explored himself. I'd challenge him to spend a few hours playing a team variation on a first-person shooter without developing some sort of emotional and visceral bond to his teammates. Such experiences do carry an emotional resonance. It may be different from the experience that Mr. Kroll feels when viewing a Monet painting, but how is that emotional connection any less valid?<sup>55</sup>

The writer, a member of an online gaming community, doesn't simply contradict Kroll's assessment that games cannot produce complex emotion. Rather he claims that the emotions games produce are meaningful for other reasons, notably because they are visceral and intense. This response from RPGamer, though, argues otherwise:

How ironic that Mr. Kroll uses the CG still of Aeris [from Final Fantasy VII.] in an editorial that states that video games cannot transmit emotion. Aeris Gainsborough's death is one of the most touching moments in video game history, a death which caused people to petition Square to change the game's story, inspired numerous shrines to Aeris on the internet, and moved fan artists, fan musicians, and fan fiction writers to create countless beautiful works remembering her.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Cohen, <http://www.clanmacgaming.com/articles.php?read=96>.

<sup>56</sup> McGrath, <http://www.rpgamer.com/editor/2000/q1/031000bm.html>.

This gamer rejects Kroll's statement about complex emotion by giving probably the most cited pop example of a harrowing, depressing event in a videogame.<sup>57</sup> Again sadness is used as a mile-maker to indicate complex emotion.

Two people from the same community—gamers—use the opposite rhetoric to discredit Kroll, hinting at the interpretive diversity contained within a single community. Both the ClanMacGaming player and the RPGamer player disagreed with Kroll that games lacked emotion, yet the RPGamer player echoed Kroll's rhetoric. Both Jack Kroll and the player from RPGamer agreed that complex emotion is meaningful, but they disagreed on whether games could achieve complex emotion, while the ClanMacGaming player seemed to reject both their rhetorics in favor of reasoning that was similar to Hal Barwood's. As the terrain becomes more visible, the different interpretive clusters of simplicity rhetoric and complexity rhetoric become more clear.

## **Inclusive Viewpoints**

It is difficult to find middle-of-the-road stances that incorporate both simplicity and complexity rhetoric. The communities of journalism and industry seem to view emotion hierarchically without much question, however, gamers seem to be more flexible. While it is true that gamers are a much bigger group and bound to have a much wider variety of opinion, it may be telling that in the single internet survey I conducted on the game

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<sup>57</sup> *Final Fantasy VII*, and in it the death of this particular character, Aeris, has become a symbol of the emotional impact videogames can have for certain circles of gamers, mostly those immersed in the fan-cultures of anime and Japanese role-playing games. Though these fans don't likely represent a majority they have been incredibly vocal in promoting *FF7* as a proof positive of affective gaming for several years in websites, magazines, messageboards, etc.



enthusiast forum Horizonstavern.com, not one person suggested that there were emotions games could not portray. Some seemed to echo the logic of emotional hierarchy (or at least emotional categories) without saying this prevented certain feelings:

Games can be very emotional. Although few, and in my experience mostly RPGs, games can very easily produce sadness. I've allowed myself to cry while watching the storyline to a game before ... Obviously games can also cause frustration, as they do many times, and they can also cause feelings of joy and accomplishment (though that's not an emotion) in beating a game.<sup>58</sup>

Others balked at the idea that such distinctions exist:

I don't think there are any emotions a game would -not- be capable of producing.<sup>59</sup>

Every kind of emotion is possible. Anger at the main enemy, sadness when an NPC dies, happiness when you get two NPC's together or when a goal is reached. And sometimes even many of them together. Even being scared is possible. ... I don't think [there are emotions that games have

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<sup>58</sup> Daffery, see link in bibliography.

<sup>59</sup> Rivan, see link in bibliography.

difficulty producing], but again it depends on the kind of videogame. In RPGs nearly anything is possible with good storytelling.<sup>60</sup>

The Horizoners cite many of the same emotions we've encountered so far—sadness, fear, frustration—yet they don't view them as part of a hierarchy. Or, if they do, they don't see one end as being inherently superior to the other. To these gamers emotion seems to imply a fairly obvious phenomenon that contains a wide and organic variety of feelings.

### **Interpretive Limitations**

As with narrative, emotion is a debate over inclusiveness. How inclusive should a definition of emotion be in games? Which interpretive clusters accept only complexity rhetoric? Which accept simplicity? Which accept both? Will Wright, David Freeman, Jack Kroll, and the articles from MSNBC.com, BBC.com, GameBytes.com, and RPGamer could be thought as complexity essentialists, believing in a difference between superior and inferior emotions. The complexity cluster is limited to meaningful emotions that fit a criteria of complexity, though the extraordinary amount of disagreement as to whether games are capable of such complexity makes this cluster's opportunities for meaningful emotion ambiguous. Tony Kee, Hal Barwood, and the gamer from ClanMacGaming.com all suggest simplicity essentialism, the belief that, while an emotional hierarchy may exist, there is no prejudice among which feelings can be meaningful. However, the simplicity cluster is limited by the beliefs its members may

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<sup>60</sup> Mythril Dragon, see link in bibliography.

have that complex emotion isn't possible in games, reducing their spectrum of meaningful emotion to intensity-based experience. The only people who seemed to enjoy an inclusive viewpoint were the gamers from Horizonstavern, whose non-hierarchical views of emotion allow them great latitude in defining the limits of meaningful emotion in videogames.

## Meaningfulness Revisited

The point of this thesis has been to illustrate the subjective landscape of narrative and emotion, and in doing so illustrate (in part) the subjective landscape of meaningfulness in videogames. In the previous chapters we saw that people tended to see the topic of meaningfulness in games in three ways: either it exists, it will exist, or it can't exist. These positions form a central ambiguity that has captured the popular imagination. One might call it the Impending Revolution of Meaningfulness. Many people recognize, whether they agree with it or not, the notion that videogames are (or could be) poised on the threshold of becoming the ultimate affective storytelling medium. We've seen several opinions on this topic thus far: pro, con, and neutral. However, there seems to be very little attempt, even on the part of academics, to step back and observe the relative, subjective positions of opinion. Members of all communities are more often making grand claims about "what videogames are," "what emotion is," "what narrative is," etc. rather than trying to understand each other. While I'm not arguing that they necessarily should understand each other or that all should agree on what meaningfulness is (after all, discursive conflict is a healthy agent of change) I am alarmed by what seems to be a

general lack of even the *concept* of relative aesthetics. In present gaming discourse, acknowledging subjectivity tends to involve little more than describing differing tastes and preferences *within* the body of pre-determined rhetorical boundaries, yet examinations of the larger, meta-rhetorical structures that define videogames are so few as to be practically non-existent.<sup>61</sup> I feel there is an incredible amount to be gained by stepping back and looking at games in such a way, and my goal has been to help begin laying the groundwork for such an understanding.

## Interpretive Influence

The point of all this—the purpose of looking at narrative and emotion and trying to map out the different ways people see them—is to illustrate what is at stake when an emerging media is beset by so many conflicting communities that seek to define (and in some cases enforce) their standards of aesthetic judgment. Stanley Fish illustrate what can happen when one community or set of communities dominate a discursive landscape. Using the field of literary criticism he states:

[T]he shape of [interpretation] is determined by the literary institution which at any one time will authorize only a finite number of interpretive strategies. Thus, while there is no core agreement *in* the text, there is a

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<sup>61</sup> The only ones that come to mind are pieces by Henry Jenkins, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman who often advocate looking at several differing perspectives on what games are and what they can be. However, these pieces (which can mostly be found in the books *First-Person* and *Rules of Play*) are not meant to be rigorous explorations of discursive landscapes but inclusive statements about the diversity of videogame genres, conventions, styles, etc. that appeal to common-sense. I am not suggesting that no one else has thought of looking at games in terms of aesthetic relativism, but I have not seen someone do this as a major project which seeks the level of detail I am attempting here.

core of agreement (although one subject to change) concerning the ways of *producing* a text. Nowhere is this set of acceptable ways written down, but it is a part of everyone's knowledge of what it means to be operating within the literary institution as it is now constituted.<sup>62</sup>

Fish explains how a discourse remains stable and cohesive even though there is no way to prove one viewpoint is superior to another. This is part of his attempt to soothe the criticisms he constantly anticipates: that, by submitting to total relativism, literary criticism would basically lose all its meaning since it could never make claims of authority. This is an all-consuming goal of Fish, who is writing to a community of scholars who equate interpretive relativism with interpretive chaos and the collapse of literary criticism as a field. Fish, however, argues that while you can never argue based on authority, you can argue based on perspective... which, he suggests, does not dramatically rearrange the face of literary criticism since the "literary institution" which only allows a "finite number of interpretive strategies" effectively dominates the landscape. If one can assume that the field of literary criticism has an impact on the popular imagination of what good and bad books are or what the right or wrong way is to understand a poem, it's easy to see how these interpretive standards affect the evolution of literature as a medium. They help shape the culture's perception of what literature is, what it can be, and what it is and isn't communicating to readers... a process guided by the ever-evolving yet, at any one moment, dominating influence of "the literary institution."

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<sup>62</sup> Fish, 342.

Considering Fish's radical notions of relativist thought, his casual acceptance of a dominant interpretive structure is puzzling. This is partially because the text I'm drawing from is an earlier work by Fish, whose ideas later evolved to focus more on power and argued for a more decentralized system of interpretive authority. At the time he first developed his theory of interpretive communities, however, he was more interested in placating his critics (and himself) by assuring that their livelihoods as scholars would not disappear. The Fish I'm concerned with takes a fairly utopian stance on how interpretive relativism functions. Because literature and literary criticism are in a constant state of flux he can assume with confidence that any interpretive community currently dominating will eventually evolve and change, courtesy of the multitude of alternative communities that will always be chipping away at it with their various persuasions. Theoretically, this ensures a nicely populated gene pool of diverse interpretive strategies, resulting in a smooth, varied evolution from one dominate interpretive generation to the next. The Fish I'm using does not yet criticize interpretive domination by one community or series of communities so much as criticize the confusing of a dominate form of persuasion with objective truth.

[Interpretive relativism] allows us to make sense of the history of literary criticism, which under the old model can only be the record of the rather dismal performances of men ... who simply did not understand literature and literary values as well as we do. Now we can regard those performances not as unsuccessful attempts to approximate our own but

extensions of a literary culture whose assumptions were not inferior but merely different.<sup>63</sup>

The action Fish seems to be calling for here is fairly benign. He says it's okay for things to continue as they have as long as we know that it's merely a step along an evolutionary continuum, offering up his theories as little more than newer and more interesting ways to go about his job, concluding in the end that it's enough to merely "advance the discussion" of interpretation, authority, subjectivity, and objectivity as concepts within his field of study.<sup>64</sup> He leaves us with only vague implications of the more radical applications of his ideas, claiming briefly that, under his model, scholars are:

...free to consider the various forms the literary institution has taken and to uncover the interpretive strategies by which its canons have been produced and understood.<sup>65</sup>

Unfortunately Fish doesn't ask any of the obvious questions, like what the field of literary criticism *stands to lose* by failing to do such things. He doesn't, for example, directly claim that literature will be somehow "improved" by the enriched tapestry of understanding he proposes. It's these sorts of gaps that, though Fish eventually moved beyond them, are useful in illustrating the dangers videogames face today. Where do these unanswered questions leave our understanding of the interpretive communities, clusters, and strategies of the emerging videogame discourse? The Fish we are dealing

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<sup>63</sup> Fish, 368.

<sup>64</sup> Fish, 371.

<sup>65</sup> Fish, 368.

with doesn't offer much insight. The discussions in the Narrative and Emotion chapters were not meant to provide a framework that's sole use was to claim "Meaningfulness is relative." I did not choose this particular phase of Fish's thinking for its conclusions but for its premises, which allow us to articulate how various videogame communities approach topics of meaningfulness. Once articulated, however, I'd like to take them beyond the generally agreeable realm of harmonious interpretive evolution Fish once envisioned. I'd like to look at them in a more dire and dangerous light, in which the evolution of interpretive dominance isn't always so rosy, a perspective which sees the awareness of interpretive relativism as a way to ensure that an emerging medium is not strangled in its cradle by interpretive strategies that dominate a little *too* effectively.

### **The Stakes of Limiting Videogame Discourse**

Fish states that discursive conflicts over interpretation will always be in flux. This is true, yet this doesn't necessarily mean they will fluctuate equally. Despite what Fish claims about the self-selecting stability of literary discourse, history is filled with examples of media that are constrained in unfortunate ways by dominating interpretive communities. Probably the easiest entertainment medium to see this in is film, where an entire generation of scholars, critics, and fledgling filmmakers had to fight for the recognition and preservation of forgotten innovators. In the case of directors like Orson Welles, who repeatedly defied Hollywood's standards of editing, cinematography, and characterization, innovation was rewarded with years of hardship. Welles, who peaked creatively in the 1930's, was not universally recognized as a major contributor to the



medium of film until the 1960's, and by that time the damage had been done: a tragic legacy of unfinished projects and films mangled by studios. The gradual incorporation of new interpretive strategies into mainstream film tastes was too late to save much of Welles's work, yet many of his stylistic experiments are now considered to be the backbone of modern filmmaking that inspired people like Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Brian DePalma, and Steven Spielberg—a generation of the most prolific, critically acclaimed, and financially successful filmmakers ever.

Videogames are in a unique position at present. Similar to film at the dawn of the last century, games are in a battle over in which spaces innovation is and is not allowed. Any war fought over aesthetic standards is a war over who will decide what is a good or bad example of a medium. Even if that war isn't an entirely conscious one—as it seems to be with videogames—the stakes are still the same. Prominent interpretive strategies push a medium in specific directions, but these are not the only directions possible. This is how aesthetic diversity can be lost. Yet a better awareness of the different viewpoints out there and how they compare to each other can enrich both the commercial and artistic life of a medium. A robust understanding of aesthetic difference can stimulate an academic's willingness to explore different ways of studying games, a journalist's ability judge games by fresh criteria, a developer's ability to see the different advantages of multiple design strategies, and a player's desire to see and play games in new and unique ways. Videogames are at the center of several communities who have a variety of different aesthetic standards of what and what does not make a game meaningful. These conflicts are in their early stages: they only now, roughly 30 years after the development of the

medium, seem to present themselves in enough clarity to even be identified. By outlining their logics—as I’ve done in previous chapters—we can hopefully recognize some of this diversity before it becomes dominated by one rhetoric or another.

## **The Terrain**

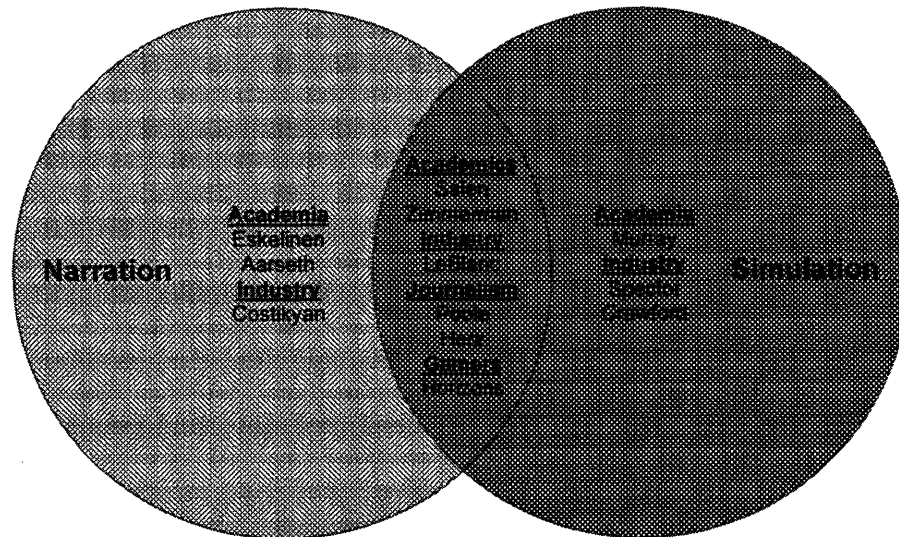
Below are diagrams mapping various rhetorical positions I’ve discussed in the last two chapters. They are designed to clarify what exactly the disagreements are afflicting the discourse and reveal new issues about the rhetorics of narrative and emotion.

The take-away here is looking at things in terms of discursive groups. This approach is useful because it allows us to recognize patterns of *dissonance*. Dissonance results from people perceiving meaningfulness differently, resulting in a fragmented discourse made up of multiple, contradictory worldviews. Understanding this dissonance helps us navigate the discourse. It helps us identify which areas have higher concentrations of conflict, and thus are in greater danger of one interpretive cluster gaining dominance. It’s our map of what is still a fairly wild frontier, one made up of different interpretive clusters, each not quite fully formed yet projecting individual world views. Like typical frontier settlements, these groups are made up of people coming together from a variety of backgrounds, which they each bring a bit of with them. For example, a gamer who loves *Baldur’s Gate*, an academic who loves *The Last Express*, a journalist who loves *Max Payne*, and a designer who loves *Grand Theft Auto III* might all have similar views on narrative, but they might have formed those views in completely different ways and for completely different reasons. Although examining these reasons in detail is beyond

the scope of this thesis, mapping these configurations can provide a framework to understand the discourse better.

### **Narrative**

Below is a diagram of the narrative spectrum I have used in my analysis. It illustrates the rhetorics and how they overlap as well as the position of key participants along a continuum.<sup>66</sup>



The left side contains those who tend to argue that narrative is linear and fixed, and the right contains those who argue it should be dynamic, emerging from the combination of

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<sup>66</sup> I've included two people in the diagram that I did not discuss in my Narrative chapter: Espen Aarseth and Janet Murray. I've included them here because they help fill out the diagram, but discussing them in detail would be redundant since they represent rhetorical ground already explored. Aarseth's view of narrative is similar to Eskelinen's (see his article "Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation" in *First-Person* for a detailed account.) Murray's views on narrative, which can be found in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, are largely procedural, emphasizing her notions of agency and immersion.-

virtual space and a rule system. In the middle are those who recognize both positions but don't seem to favor one or the other.

All four communities are represented in this diagram. Narration is made up of academics and industry. Simulation is also made up of academics and industry. And the middle ground is made up of all four, including journalists and gamers. These are the interpretive clusters I've been speaking about, groups that are aligned by rhetoric but more often than not lack a coherent identity.<sup>67</sup> The narration group displays a stringently formalist view of videogames. Their fundamental perception of games could be thought of as technology-based, defining the medium via its inherent qualities of agency and interaction. This leads them to believe that narration, since narration does not involve either of these qualities, is either incompatible or has an inherently negative relationship with games. Ironically, the simulation group seems to harbor almost identical notions about the formal qualities of games. The only difference is that they use the word narrative to refer to them. In many ways, this is not much of a contradiction. In terms of their user profiles, the two groups mirror each other. They also harbor similar definitions of what a game is. They just have a semantic difference. One might imagine this as religious difference. They are both followers of formalism, but they don't speak the same language. There's a big difference between this and the group occupying the middle

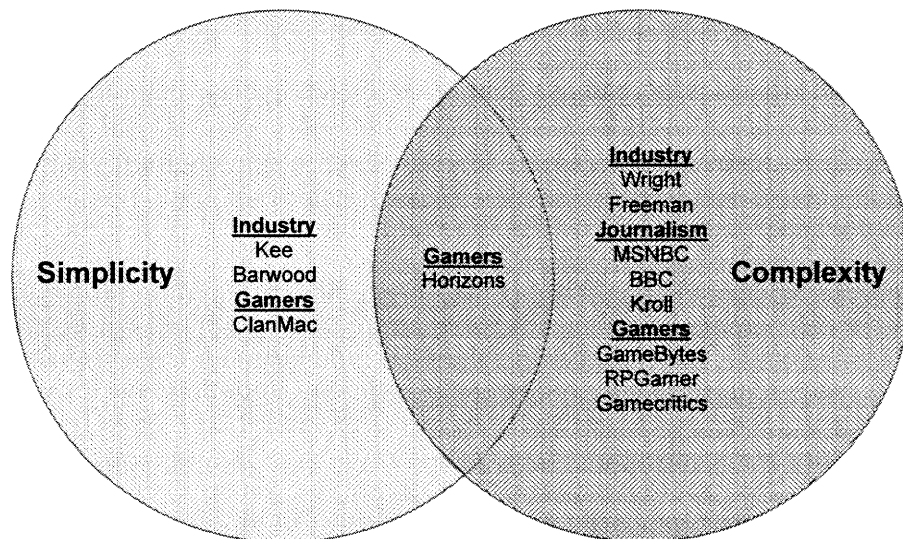
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<sup>67</sup> An exception to this would be the group of academics that call themselves "ludologists," who have gained a reputation in academia for their general insistence on narration rhetoric and its fundamental separation from the rule-structures that define games as a medium. However, this hard-lined approach has been diffused lately with scholars like Jesper Juul and Gonzalo Frasca, who identify themselves as ludologists, displaying more flexibility to the idea of narrative in games, specifically in Games Telling Stories? (Juul 2001.) Markku Eskelinen and Espen Aarseth, being two of the main foundational influences of ludology and basically steadfast in their use of narration rhetoric, are now mostly responsible for the label "ludologist" retaining its narrative=narration connotation. It remains to be seen whether this connotation will eventually fade away in lieu of a more generalized meaning (perhaps indicating merely "game studies") or if it will retain its anti-narrative connotation to a lesser or greater extent.

ground. They are made up of every group, and suggest a socially constructed definition of games. Their viewpoints don't suggest formal and/or technological essentialism, but a view of games that is socially constructed. Their lack of prejudice leaves them open to a wide possibility of narrative meaningfulness. The other groups, by comparison, don't have as much room to move. The narration group lacks all capacity for narrative meaningfulness. And the simulation group is limited to successful experiments that push the envelope of emergent narrative.

### **Emotion**

Below is a similar diagram of the emotion spectrum I used in my analysis. It also illustrates rhetorical relationships as well as the key figures who made up my examples.



The left side contains those who view meaningful emotion as simple, primal and visceral, and the right contains those who view it as feelings which are superior or more

complicated than merely intense feeling. The people in the middle either don't see this distinction at all or see it but don't favor one group of emotions over the other.

All four communities are represented here again. Simplicity is made up of industry people and gamers. Complexity is made up of every group. And the middle ground is made up of gamers only. These user profiles are quite different from those in the narrative spectrum, which seemed to mirror each other on each end with the largest diversity of groups in the middle. Emotion has a different shape. The complexity cluster is widely diverse, whereas the others (at least in my examples) don't seem to be. Although these may not be representative examples, the picture they form is interesting. They also suggest a tension between formal or technological determinism and a more socially constructed notion of games, something which it inherits via implicit connections with the rhetorics of narrative. The simplicity cluster seems simulation-oriented, viewing games dynamic systems that excel in producing unique, visceral, and intense emotional experiences. The complexity cluster is not as cohesive. For the most part, followers of its rhetoric see emotion as a uniquely human and sophisticated experience of being moved, the feasibility of which has yet to materialize in a primarily rule-based format. This doesn't stop some of them, however, from associating narration as the vehicle to deliver a complex affective experience. The group which occupies the middle ground is in some ways the most ambiguous. It is unclear whether its members are inclusive of both simple and complex emotion because they recognize a connect between simulation/simplicity and narration/complexity and simply accept both kinds of narrative, or whether they see both simple and complex emotions inhabiting both sides of the

spectrum. Either way, they are the cluster with the largest capacity to experience emotional meaningfulness, followed by those who exhibit simplicity rhetoric. Complexity's a little muddier with several different stances of narrative dividing the cluster between those who currently find emotional complexity in games and those who look forward to its coming.

## **Models for Influence**

Now that we've seen how narrative and emotion can be mapped, which interpretive clusters they support, and what some of the underlying assumptions of those clusters are, we're ready to discuss how they might limit one's ability to imagine meaningfulness. To do this I'm using two examples from discourses that unapologetically seek to limit the interpretive freedoms of videogames. These serve as a model for how certain rhetorical configurations of narrative and emotion can dominate interpretation and limit one's conception of the medium.

The first example comes from a legal case, now infamous in the world of videogames, where U.S. District Judge Stephen S. Limbaugh ruled that videogames exhibit "no conveyance of ideas, expression or anything else that could possibly amount to speech."<sup>68</sup> He identified a difference between "scripts," which contained plot and character development, and "objectives," which represented the rule-based nature of play. Limbaugh basically concluded that "objectives" are essential to gameness and "scripts"

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<sup>68</sup> Limbaugh 2002.

aren't, and therefore any meaning displayed in the scripts doesn't count as speech. There have been several cases where videogames were threatened with censorship, yet Limbaugh's has drawn the widest and most passionate criticism, probably because his comments most blatantly represent amateur theorizing on the conventions and capabilities of the medium. David Lemasa, a writing for Penny-Arcade.com, responded with the complaint:

He's saying that even a story told within the context of the game is only in furtherance of the game as a medium - he's saying that the story is "inconsequential" and it's merely a vehicle to get through the game. He's trying to head off future arguments that would cite games like the Final Fantasy series, the Legacy of Kain stuff, even the abysmal, God-awful Metal Gear Solid 2, in support of the free speech of games. You might be saying, "haven't games reached the same level of speech that movies or novels have". While I completely agree, he doesn't.<sup>69</sup>

Limbaugh's reasoning sounds an awful lot like narration rhetoric. He sees the "game" part of the game and the "story" part of the game as fundamentally incompatible, a distinction that Lemasa disputes. They both seem situated in narration rhetoric, only one person includes it in his definition of games and the other doesn't. Dissonance like this suggests the technological versus social constructionist pattern suggested earlier. Limbaugh seems to be deciding with authority that videogames must be based on their interactive, rule-based properties and not on a more malleable concept of "game" that the

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<sup>69</sup> Lemasa, <http://www.penny-arcade.com/lod3.php3>.



culture of gaming (or at least parts of it) may find acceptable. In other words, he's using his legal power to make an interpretive judgment about the essence of gameness, one based on a set of interpretive strategies rooted in formal essentialism. Functionally, Limbaugh is *forcing* this set of strategies on the discourse by virtue of his legal authority.

The second example is the work of Lt. David Grossman, also infamous in videogame discourse. This example doesn't pertain to any specific statement, but rather his general, often reiterated belief that videogames behaviorally condition players to commit aggressive acts of violence. Grossman has gone on record numerous times claiming that videogames use the same operant conditioning techniques employed in the military to squelch a soldier's aversion to killing. This conditioning, he claims, is "extraordinarily powerful and frightening. The result is ever more homemade pseudo-sociopaths who kill reflexively and show no remorse."<sup>70</sup> Comments like these have brought harsh criticism from media scholars like Henry Jenkins. He concludes that Grossman:

...assumes almost no conscious cognitive activity on the part of the gamers, who have all of the self-consciousness of Pavlov's dogs. He reverts to a behaviorist model of education which has long been discredited among schooling experts. Grossman sees games as shaping our reflexes, our impulses, our emotions, almost without regard to our previous knowledge and experience.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Grossman, [http://www.killology.com/art\\_trained\\_operant.htm](http://www.killology.com/art_trained_operant.htm).

<sup>71</sup> Jenkins 2004.

Grossman's views sound a lot like emotional complexity rhetoric. He is arguing for a model in which certain emotional responses such as rage, aggression, etc. can be triggered by games without the interference of higher brain functions. These "low" emotions are incapable of meaning, since they cannot be interpreted by the person who feels them. This is the difference between "effects" and "meaning" that Jenkins illustrates in his response. Grossman's logic suggests that, although higher human analytical thought is possible, it is not part of the emotional experience of violent videogames. Jenkins maintains that it is. Again the rhetorics don't seem opposed so much as the definition of videogames and, by relation, the social construction of technology. Grossman is echoing the fundamental, technological determinist view that videogames are defined by their rule-based systems, which, by the essence of their design, can only illicit simple, visceral emotions. Grossman is espousing, and consequently validating for the communities he speaks to, a simulation/simplicity orientation of narrative and emotion. "This is what games are, and they have these affective limits," he seems to be saying to the non-gaming members of school boards, special interest groups, legal councilors and anyone else who hears him speak or reads his books.

Already in these two examples we can see how rhetorics of narrative and emotion, when presented in certain context of social authority, can potentially limit the evolutionary freedom of games. Limbaugh basically decided for everyone in St. Louis, Missouri that narration is narrative, simulation isn't, and games therefore cannot contain narration and, thus, any meaningfulness which it may make possible. Grossman has basically decided

for his readership, as well as the military and psychological communities for which he is a spokesman, that (violent) videogames are simulations only which cannot convey complex emotion. Effectively, these two individuals have exerted their influence to shape public opinion over what the aesthetics of games are. Their audience, especially in Grossman's case, consists of people who do not play games, which makes their resistance to accepting these interpretive strategies a lot less likely. In both of these cases, one might say that the aesthetic trajectory and potential for innovation has or could have been shaped by these two opinions. It might be difficult to convince readers of Grossman that games can involve narrated story elements or that rule-based systems can convey complex, meaningful emotions. Likewise, because of the precedent Limbaugh's decision set, it might be more difficult to convince some people in the legal system that simulation could produce ideas or that narration was a valid storytelling strategy for the cultural artifact we call a "videogame."

## **Spheres of Influence**

Limbaugh and Grossman give us a nice place to start looking at how rhetoric shapes videogame discourse. Limbaugh might be the most obvious, reflecting Markku Eskelinen's, Espen Aarseth's, and Greg Costikyan's views on narrative. Although these people do not share Limbaugh's legal power they can project influence in other ways. Each participant has a different reach within a discourse, a different audience they are speaking to. Eskelinen and Aarseth have a much farther reach in the academic community than Costikyan. However, Costikyan has a farther reach in the industry than

either the two of them. The result is that the interpretive strategies they share, and the subsequent interpretive cluster they form, has reach within both academia and the games industry. A similar sphere of influence could be shown for the opposing rhetoric. Warren Spector and Chris Crawford are both regarded as important thinkers on non-linear narrative in the games industry, and Janet Murray is known as one of the most outspoken academics on narrative. In this way the spheres of influence for narration and simulation rhetoric seem equal, however if you add Limbaugh into the mix the narration camp is profoundly reinforced. Jack Kroll, standing behind the mainstream legitimacy of Newsweek, reinforced it further. Now the interpretive reach of narration rhetoric doesn't seem so small, and simulation suddenly seems like a less dominant interpretive strategy. It might even be one that needs to struggle for legitimacy in mainstream culture, while narration enjoys a fairly comfortable following.

Grossman's hierarchical view of emotion seems shared by industry people like Will Wright and David Freeman, journalists like Jack Kroll and those at MSNBC and BBC, and gamers like those at GameBytes and RPGamer. Yet because of their differing stances on narrative they can't agree on where games fall within this hierarchy. MSNBC, the BBC, and Will Wright may seem to advocate complexity, yet practically speaking they seem more in line with simplicity rhetoric since they agree that games aren't creating complex emotion *at present*. This concentration of opinion could be contributing to a potential dominance of simulation and simplicity rhetoric, one that is reinforced by people like Kroll and Grossman who, though far more pessimistic, approximate the view that simple emotions and simulation go hand-in-hand. Their

visibility as authorities in the fields of art and psychology combined with the industry reach of Wright and the journalistic reach of MSNBC and the BBC bolster this rhetorical position greatly both in and outside gaming culture, creating an intimidating interpretive cluster for other, weaker rhetorics to stand up to. The gamer from the Gamecritics.com who cites examples of complex emotion that aren't narration-dependant<sup>72</sup> or the member of RPGamer who cites examples that are, these are people who can claim less influence since they lack the authority of famous designers, popular authors, and prominent journalists. Even the collective authority they have as part of a consumer audience doesn't result in a competitive extension of influence. Both RPGamer and Horizonstavern represent widespread sub-cultures of gaming fandom that recognize various degrees of emotionality in various strategies of narrative<sup>73</sup>, yet as with all other groups this influence extends mostly within their own community. Since we have here two rhetorical combinations (narration/complexity and simulation/complexity) contained within one community, it just doesn't have the expansive reach of one that span multiple communities.

## **The Value of Awareness**

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<sup>72</sup> Although Top Hat, the Gamecritics.com member quoted the Methodology chapter, doesn't explicitly claim that empathy arose out of a rule-system, the game he cites, *Out of This World*, does not use narration heavily. In fact, the "mute guide" Hat mentions is experienced throughout the game as a dynamic companion whose characterization is defined through gameplay.

<sup>73</sup> RPGamer is known primarily as an enthusiast site for story-driven, console RPG's, and Horizons originally began as a community of PC RPG enthusiasts. These communities are part of the legions of role-playing gamers for whom complex emotions and elaborate stories are shared cultural norms for the genre.

There is no doubt that the two most populated rhetorical positions seem to be narration combined with emotional complexity and simulation combined with emotional simplicity. The pervasiveness of these two positions has a profound potential to shape the future of videogames. This isn't necessarily bad, but there are pros and cons to a vision of gameness that takes these interpretive strategies for granted. More than anything they represent what seems to be two popular beliefs: that games should be defined in formal essentialist terms, and that complex emotion is naturally difficult to achieve in games.

It's not difficult to see how these beliefs, perfectly valid unto themselves, can limit the evolution of games and fracture its discourse if asserted with ignorance or impunity. Narrow views of procedural formalism and emotional complexity in industry circles can stunt the development of innovation involving narration-based storytelling or interactive experiences that eschew emotional complexity for intensity. If games like *Grand Theft Auto* or *The Sims* are the *only* valid models of narrative, what will happen to games like *Final Fantasy* or *Max Payne*? If *Final Fantasy* becomes the only valid model of emotion, what will happen to games like *Counter-Strike* or *Dance Dance Revolution*? Or if all these games are seen as valid yet separate models for narrative and emotion, what will happen to combination experiments like *Deus Ex*, *Way of the Samurai*, or *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*? If powerful people in academia, journalism, the legal system, or even in the industry itself shape the public's consciousness too far towards formal essentialism we could possibly see a rift grow between the aesthetics of people who are comfortable with multiple, experimental game styles, and those who view *The Quest for Meaningful Game Design* as a narrow endeavor consisting mainly of waiting

for technological improvements to arrive that can finally marry simulations with emotional complexity. I'm arguing that this rift already exists and that if we don't watch out it and others like it will just widen and eventually cripple our ability to imagine videogames in a variety of ways.

Realizing there is a difference of opinion on meaningfulness can help direct the medium of games in more effective ways, by focusing less on trying to achieve universal standards of meaningful narrative and emotion and instead investigating ways to expand, enhance, or consolidate the different interpretations of meaningfulness that already coexist. If meaningfulness is so important, and so diversely defined, it can only be enriched by members of the videogame community at large realizing they are, in fact, a community. Then we might draw from each other's equally valid viewpoints in order to help videogames evolve comfortably and prevent the sabotage or repression of unconventional design philosophies that may turn out to be beneficial down the road.

## Conclusion

In some ways this thesis has been an elaborate build-up to a series of issues that I won't get a chance to discuss. Explaining what interpretive relativism is, identifying rhetorics of narrative and emotion so that meaningfulness might make a little more sense: these are just the groundwork for more practical concerns. Once academics, journalists, industry, and gamers understand the function and stakes of aesthetic subjectivity, how might they apply it?

## Future Directions

I said at the beginning of my Methodology chapter that I imagine two kinds of people reading this thesis: industry people and academics. However, my thinking wasn't always this clean-cut. My original ambition for this thesis was to explore specific tools and strategies designers could use to make games more meaningful. However, I soon realized that this would be impossible without bringing the topic of meaningfulness itself into greater focus. Trying to achieve this focus via examining narrative and emotion has produced material with wider possibilities for application, although I still believe the



frameworks and arguments I've made hold the greatest potential to enrich the design of games themselves.

The most obvious academic expansion of this thesis would be in ethnographic research. It might be worth exploring where certain interpretive strategies come from and why. What are the multitude of forces that might shape opinion when it comes to which interpretive cluster one falls into? What is it about some people that makes them respond affectively to Japanese RPG's and not to competitive online gaming? Does this have anything to do with the cultural construction of technology or lack there of? Or does it have to do with something else entirely? Would this have anything to do with the culture they grew up in? What if these cultures aren't defined by nationality but by pop or sub-cultural groups, such as certain kinds of fandom. If these sorts of connections could be established, how would more conventional factors, such as race, gender, or age, affect this orientation. Can these orientations be changed? Can they be tied to regional geography? Economic class? Religious conviction? Pet preference? All this can obviously never be answered definitively, but using some of the frameworks I've outlined might yield a more nuanced way to categorize players than along gender, race, or age.

In the case of industry, I think using frameworks to understand interpretive relativism could lead to a much more successful synthesis of design conventions with audience taste. I don't expect game producers and designers to get excited about promoting aesthetic diversity for its own sake, but having more rigorous ways to understand the

diverse tastes of players could help designers zero-in better on exactly what strategies of narrative and emotional meaningfulness might be most effective for a given audience. This would involve an additional level of focus. We already have an idea of how different strategies for narrative and emotion may or may not appeal to certain groups of people. Now we may want to figure out what strategies of *representing* narrative or emotional experience break down among different interpretive clusters. Representation is a topic that was mostly absent from my argument, but it is, I believe, one of the main reasons to bother contextualizing the discourse in the first place. The real usefulness of identifying interpretive clusters and the views that shape them is to see how these limitations dictate which representational strategies players find compelling. In many ways, this is another avenue of the same goal of examining hidden forces that affect opinion. However, instead of identifying trends that create dissonance *between* clusters, this would focus on doing so within them. My hypothesis is that when people agree on rhetorics of narrative and emotion, the only thing that makes them disagree on whether or not a game successfully achieves them is representation. How are different representational strategies in games evaluated the various rhetorics? Why do some players respond only to certain representation and others do not? What level of awareness of interpretive difference do these players have when deciding if a representation “fails” to achieve what they desire to experience? A good place to start might be by comparing the different genre literacies of gamers against which national or cultural styles are represented in a game. For example, you may have one player who grew up playing Japanese videogames, and is therefore more in-tune with the culturally-bound representational strategies they use. Another player, who maybe grew up exposed

to more Western game genres, might not be able to understand these modes of representation, and conclude they are unsuccessful when in fact they simply require a different literacy of representation. It's my personal belief that identifying and clearly mapping out these different literacies could have an *enormous* effect on understanding why there is so much dissonance in certain areas of the discourse, specifically in the area of simulation and emotional complexity rhetoric. Understanding these literacies, and being able to find new ways to combine and consolidate them, could be a project of monumental importance to designing more meaningful games for a wider population of players.

## **Final Thoughts**

I've used a bit of conjecture throughout this thesis. The discourse I looked at is not an even representation of who is currently playing, designing, and writing about videogames. Highly visible events like Game Developers Conference and the collection on scholarly work in books, conferences, and journals on games sometimes makes it difficult to know what other discursive voices might be. I've dealt with these limitations basically by my intuition as both a gamer and an academic, two spheres of discursive awareness that helped guide my choices of which debates and people to follow. This is arguable the best one person can do in attempting to make sense of a large, chaotic discourse, making a messy but nevertheless calculated stab at trying to bring the wider field into focus. The claims and conclusions I've made aren't meant to be proof that meaningfulness is constructed in exactly these specific, limited ways. They are just

frameworks to begin hypothesizing how this sort of understanding *might* be accomplished, in which case inconsistencies in my thinking can inspire constructive criticism and debate. I've proposed one possible framework for understanding the subjective landscape of meaningfulness, however the framework itself is less important than the realization that an awareness of interpretive subjectivity is important.

This thesis has been my best attempt to explore what meaningfulness can be in videogames as well as offer a reason why such an exploration is necessary. I hope it been illuminating. I feel like I've been trying to start a fire in the darkness by rubbing two sticks together. Those two sticks were narrative and emotion, and I hope I've at least generated some heat and smoke. It's going to take a lot more than this to create a blazing fire, just as long as people know where to pour the gasoline.

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