Jeff Lasowski

**A Response to *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game***

The first section of the book lays the groundwork by defining cyberdrama as a new type of storytelling that emerged to tell the stories of the internet age, similar to how novels emerged to tell the stories of previous generations (Murray, Page 1). Some of the key goals Murray associates with cyberdrama include agency, immersion, and transformation. Agency is a fascinating concept for non-theatrical narrative because it requires the creators to anticipate how the audience will react to the work and tailor the experience around that reaction. Choose your own adventure books and a few ambitious movies dabbled in the audience dictating the narrative, but the choices offered by cyberdrama are more natural and immersive. I don't fully agree with the necessity of immersion in cyberdrama, however. Fourth wall breaking can be a useful tool in the right context, and Alternate Reality Games can only do so much safely. Transformation is certainly a necessity with games being on par with, if not more ephemeral than music.

*The Sims* is mentioned as one of the games that led to the creation of the term "cyberdrama" because it is "neither game nor story" (Murray, Page 5). This brings Murray's premise into greater focus because a life simulation will tell the story of that life as it grows and changes, though not necessarily through a written narrative. The actions of the developers, the player, and the game itself work together to generate an unwritten story of the simulated life as it exists. There is a need for a different approach because "just as there is no reason to think of mystery novels or role-playing games as merely versions of chess, there is no reason to think of the new forms of story telling as extensions of filmmaking or board games" (Murray, Page 8).

Perlin questions why audiences are better able to identify with protagonists in non-interactive works like movies and books as opposed to interactive works like video games. In both cases "identify"

seems like an imperfect fit. In a movie or a book we are aware that we aren't the character, we're merely observers closely shadowing them through the story. "The protagonist gets hurt, I feel bad" sounds more akin to character empathy than identifying as the character (Perlin, Page 12). Games have the opposite problem in that the player is aware that the protagonist is essentially a puppet under their control. They personally identify as their avatar, so empathizing with the character behind that avatar becomes more difficult.

Mateas describes interactive drama as the player assuming "the role of a first-person character in a dramatic story" and that "the player does not sit above the story, watching it as in a simulation, but is immersed in the story" which sounds accurate, but restrictive (Mateas, Page 20). The implication is that only a game from a first-person perspective with a suitably blank slate protagonist can ever qualify as an interactive drama; like the player is required to physically and mentally project themselves into the game. A more accurate definition may be that player actions drive the story.

 I agree with the interactive Gandhi story anecdote as it pertains to game design and player agency (Mateas, Page 24). If the player has the freedom to interact with the world presented to them however they like, but has their actions arbitrarily restricted, such as littering the game world with weapons they can't use, agency is undermined. The material affordances of the gameplay should match the formal affordances of the narrative as closely as possible to create a context in which the player's actions contextually make sense.

The second section opens with the ludology, the study of games, and outlines the current thought about the study of gaming itself. Ludologists attempt to analyze the games themselves rather than create analogies to existing media like film or literature. This is a worthwhile endeavor, but progress made in the decade since this book's publication suggests that ludology will remain an emerging study for the foreseeable future.

Eskelinen attempts to establish the relationship between gameplay and narrative by breaking down both to their fundamentals and somewhat convolutedly piecing it back together. My understanding is that a narrative can be broadly defined as a sequence of events, but the sequence of events that comprise a video game don't necessarily constitute a narrative (Eskelinen, Page 37). I can see where this argument is coming from because narratives typically show intent, a dramatic throughline tying the events together. It's the difference between the story of an event and an itemized list of what happened at said event.

Aarseth breaks down games into something of a dichotomy between narrative and simulation. Aarseth comes across as largely dismissive of game narrative, referring to "story-game hybrids" as though the two concepts are inherently opposed (Aarseth, Page 51). I disagree on this because story and narrative is what shapes the game. Story creates the context for gameplay, it's what separates an elven mage fighting to defeat the evil overlord from a player avatar navigating a virtual space to despawn other character models. Gameplay and narrative are already intertwined, it's up to developers to determine whether the two will create a strong rope or the other's noose.

Moulthrop seems to argue for a sort of anti-immersion. Games fit in a broader cultural context and that culture must be taken into account when making or playing games. This point has me split because it depends so highly on the game in question and whether or not its goals are for escapist entertainment, political/social commentary, or a combination of the two.

The fourth section, and final section I will be covering, outlines game theories beginning with Jenkins' game design as narrative architecture. Jenkins argues that the way gaming and narrative have been typically thought about is going about the problem in the wrong way and designers should consider themselves less as narrative storytellers and more as narrative architects (Jenkins, Page 121). In particular, Jenkins mentions "embedded narrative" which sounds almost synonymous with the idea of

environmental storytelling, or conveying narrative meaning through the game's setting especially as it changes over the course of the game (Jenkins, Page 126-127). I disagree somewhat on the point about emergent narrative, however. Creating a compelling, meaningful narrative simply by allowing the elements of the game to interact with each other sounds a bit too much like a pipe dream. Procedurally generated environments with current technology trend more toward utility than creativity as it is, procedurally generated narratives would likely end up just as shallow.

Juul explores the more abstract concept of how time relates to video games. Particularly the concepts of game time, the game's state at the moment; play time, the real time investment made by the player; and event time, the time with which events in the game unfold typically through phrases like in-game hour, or in-game day (Juul, Page 139). Time is an interesting concept for narrative because it's always changing, a time skip here, a flashback there, a montage or two, in that sense games have a lot in common with film and literature. The subject is worth talking about, but its application seems most suited for a case-by-case basis approach.

Pearce describes six narrative operators that can dictate a game: experiential, performative, augmentary, descriptive, metastory, and story system (Pearce, Page 145). This article reads as more descriptive of these factors and how they impact games than anything, but a few points did stick out. Authorial abdication, or the idea that video games can reject the will of the author through gameplay is a fascinating and the likely cause of the much dreaded "ludonarrative dissonance." Crafting distinct characters with enough wiggle room to narratively justify the gameplay is an interesting problem for writers to have. A new approach to dynamic character writing that takes into account audience participation is required, but only time will tell whether this can reach the level of literature and cinema's more static greats.

Zimmerman's section largely restates many of the ideas of authors earlier on in the text with an examination on how his "four naughty terms:" games, play, narrative, and interactivity, interact when it comes to games and stories (Zimmerman, Page 155). I agree with the sentiments, particularly "games are about conflict" when taken to mean players are presented with an obstacle and work to overcome it. Given the context of previous articles, however, Zimmerman's article reads as a largely derivative addition, especially when it consists almost entirely of defining his terms with only a single page devoted to applying those terms to an illustrative example.

*First Person* provides plenty of food for thought with its compilation of essays and responses representing different sides of several ludological and narratological arguments. I agreed with some, disagreed with others but I now have a better grasp on the debate at hand when it comes to narrative in the video game industry.

Harrigan, P. & Wardrip-Fruin, N. (2004). *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.