Who's Afraid of the Holodeck?
Facing the Future of Digital Narrative without Ludoparanoia

Janet H. Murray   @janet.murray etv.gatech.edu inventingthemedium.com
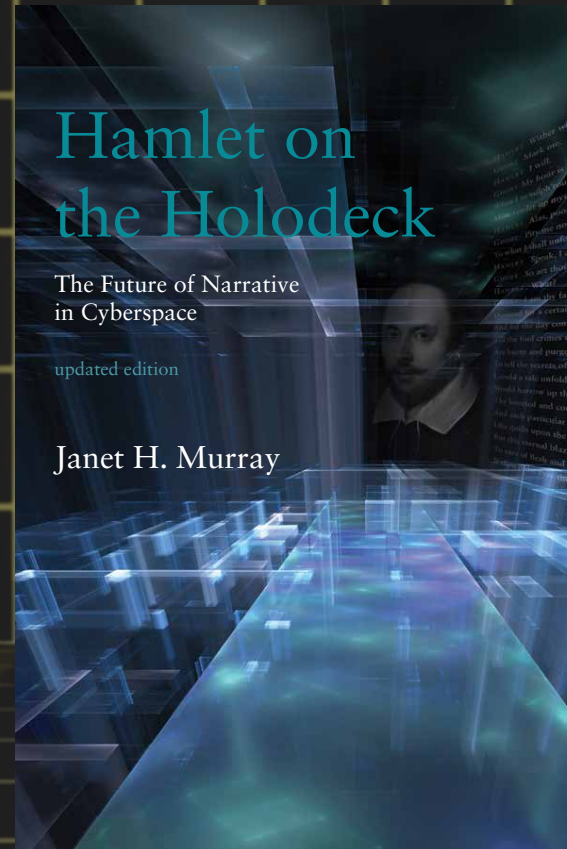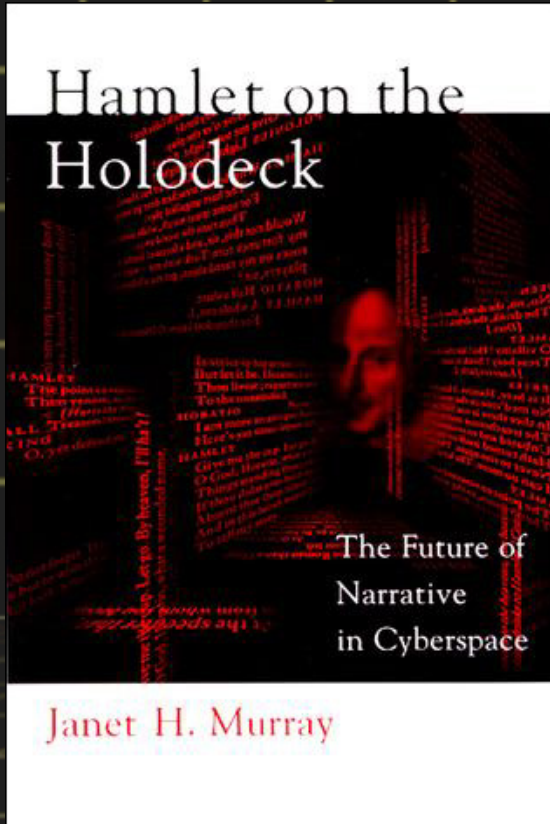Georgia Tech

A talk at University of Utrecht May 22 2017

Who's Afraid of the Holodeck?
Facing the Future of Digital Narrative without
Narratophobia

Janet H. Murray
Georgia Tech

A talk at University of Utrecht May 22 2017

1997 - 2017 I was right about the flowering of computational narrative forms

Things I did NOT claim

Interactive narrative is the teleological ideal for all videogame development

Games should aspire to be movies

Ludologists' assertions I agree with

Games don't have to grow up to be stories

Games are their own genre with their own aesthetics

Ludologists' assertions I do not agree with

Narrative elements in games necessarily distract from game pleasures

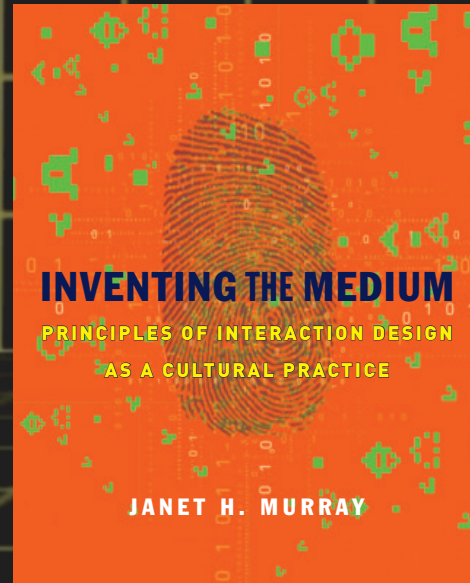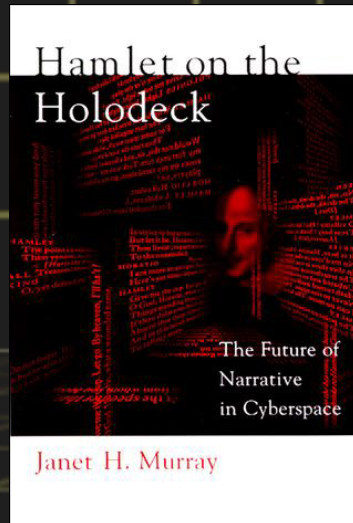Game rules are more "real" than narrative

Lara Croft is identical to a chess piece

12 Hour Version

A new medium of representation with particular promise for storytelling

- The affordances of computation as a medium: procedural, participatory, encyclopedic, and spatial

- Aesthetics of Immersion, Agency, Transformation

New form of narrative expression

Anticipated by multiple cultural practices

- legacy storytelling forms – prose, film, tv -- becoming multi-sequential,

- computer science explorations of procedural plot generation and AI characters,

- videogames
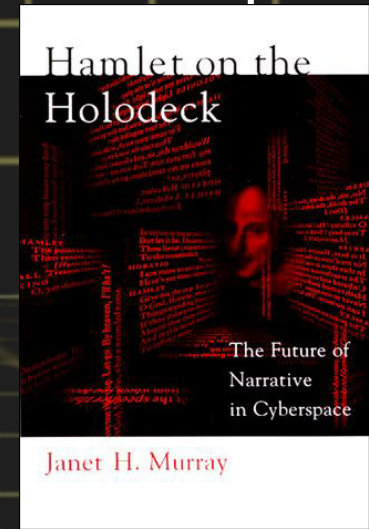
New form of narrative expression

The Holodeck is shorthand for all these

Possibilities -- a fantasy of perfect interactivity

and immersion

Hamlet on the Holodeck

The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace

Janet H. Murray
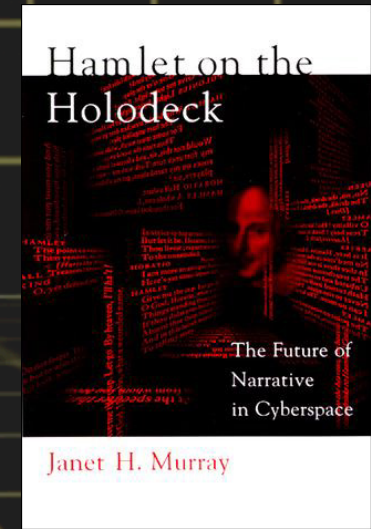
1997; 2017 Holodeck seems closer
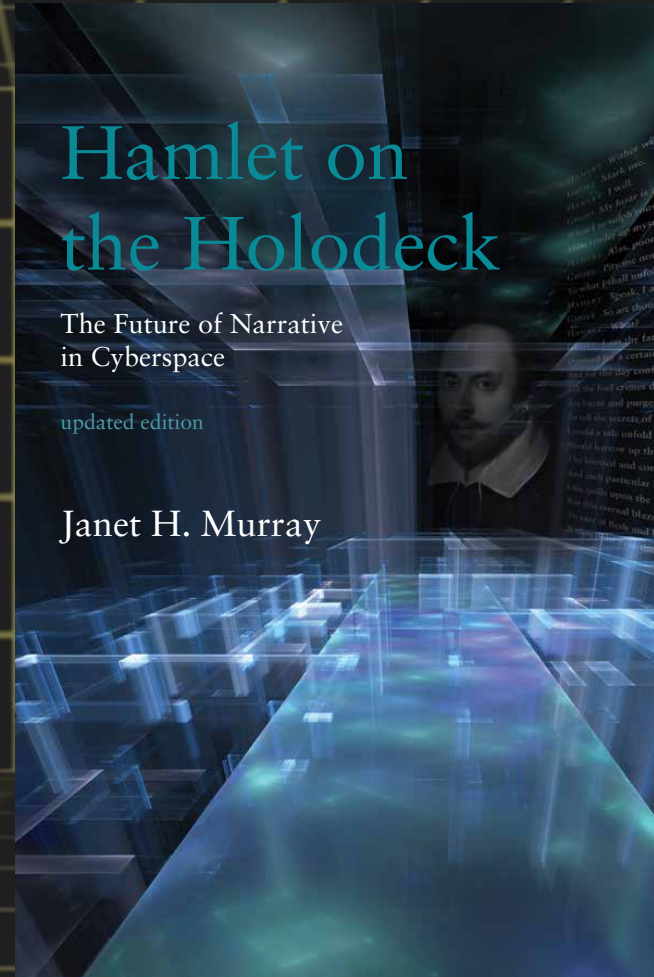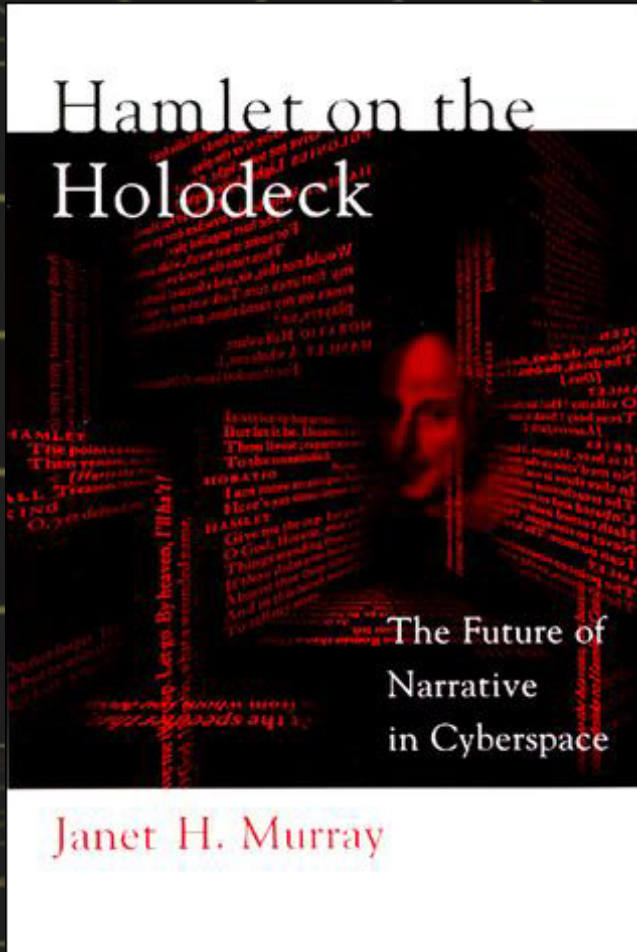
Hamlet on the Holodeck

The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace

Janet H. Murray

Hamlet on the Holodeck

The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace

updated edition

Janet H. Murray

The Holodeck is a fantasy ... that excites desire

"the ultimate way of reproducing reality"

Gene Dolgoff, who introduced idea to Gene Roddenberry

Subscribe Here

12 Hour Version

Gene Roddenberry's Holodeck:
Genre fiction in which you play the protagonist

Gene Roddenberry's Holodeck:
...within an impossibly detailed & responsive world

Star Trek: The Next Generation 1987-94

Fears of Representation

- Star Trek Holodeck narratives were often nightmares
  - Violent intrusion of the imaginary into the real world
  - Imprisonment within the imaginary world
  - Vulnerability to harm because computer unresponsive

Moriarty escapes! Crew imprisoned in simulation!Simulation cannot be suspended!

Caption: Data and Moriarty

Fears of Representation

Star Trek Holodeck narratives were often nightmares

– Violent intrusion of the imaginary into the real world

– Imprisonment within the imaginary world

– Vulnerability to harm because computer unresponsive

UNDERLYING UNEASE: Representation is spooky (uncanny)!

UNDERLYING FEAR: Power of imaginative experience

Chimes with Persistent Fears of Media Forms

- Plato on poets – false, corrupting, excite disruptive passions
- Don Quixote – too much silent reading of chivalry books makes you mad
- Huxley's Feelies – enslaved by pleasure, based on his horror of the "talkies"
- Comic Books, Television, Dungeons and Dragons
- Computers generally, videogames in particular

The Holodeck is a fantasy … that excites desire

"the ultimate way of reproducing reality"

Gene Dolgoff, who introduced idea to Gene Roddenberry

"Our Holy Grail is the Holodeck"

Richard Lindheim, one of the founders of of ICT (2002)

The Holodeck is a fantasy … that excites desire

"the ultimate way of reproducing reality"
Gene Dolgoff, who introduced idea to Gene Rodenberry in 1970s

"Our Holy Grail is the Holodeck"
Richard Lindheim, one of the founders of of ICT

"Can Haptic Holograms Unlock the Holodeck?"
PC Magazine 2014

"The Holodeck is Here!" (meaning room-scale VR) Conference panel at #Unite2015 Boston

VR Recent claims

- You are there!

- You are immediately empathetically engaged!

Most recently

- Virtual Reality (in critiques)
  - As delusional, separating us from knowing what is real
  - As escapist and addictive
  - As instrument of torture

You are there!
Ares Project http://etv.gatech.edu/projects

VR 2017: You are (not)"there"

Roomscale with controller, much more present:

- Can move through "impossible spaces"
- Can experience jump-scares
- Can pick things up, change the state of the world, feels like a visit to a space
  - » My own experience with chasm, elevator, axe

You are NOT there

- You cannot touch anything and feel the weight

- You are aware it is an image , a navigable representation and unsure how it works

- You feel more immersed, the clearer the boundary and the more consistent the interaction mechanics

You are NOT there

Every holodeck needs a door
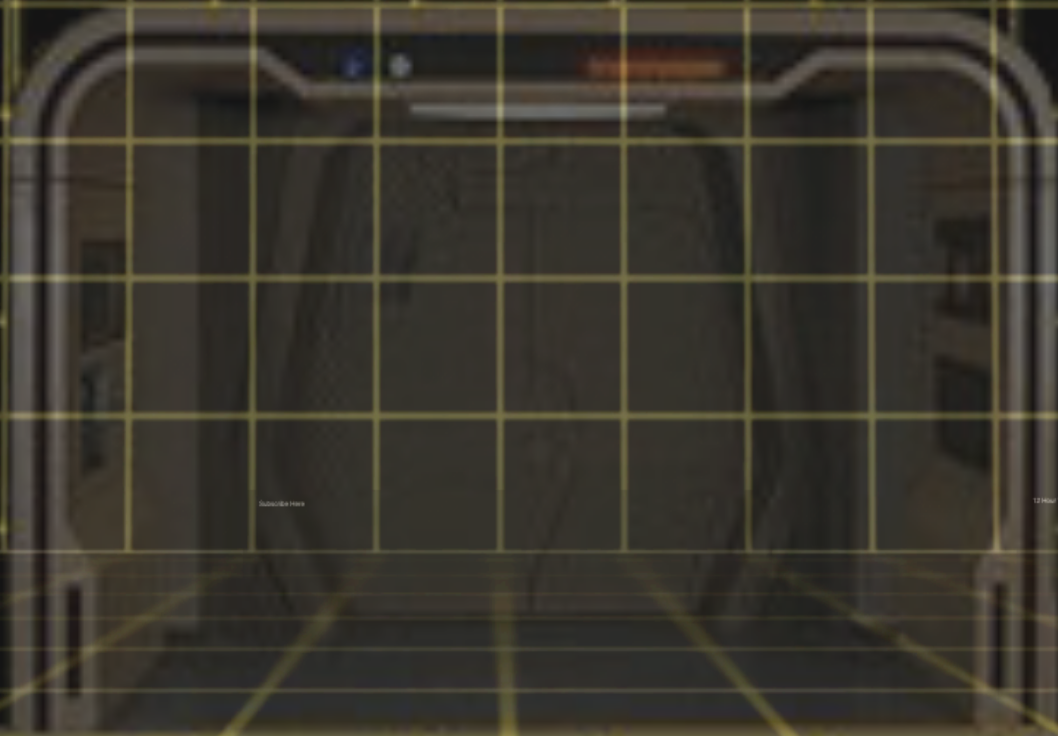
Nonny de la Peña

- Dramatic compression
- There/not there
- Intimate witness
- Real audio
- Mo-cap modeling
  of actors

There is an appetite for place-based immersive fictional experiences beyond videogames

Punchdrunk "promenade" Theatre

Theater + Dance + Set Design + Party + Game

- Re-establishing the fourth wall with Masks
- Lacking narrative structure and dramatic agency
- Closer to Spectacle than participatory genres
- Opportunities for with more dramatic use of simultaneity and choice

There is an appetite for role playing experiences within richly detailed genre-based storyworlds

Artistically ambitious narrative videogames are stronger than ever

- Journey

- Her Story

- Gone Home

…

Gone Home (Fullbright Company, 2013)

Red herring / red hair dye

Videogame Mechanics Can Scaffold VR Storytelling

- Exploration of a confined set of spaces (island, house)

- Unlocking of spaces as you progress

- Inventory of objects

- Distributing story among objects to be discovered and collected

Subscribe Here

12 Hour Version

Dramatic Conventions Can Scaffold VR Storytelling

- Act , scene, and dramatic beat structure

- Simultaneity of events linked to separate spaces and structured fictional timeline

- Characters moving around the space who can be followed

- Overhead sounds or glimpsed visual effects (off-stage from one space, on-stage from another)

- Confession cam, diaries, tapes, photographs, surveillance videos to present off-stage events

Two things necessary for VR coherence

- Dramatic compression
  - E.g. Nonny de la Pena's documentary work: reproduces one action in intimate proximity

- Dramatic agency
  - E.g. Gnomes and Goblins – enticing the Goblin with acorn

Subscribe Here   12 Hour Version

Holodeck as summary concept for interactive, immersive narrative

- Digital Narrative is its own tradition of practice
  - Hartmut Koenitz on IDN as not movie or literature
- Narrative conventions contribute to coherence, agency, and immersion in videogames
  - See Clara Fernandez-Vara on adventure games and how narrative expectations integrate game mechanics
- Digital Narrative draws on videogame conventions among other design elements but with distinct aesthetic goal of storytelling

12 Hour Version

SO WHY ARE SOME GAME STUDIES FOLKS SO AFRAID OF NARRATIVE?

Natasha Schull, *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas*

Gambling to "extinction" is the casino's design goal

Natasha Schull, *Addiction by Design*

Winning itself becomes an annoying distraction

Players want to be *in the zone*

Abstract tokens make it easier to zone out

When we ask enthralled players to step back and notice the cultural context of play, we are breaking a very precious spell; it is not surprising then that they resist the effort to see their enrapturing abstract symbols as meaningful signifiers linked to the common web of meaning, and their own actions, whether inside or outside the zone, within our existentially anxious human consciousness of individual choice and inescapable time.

From updated *Hamlet on the Holodeck 2017*

Overlapping but distinct pleasures

- Games arise from our delight in shared attention with other human beings, through shared pattern recognition and the invention of shared rituals.

- Narrative arises from our need to interpret causes and effects that engage us emotionally and morally; it is about desire and disappointment, hope and dread, and shared cultural values.

12 Hour Version