Are Games Bad for Stories?
Seeing Interactive Narrative as its own Genre

Janet H Murray

Professor and Associate Dean for Research

Graduate Program in Digital Media

Georgia Tech

@janetmurray   jmurray@gatech.edu

A Milestone Moment

ARDIN, founded 2017

ICIDS December 2018, First Formal Meeting

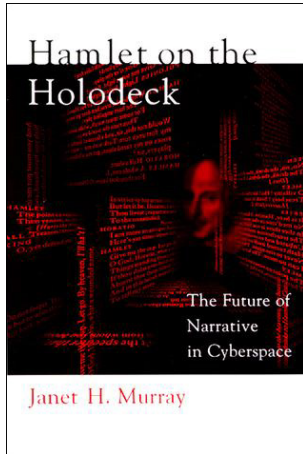Critical mass of objects to study

Critical mass of scholarship

Distinct framework
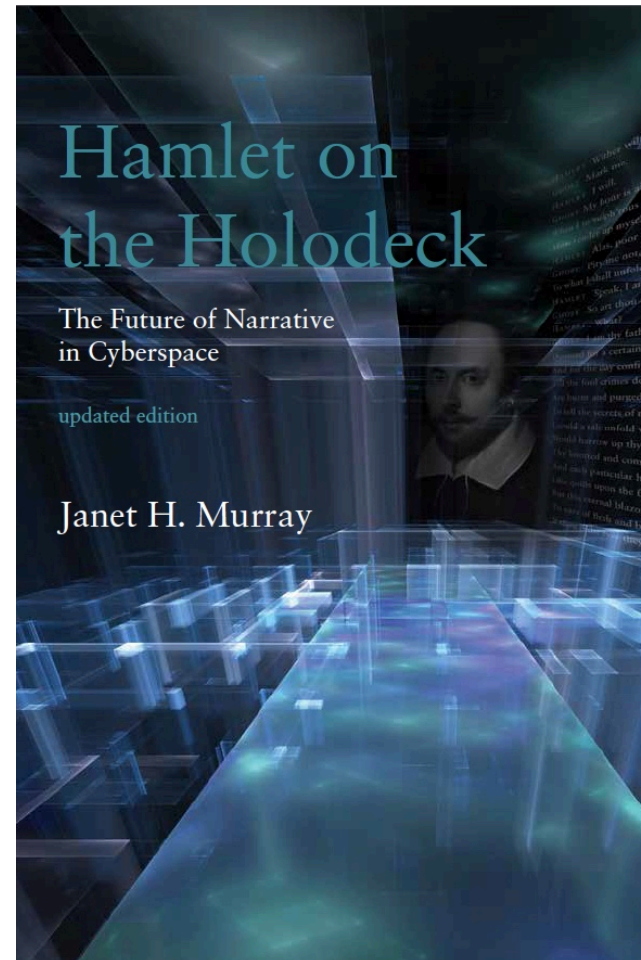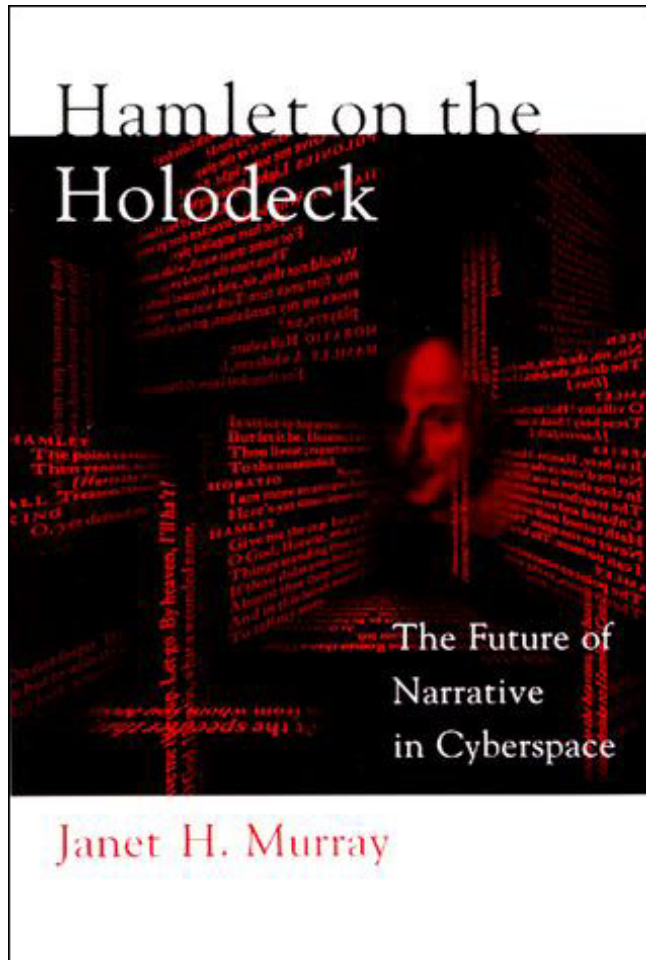- Overlaps with other disciplines
- Self-validating

Some Clarifications: Game, Story, Play

Computation as a new medium for storytelling
(not narratology, not about games)

Game Studies have positioned narrative in opposition to games, and seen it as unisequential and non-participatory

Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (2005)

Narrative

In a traditional sense, a narrative is the presentation of a story (a fixed sequence of events) by way of a discourse (Chatman 1978). In contemporary theory, narrative is often used in a much broader sense.

- Murray asserts that computers are "A new medium for storytelling" (1997, p.11).
- Eskelinen writes that "Luckily, outside theory, people are usually excellent at distinguishing between narrative situations and gaming situations: if I throw a ball at you, I don't expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories." (2004, p.36)

Half-Real, chapter 4 discusses the relation between games and narratives and compares different definitions of narrative.

Narratology

- The study of storytelling. Also: The study of games as story systems (for example, Murray 1997). See Chatman 1978.

from dictionary http://www.half-real.net/dictionary/#narrative

# Game Studies have misunderstood *interactive* narrative

Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (2005)

"The duality in video games of a real set of rules governing how the game is played and a fictional world that the player imagines."

Chapter 5 – from dictionary http://www.half-real.net/dictionary/#half-real

Computation as a new medium for storytelling
(not narratology, not about games)
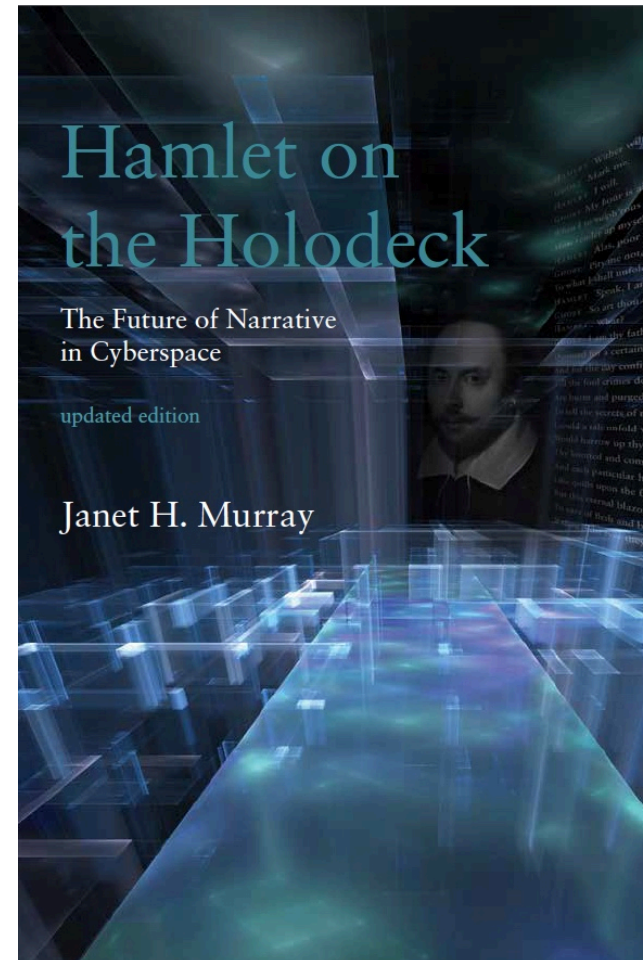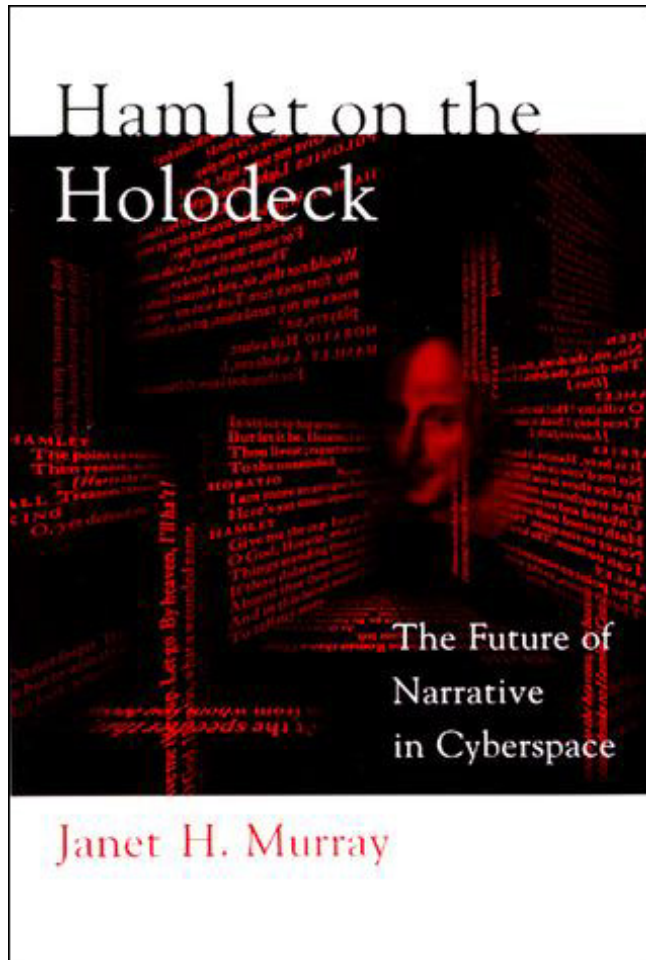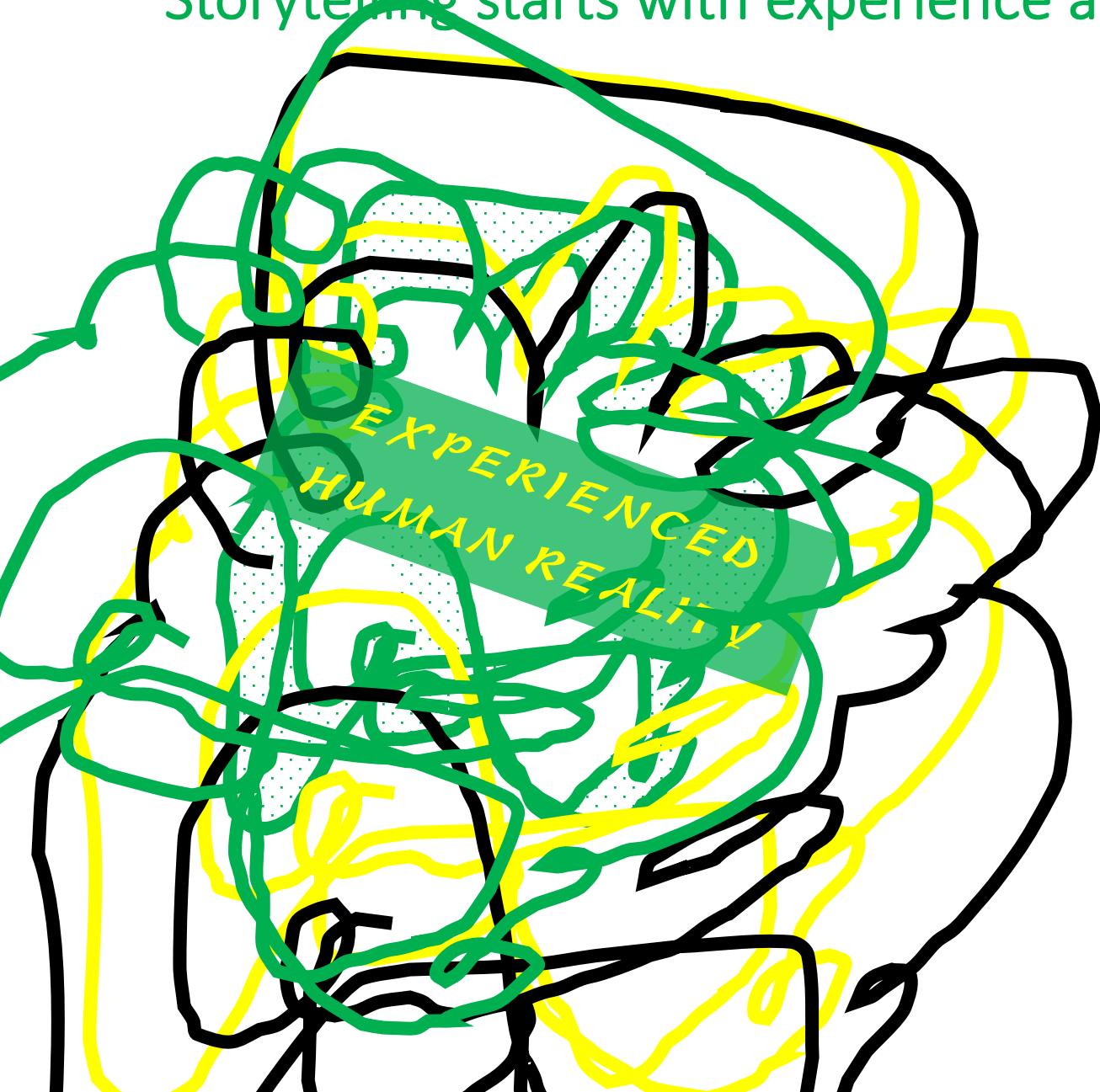
Where is the story-making?
Classic Narratology: events filtered through discourse

Chronological Events

Expressive Telling

Storytelling starts with experience and creates a coherent world

EXPERIENCED HUMAN REALITY

Coherent Storyworld

Games and Narrative are Cognitive and Cultural Forms, related to Play

B. Sutton-Smith: Play is exploration that expands our repertoire of adaptive behaviors

M. Tomasello: The Joint Attentional Scene is the cognitive and cultural basis of symbolic communication (language)

M. Donald: Cognition and culture co-evolve through our media of representation

J. Huizinga: Games are the basis of culture

N.D. Schüll, Addiction to the Zone (*Addiction by Design)*

D. Winnicott: Imaginative play is emotionally adaptive, promoting growth

V. Turner: Play and art share liminality

K. Oatley: Fiction is social simulation running on minds

L. Zunshine: Fiction is exercise for our mind-reading muscle

D. Herman: Narrative is the creation of a storyworld

On Joint Attention as the basis of representational systems

J. Murray, "Toward a Cultural Theory of Gaming: Digital Games and the Co-Evolution of Media, Mind, and Culture" *Popular Communication*, 4(3), 185-202 2006

J. Murray, ""Games as Joint Attentional Scenes," in Suzanne de Castell and Jennifer Jenson (eds) *Worlds in Play: International Perspectives on Digital Games Research*, Peter Lang Press, 2007

J. Murray, *Inventing the Medium: Principles of Interaction Design as a Cultural Practice* (MIT Press) Fall 2011.

Shared meaning-making starts with the Joint Attentional Scene

Shared attention is pleasurable, fueling our cognitive growth, through the cultural elaboration of symbol systems

Games grow out of our innate pleasure in shared attention…

- With opponent
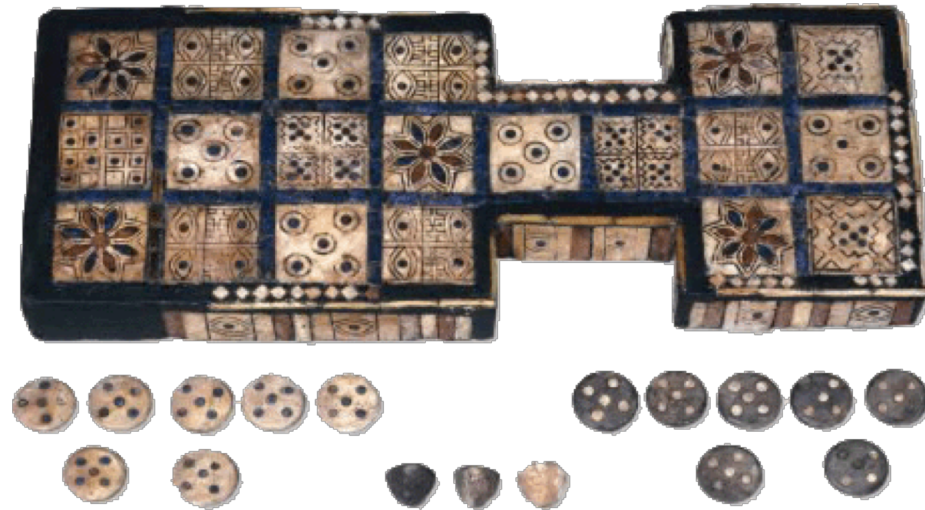- With teammates
- With composer of a puzzle

Games grow out of our innate pleasure in shared attention, as expressed through synchronized ritualized behaviors ...

- Simultaneous (Ring-a-round-a-rosy)

- Mimicking (Follow the Leader, Simon Says)

- Turn-taking (Dice)

- Complementary roles (Hide and Seek)

RING-A-ROUND A ROSY.

Games grow out of our innate pleasure in shared attention, as expressed through synchronized ritualized behaviors, and the manipulation of symbolic representations

- Dice

- Tokens

- Letters and words

Games grow out of our innate pleasure in shared attention, expressed through synchronized ritualized behaviors and the manipulation of symbolic representations codified in artificial rules

The rules of games are not "real": they are a shared cultural representation that creates a magic circle of mutual expectations, a playful space with clear cause and effect but no immediate real world consequences

The experience of coordinating (social behavior), winning (a contest), solving (a puzzle), mastering (a skill), are the most real things about games, emotionally experienced and adaptive for survival.

The pleasure of interactive narrative is not synchronization but dramatic agency

Interactive narrative creates the experience of **dramatic agency**

requires scripting of interactor and of digital storyworld

transparent actions motivated by plot events

coherent dramatic response by digital storyworld

actions not necessarily in first person

actions not necessarily changing events : could be revealing events or character

Hamlet on the Holodeck
The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace

updated edition

Janet H. Murray
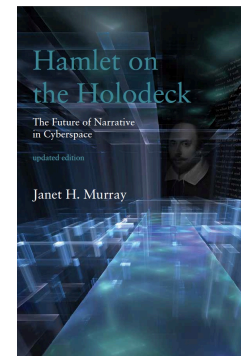
Game: Ring-around-a-Rosy
pleasure in synchronized ritualized behaviors
socialization and body control

RING-A-ROUND A ROSY.

Game: The Royal Game of Ur
abstract journey and numeracy skills
through symbolic tokens & space and rules of play

Play

WORK

Play
(Free exploration, detached from real consequences)

WORK
(ADAPTIVE BEHAVIORS WITH REAL CONSEQUENCES)

Play

GAMES
(TOKENS & RULES)

ORK

Play

GAMES
(TOKENS & RULES)

STORIES
(CHARACTERS, EVENTS)

Play

Escape

Liminality

GAMES
(TOKENS & RULES)

STORIES
(CHARACTERS, EVENTS)

Instrumentality

Escape

Both GAMES and STORIES are
Magic Circles
Immersive
Value-laden

Liminality

Instrumentality

Escape

Both GAMES and STORIES can be
Insightful / Formulaic
Pro-social /Anti-social
Entertainment / Art

Liminality

GAMES   STORIES

Instrumentality

Aesthetics of Games and Fictional Narratives

Pleasure in Games

Synchronization (ritualized behaviors and roles)

Shared symbol systems (tokens)

Predictable but surprising, abstracted world (rules, luck, strategy, opponent)

Enacting luck

Performing mastery

Performing community

Winning/solving

Flow / "the Zone"

Pleasure in Stories

Synchronization (with vicarious thoughts actions of characters)

Shared media formats (e.g. text adventure)

Predictable but surprising abstracted world (genres)

Social simulation w moral physics

Recognition of known patterns of lived experience

New Insight into patterns of lived experience

Narrative Closure

Catharis / "Hollow Pursuits"

Natasha Schull, *Addiction by Design* (2014)

Player enters the "machine zone"
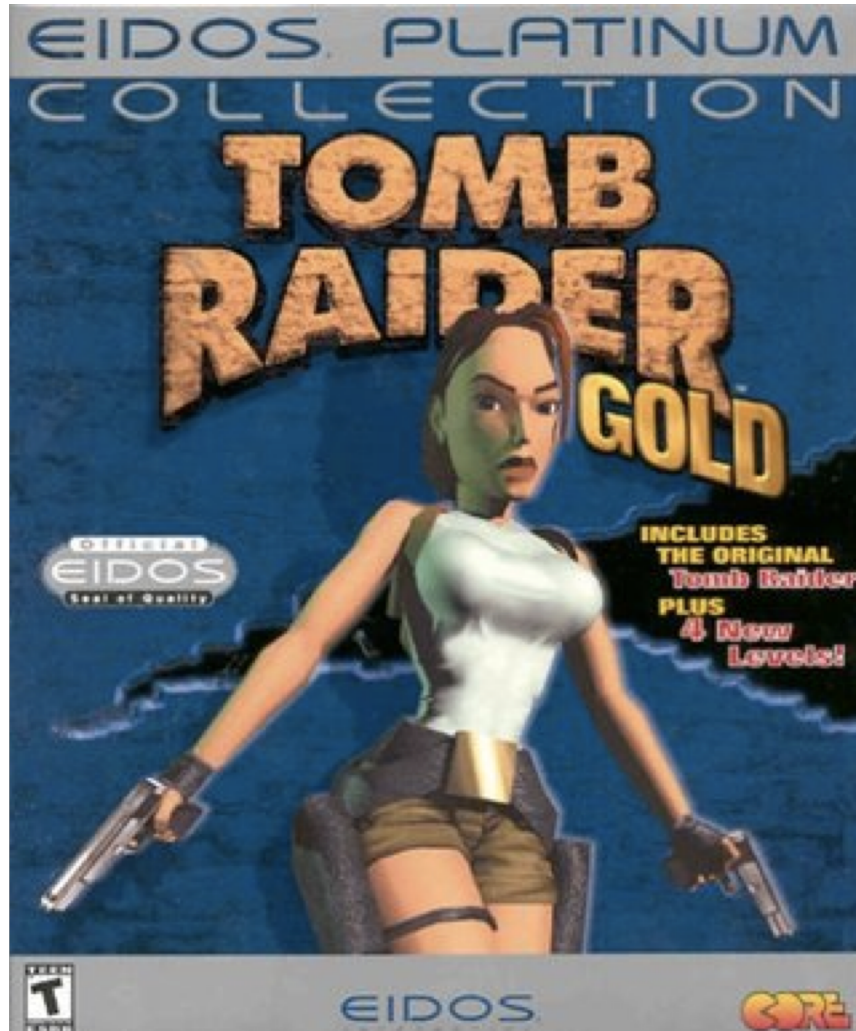
Hyperfocus on game events

No social contact

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

Longing for empty representation, without social context In a perpetual now, the opposite of narrative
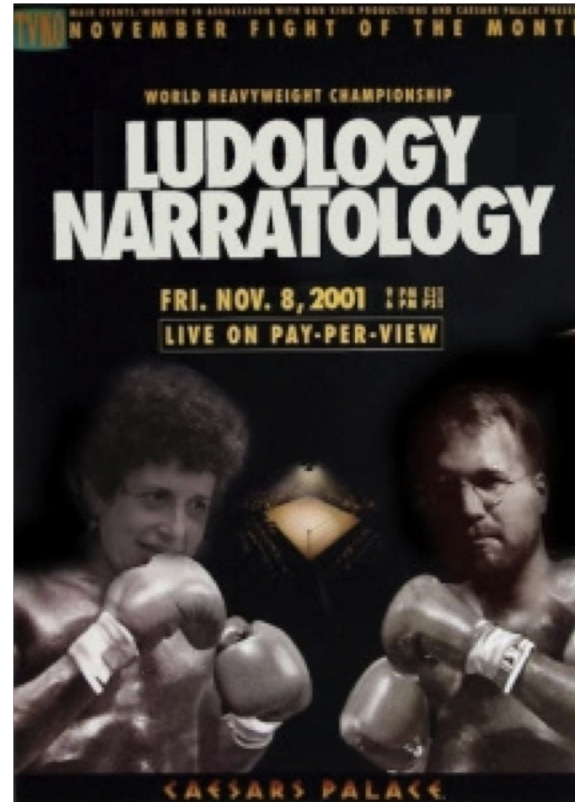
Collapsing story content into culturally/emotionally "neutral" token

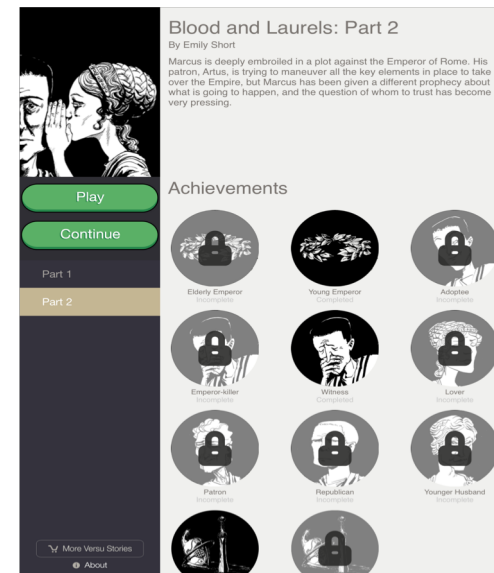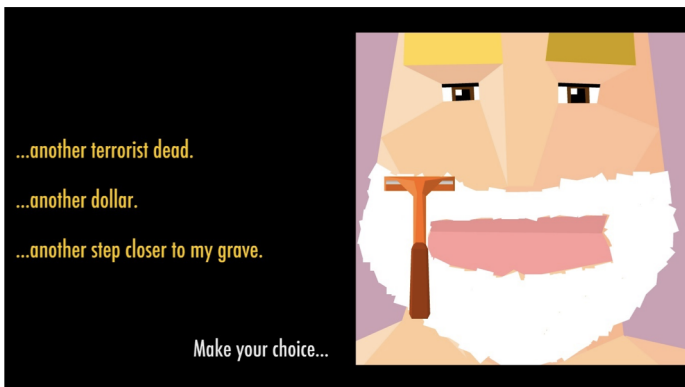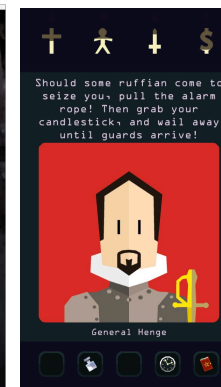# Opposing Goals: Emotional engagement leading to Catharsis versus Dissociation of the never-ending Zone

Purgation of vicarious emotion, recognition of reality

Sustained tokenized ritual, detachment from reality

Some Examples from the Game/Story Borderlands

"Bandersnatch" *Black Mirror*
Charlie Brooker, Netflix, December 28 2018

One of us is going over.

Black Mirror: Bandersnatch

One of us is going over.

Black Mirror: Bandersnatch
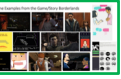
Fictional characters as game tokens

- Interiority not consistent
- Empathy violated by random behaviors and fates
- Killed off at random
- Suicide casually treated

One of us is going over.

Black Mirror: Bandersnatch

One minute 2 variations
"Bowling" *Malcolm in the Middle (2001) (5:45 -> 6:40)*

22 MIN • FOX • TVPG

Malcolm in the Middle

Bowling • S2 E20

Hey, Dad. I need a favor.

22 MIN • FOX • TVPG

Malcolm in the Middle

Bowling • S2 E20

are going in together
on an old car,

22 MIN • FOX • TVPG
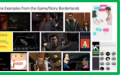
Malcolm in the Middle

Bowling • S2 E20

Hey, Mom, I need a favor.

22 MIN • FOX • TVPG

Malcolm in the Middle

Bowling • S2 E20

Get back in there!

22 MIN • FOX • TVPG

Malcolm in the Middle

Bowling • S2 E20

That's ridiculous.

22 MIN • FOX • TVPG

Malcolm in the Middle

Bowling • S2 E20

Okay. Just thought I'd ask.

22 MIN • FOX • TVPG
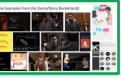
Malcolm in the Middle

Bowling • S2 E20

Oh, honey, I'm sorry.

22 MIN • FOX • TVPG

Malcolm in the Middle

Bowling • S2 E20

knowing that you kept my life
a living hell!

Russian Doll (2018) official trailer
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YHcKoAMGGvY

Replay

Used for mastery in game design with respawning lives

Used for exploring rule-based parameterized model in simulations

Can be used for progressive development in interactive narrative

      repetition emblematic of emotional paralysis

     emotional growth leads to release from repetition

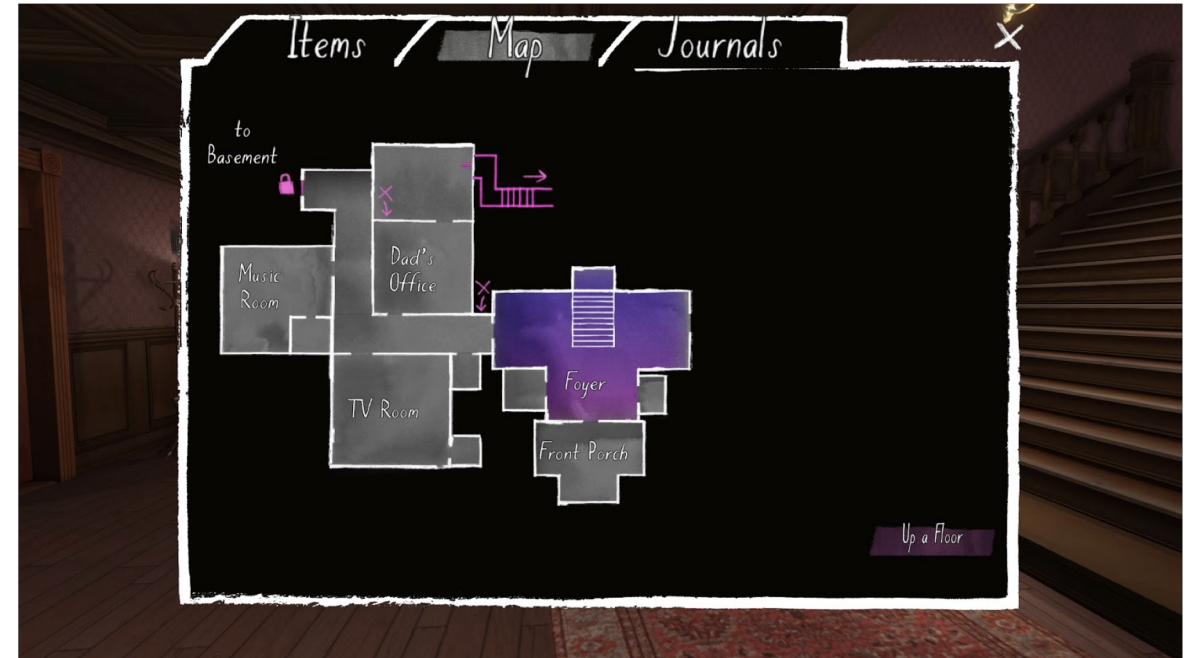Can be used for exploring multiple points of view in interactive narrative

Can be used for exploring multiple possibilities of coherent story world

Building blocks from videogame-like interactions:
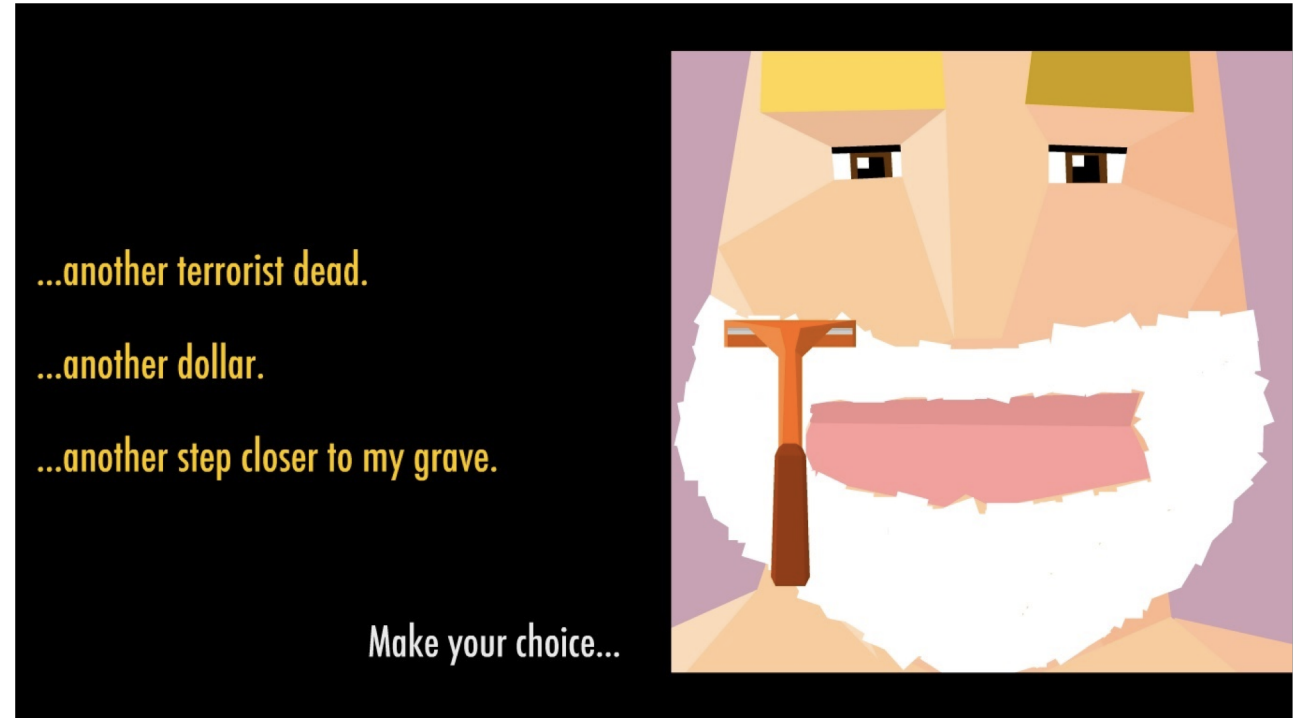# Exploring a space for backstory and clues to mystery

Mystery House 1980

Gone Home, 2013

Building blocks from videogame-like interactions: Shaving as expressive narrative convention

SHAVING IS HUMILIATING

...another terrorist dead.

...another dollar.

...another step closer to my grave.

Make your choice...

Jim Munroe, *Unmanned (*MolleIndustria, 2012)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTsP0SpWdCk

Anna Anthropy, *Dys4ia,* 2012

Reigns (2016)

Good strategy game conventions (balancing 4 readable state variables) with strong potential for IDN

Simple swipe left/right mechanic

But immersion in the story is undermined by lack of dramatic agency:

- Little payoff on player choices
- Generic actions with no parameterized variation
- No moral physics beyond survival
- Repetitive without progression

Dramatic Agency in futile actions

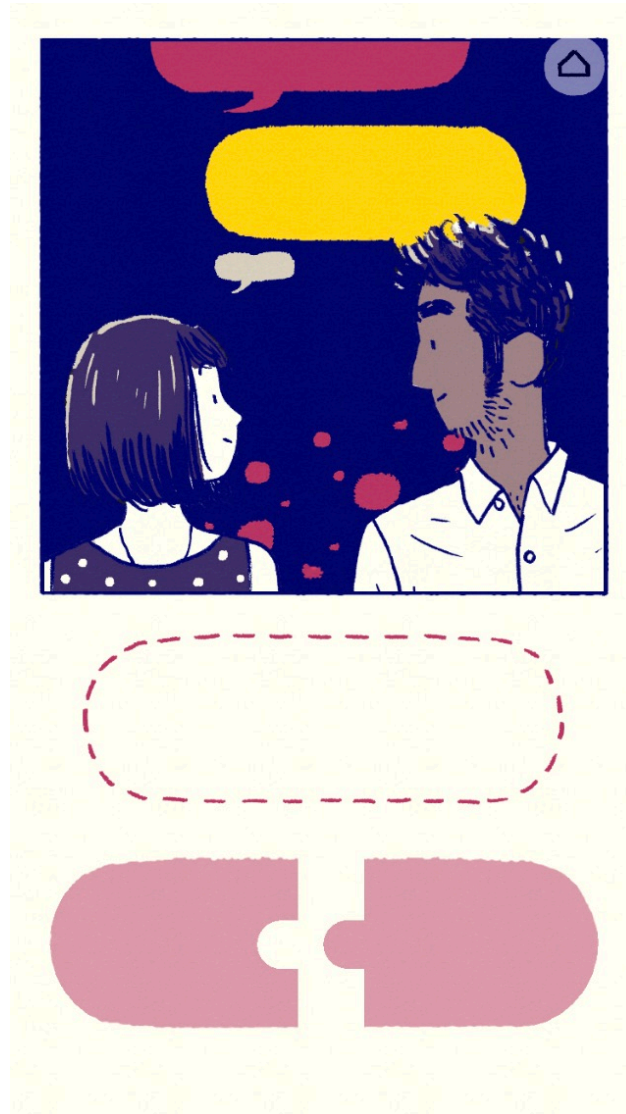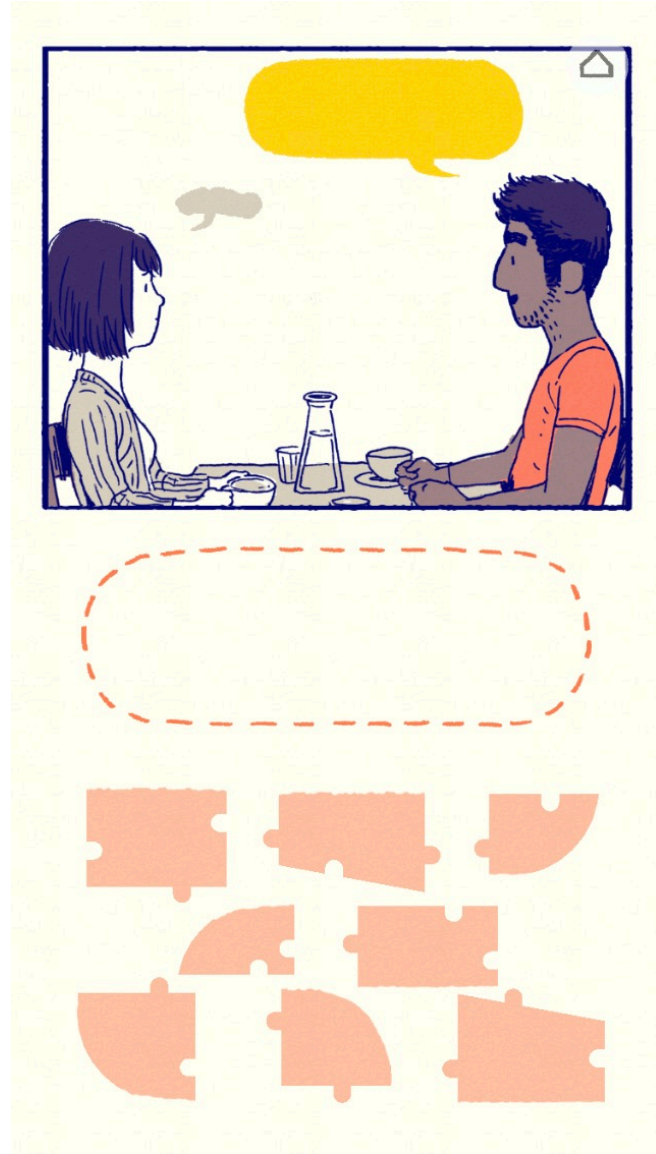The young heir cannot be saved by your advice (not a strategy game)

Fits the moral physics of the storyworld

Game of Thrones: Ice from Fire Telltale Season 1

Florence (2018) Dramatic agency through expressive enactment

Jigsaw puzzle as metaphor for shattered relationship

Complexity : Computer-based simulation games using narrative as tokenized elements

The Sims: Bildungsroman

- Structure of bildungsroman with protestant work ethic makes for coherence of game
- Backrub is a step forward in expressive conventions in gaming
- Toileting, eating meals are too real and repetitive, no dramatic compression
- Dollhouse for open-ended play
- No replay but multiple variants

Complexity : Computer-based simulation games using narrative as tokenized elements

Prom Week (2013)

- Virtuoso programming the goal
- Abstractions taken from formulaic films but lack dramatic effect because tokenized
- Problems with readable cause and effect
- Multiple characters and possibilities reduced involvement
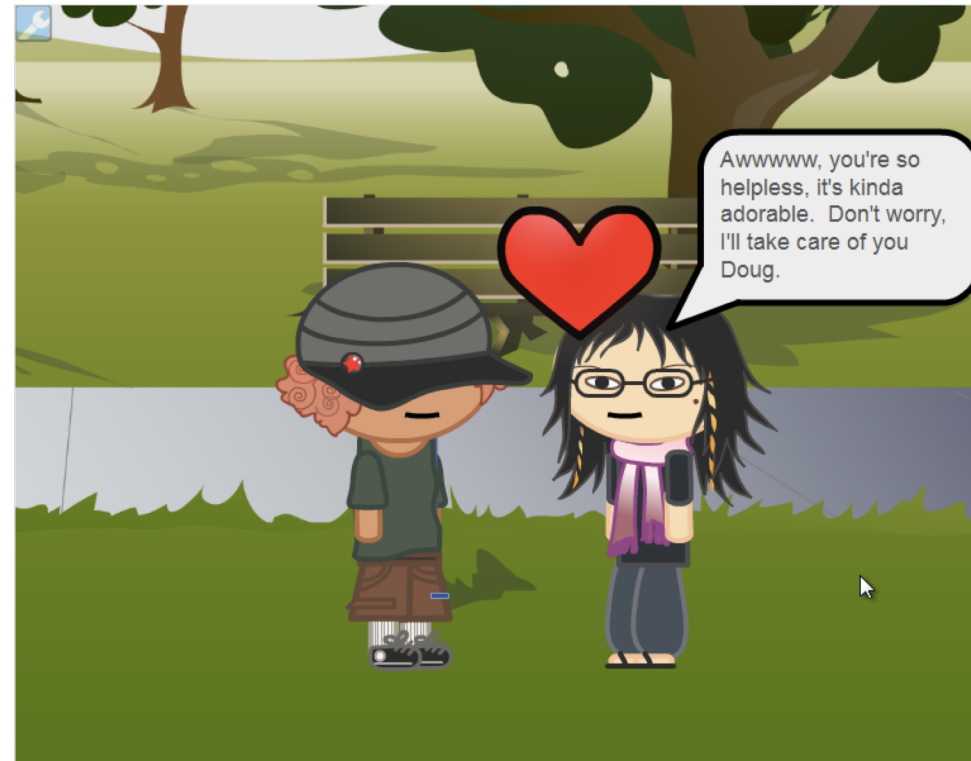
Complexity through Immersive detail: Simulation games create unfulfilled expectations of vicarious identification and dramatic action

"Early in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, a captured rival, bound to a post, begs me for food. I pick up food, but I see no option to feed him. I can eat, which upsets him. But when I toss the food on the ground, he doesn't react."

"

A crowd watches a public hanging. After the execution, the crowd disperses, and I find the victim's mother weeping in the mud. I want to console her, but for whatever reason, the game won't let me "greet" or "antagonize" the distraught mother. The only option it gives me is to pull a gun on her. "

"But ultimately, the story is too sentimental, and the game too loyal to the video game story trajectory, in which missions become bigger and more explosive, rather than more critical and introspective."

Chris Plante, Review of *Red Dead Redemption 2*, https://www.polygon.com/reviews/2018/10/25/18021034/red-dead-redemption-2-review

Complexity: *80 days:* post-colonial moral physics and "unfair" gameplay (Meg Jayanth)

Even better would be game that let us switch POVs

Even better would be an IDN – not a game – that let us switch POVs

Complexity in multiform AI-assisted text-based storyworld

Complex storyworld with consistent characters who have multiple possible fates

Adapting achievement badges game convention to keep track of multiple versions in a well-segmented, multiform story, with compelling dramatic variants

A Milestone Moment

ARDIN, founded 2017

ICIDS December 2018, First Formal Meeting

Critical mass of objects to study

Critical mass of scholarship

Distinct framework

  Overlaps with other disciplines

Self-validating (not a kind of game)

Games, INTERACTIVE NARRATIVE, and System Simulations

Abstract scenario w tacit or explicit values

(tokens, rules, luck, strategy, opponent)

Pleasure in tokenized representation

Performance pleasures

FLOW – "the Zone"

Social sim w moral physics

Recognition/insight into patterns of lived experience

Vicarious pleasures

Dramatic contrasts within common scenario

CLOSURE - Catharis

Abstracted model w rules

Tacit & explicit values

Parameterized construct with constants and variables

Understanding through replay

Insight into processes → PREDICTION, CONTROL
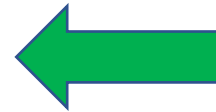
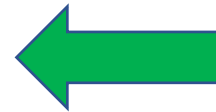# Games   INTERACTIVE NARRATIVE   System Simulations

Social sim w moral physics that interprets the world

AVOID COLLAPSE INTO TOKEN MANIPULATION

AVOID TEMPTATION to REPRODUCE REALITY

Parameterized construct with constants and variables

Expressive game mechanics

Recognition/insight into patterns of lived experience

Vicarious pleasures

Understanding through replay

Dramatic contrasts within common scenario

FLOW – "the Zone"

Insight into processes →
PREDICTION, CONTROL

CLOSURE - Catharis

Advantage of seeing Interactive Digital Narrative as its own form

Enhance its potential an expressive framework for engaging with the most pressing themes of human culture of the 21st century, and as a cognitive scaffold for increasing our individual and collective understanding of complex systems.
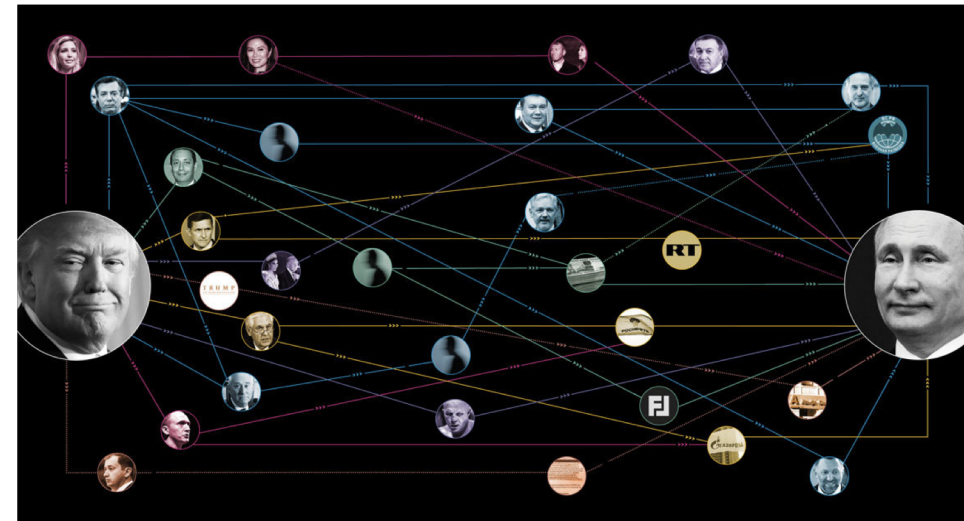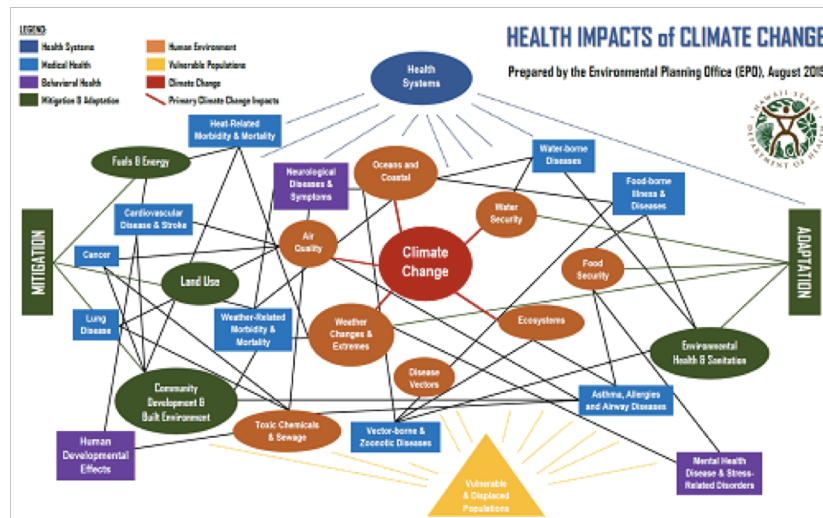
Thank you!

jmurray@gatech.edu

@janetmurray (Twitter)

http://inventingthemedium.com

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http://dilac.iac.gatech.edu