

# Are Games **Bad** for Stories?

Seeing Interactive Narrative as its own Genre

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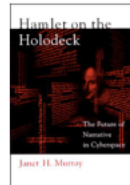
Graduate Program in Digital Media

Georgia Tech

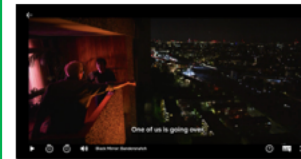
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# A Milestone Moment

## Some Clarifications: Game, Story, Play



## Some Examples from the Game/Story Borderlands



# A Milestone Moment

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**ARDIN**, founded 2017

ICIDS December 2018, First Formal Meeting

Critical mass of objects to study

Critical mass of scholarship

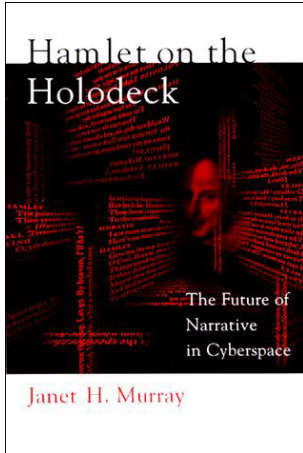
Distinct framework

Overlaps with other disciplines

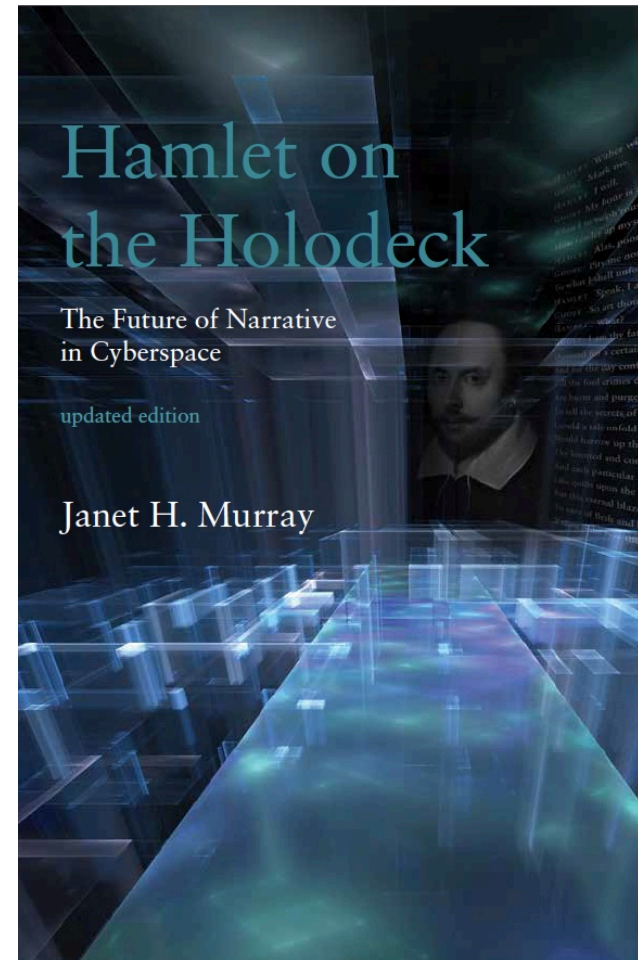
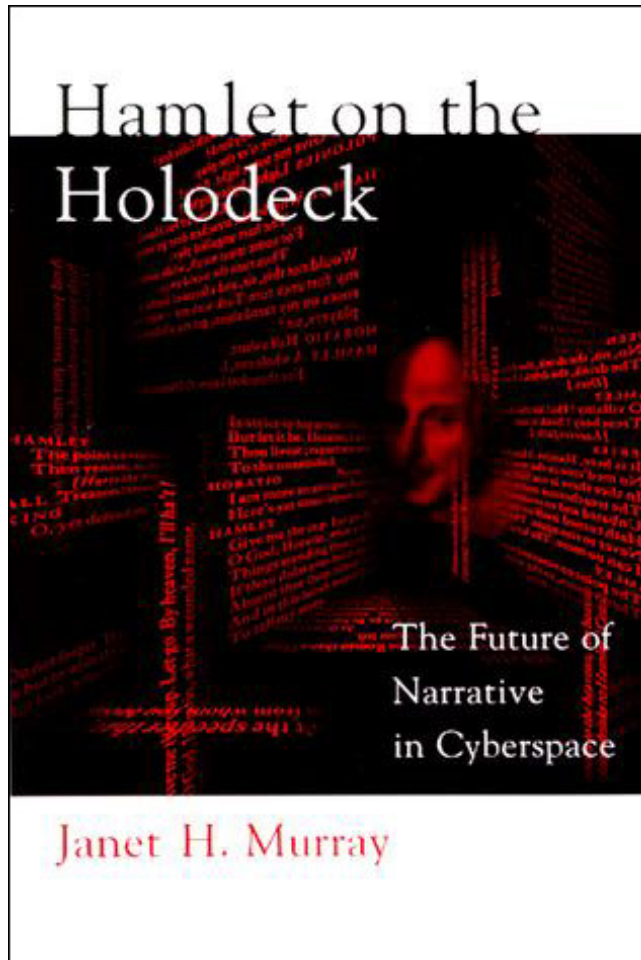
Self-validating



# 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.



## Game Studies have misunderstood *interactive* narrative

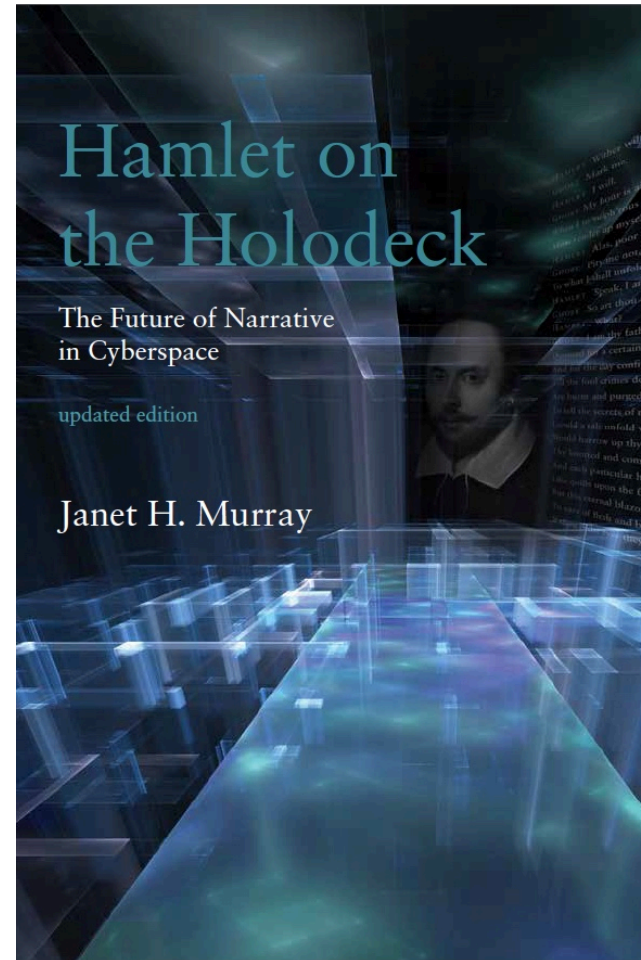
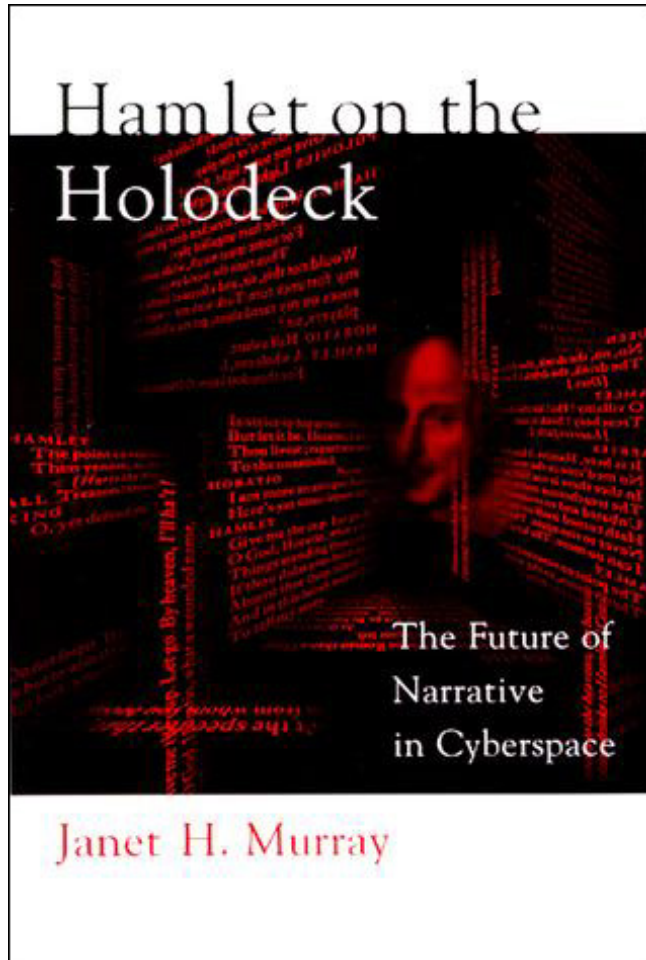
**Jesper Juul**, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (2005)

“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?

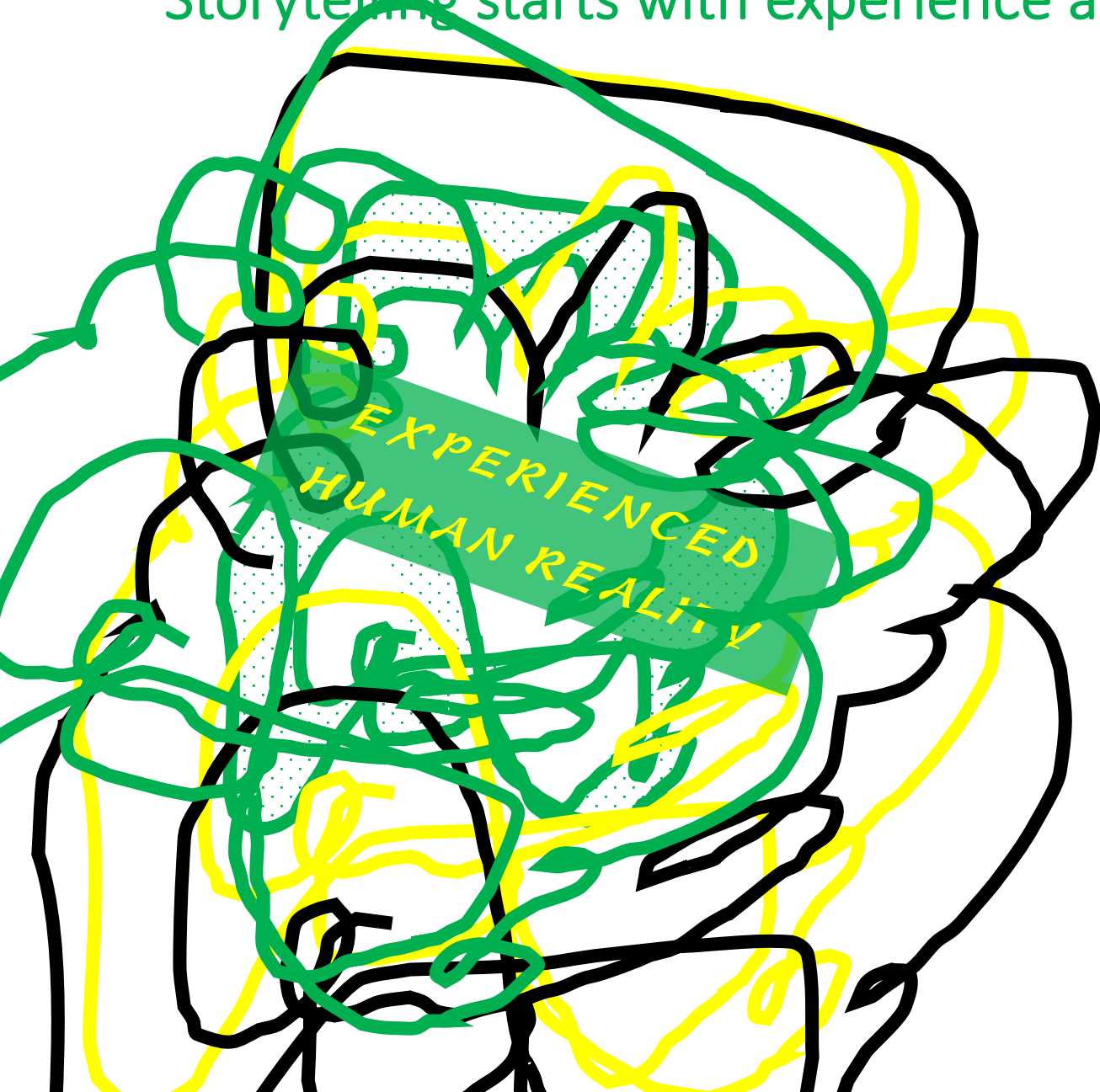
Classic Narratology: events filtered through discourse

Chronological Events

Expressive Telling



Storytelling starts with experience and creates a coherent world



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 ...

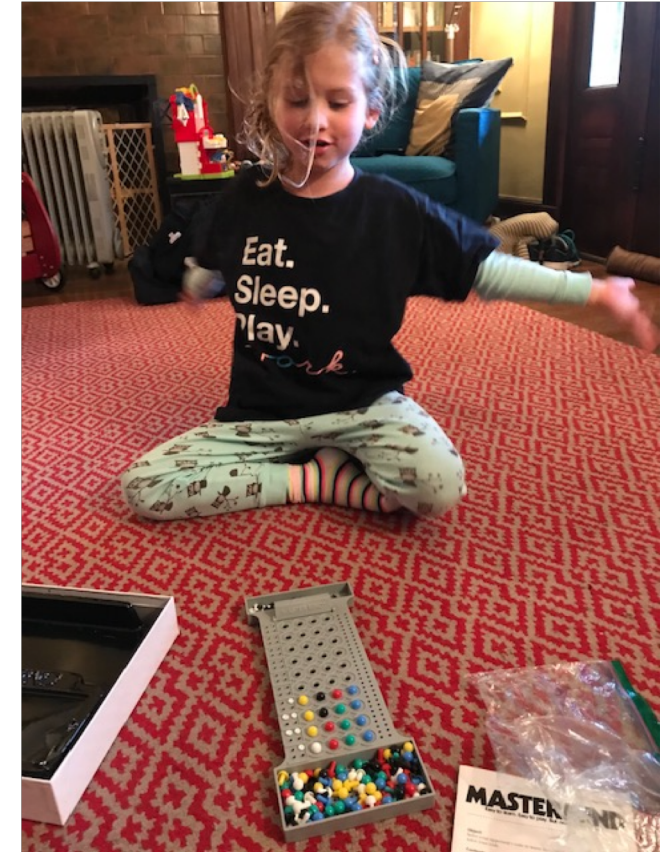
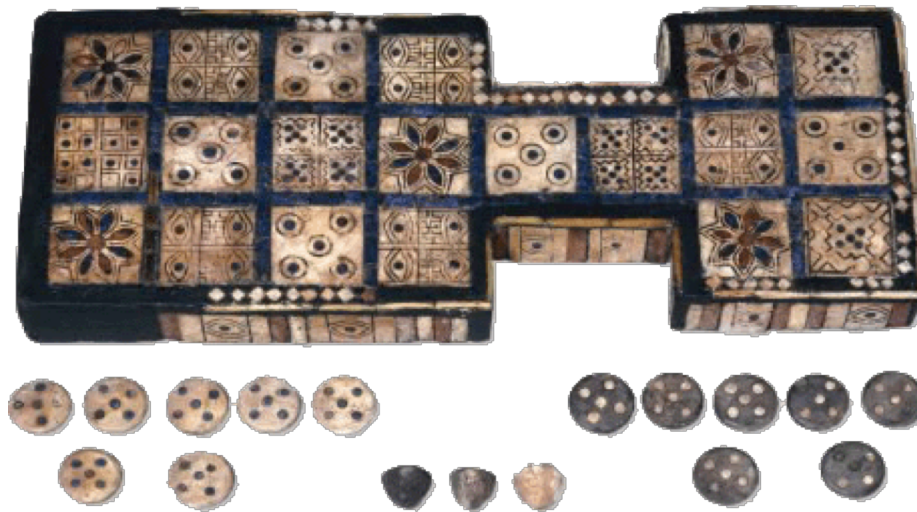
- Simultaneous (Ring-a-round-a-rosy)
- Mimicking (Follow the Leader, Simon Says)
- Turn-taking (Dice)
- Complementary roles (Hide and Seek)





# 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

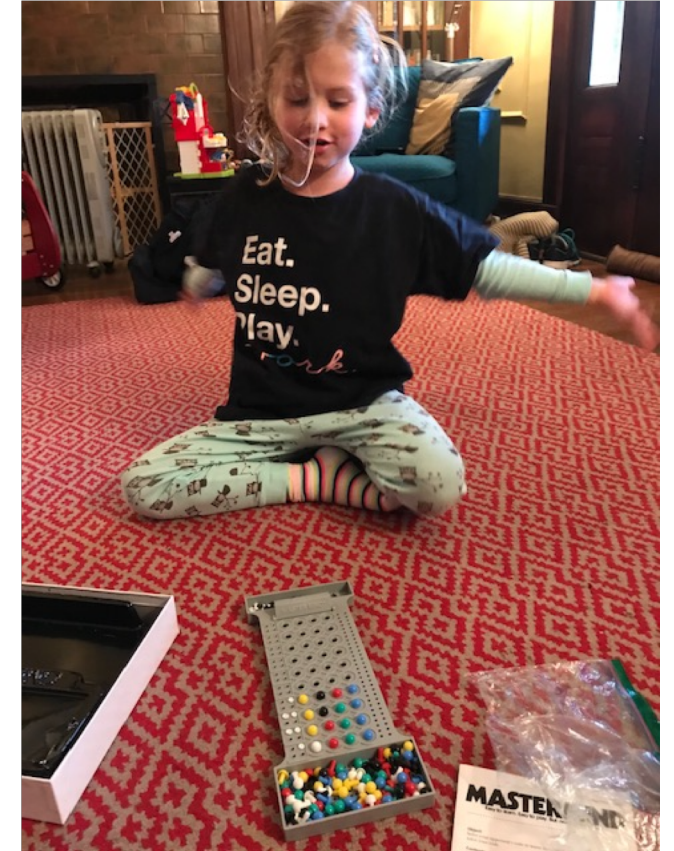




Games grow out of our innate pleasure in shared attention, expressed through synchronized ritualized behaviors and the manipulation of symbolic representations codified in artificial rules

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

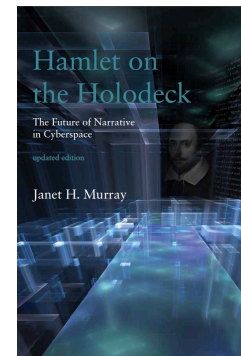
The experience of coordinating (social behavior), winning (a contest), solving (a puzzle), mastering (a skill), are the most real things about games, emotionally experienced and adaptive for survival.





# 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



# Play: Free exploration of own powers and affordances of the external world



# Game: Ritualized and synchronized playful behaviors based on shared attention



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



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)**

WORK

Play

**GAMES**  
**(TOKENS & RULES)**

**STORIES**  
**(CHARACTERS,  
EVENTS)**

or

Escape

# Play



**GAMES**  
**(TOKENS & RULES)**

**STORIES**  
**(CHARACTERS,  
EVENTS)**

Liminality

Instrumentality

Escape

Play

Both GAMES and STORIES are  
Magic Circles  
Immersive  
Value-laden

GAMES

STORIES

Liminality

OR

Instrumentality

Escape

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

Liminality

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)

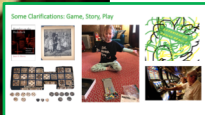
Social simulation w moral physics

Recognition of known patterns of lived experience

New Insight into patterns of lived experience

Narrative Closure

Catharsis / “Hollow Pursuits”





## Natasha Schull, *Addiction by Design* (2014)

Player enters the “machine zone”

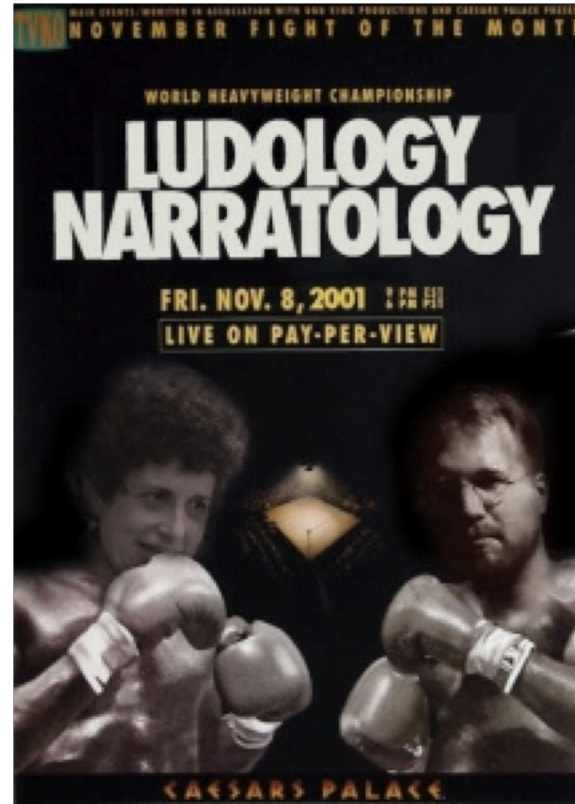
Hyperfocus on game events

No social contact

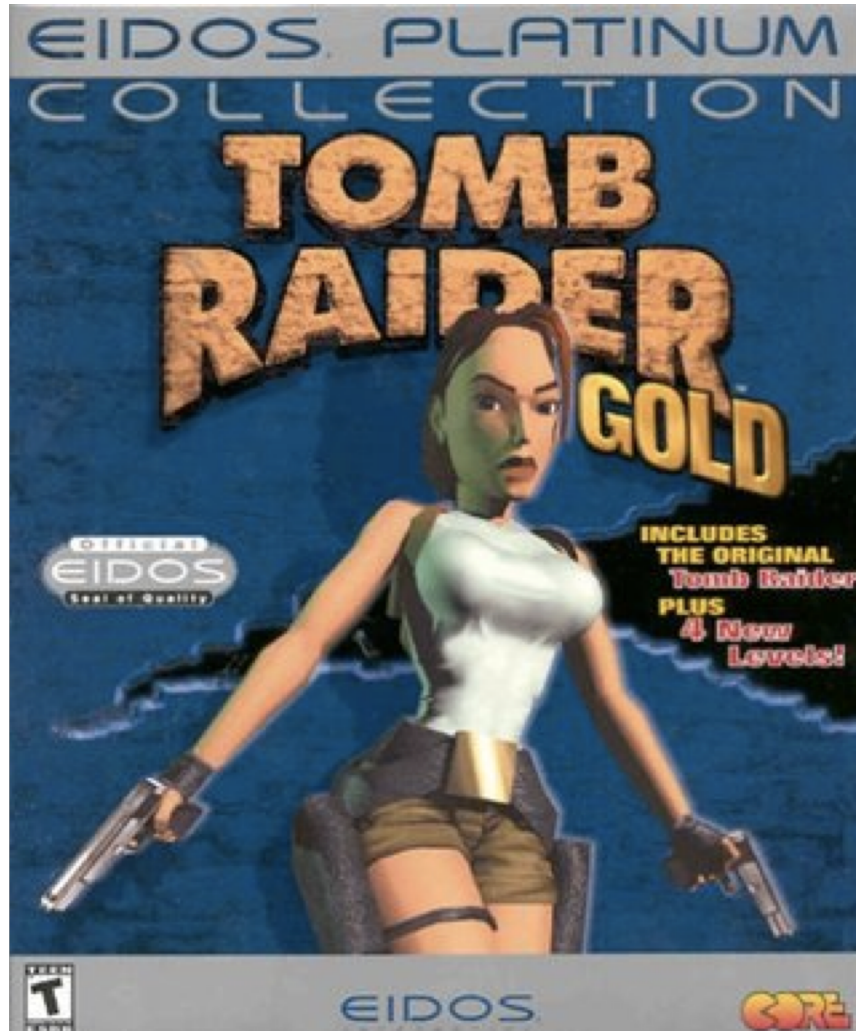
Gambling to “extinction” is the casino’s design goal



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

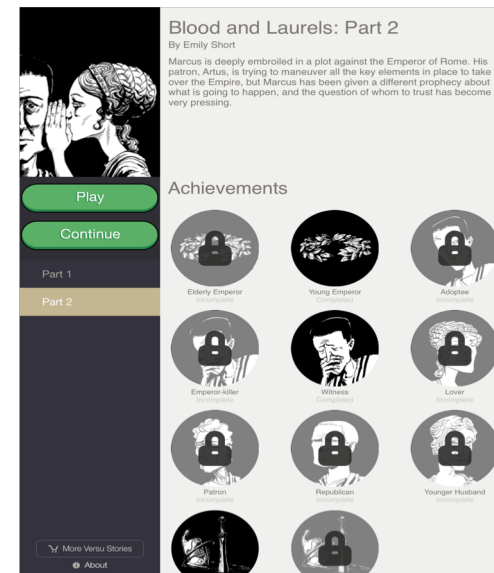
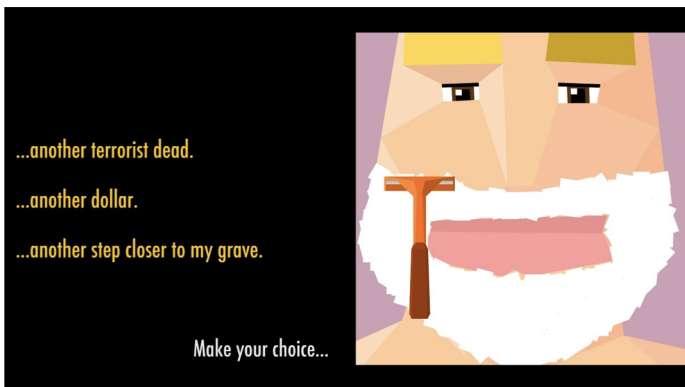
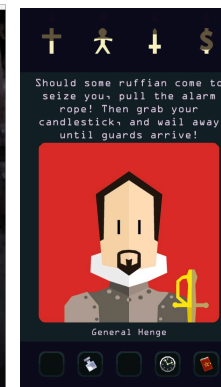
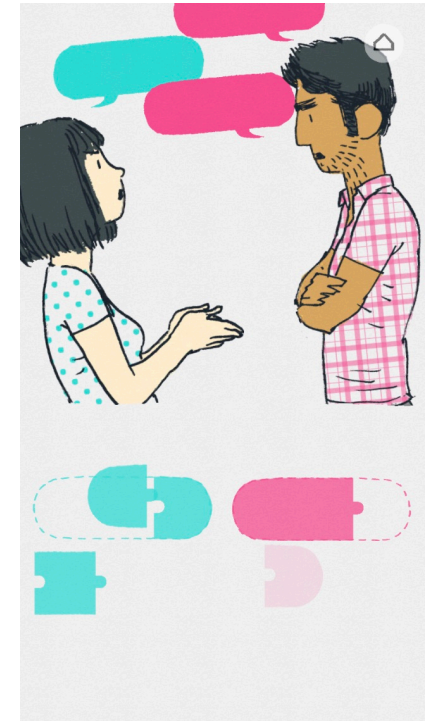
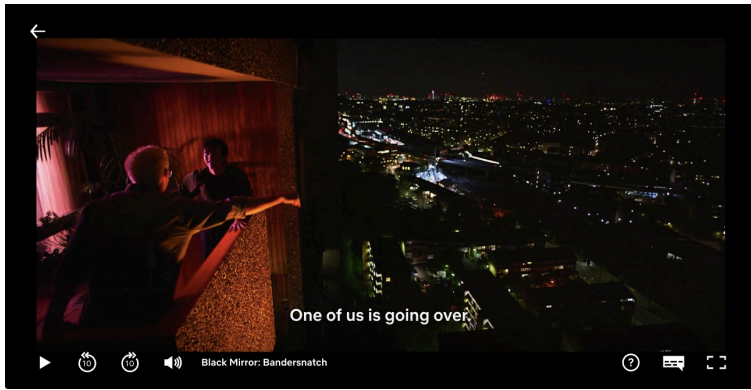


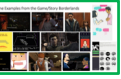
Purgation of vicarious emotion, recognition of reality



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







## Events are arbitrary

- Choices are unsatisfying
- Unearned sensationalized endings
- Interaction design unsatisfying because poor dramatic agency

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

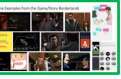
Oh, honey, I'm sorry.

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

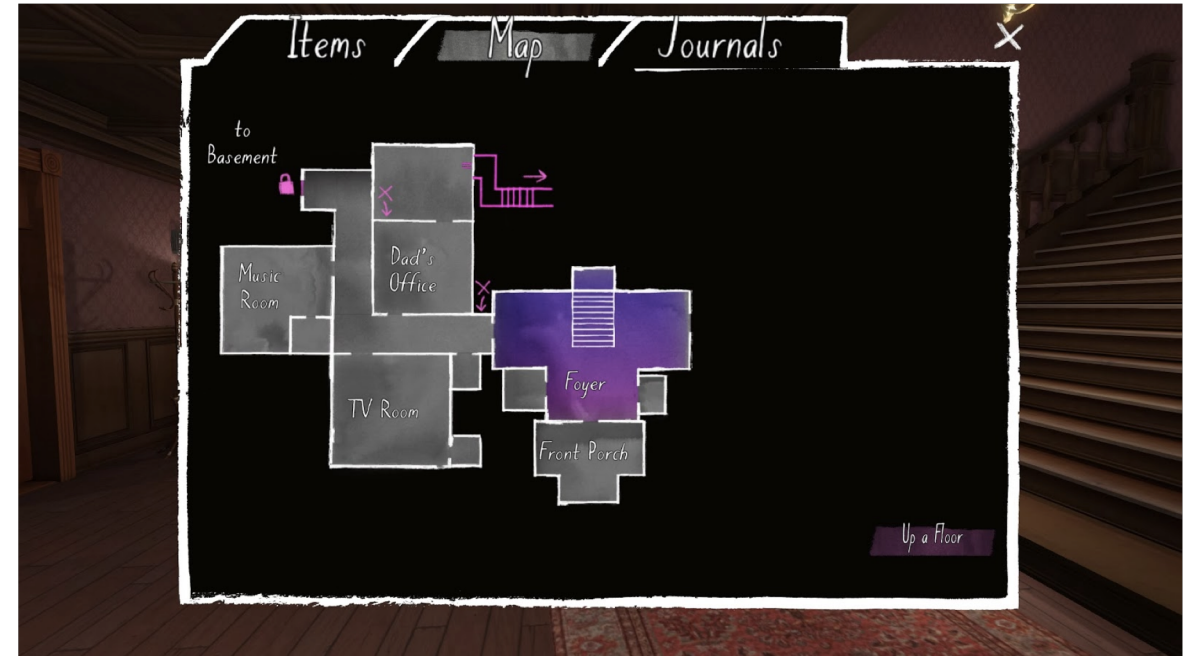
Can be used for exploring multiple possibilities of coherent story world



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



Mystery House 1980



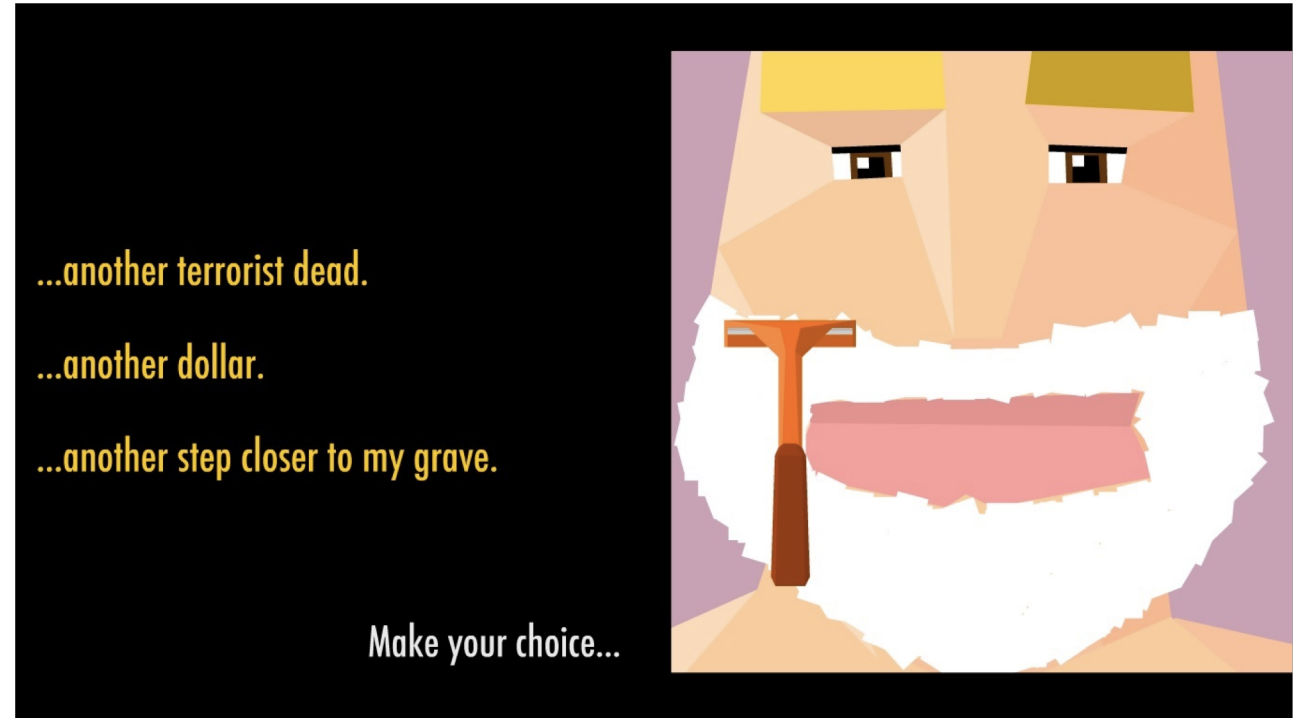
Gone Home, 2013



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



Anna Anthropy, *Dys4ia*, 2012



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





# 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)

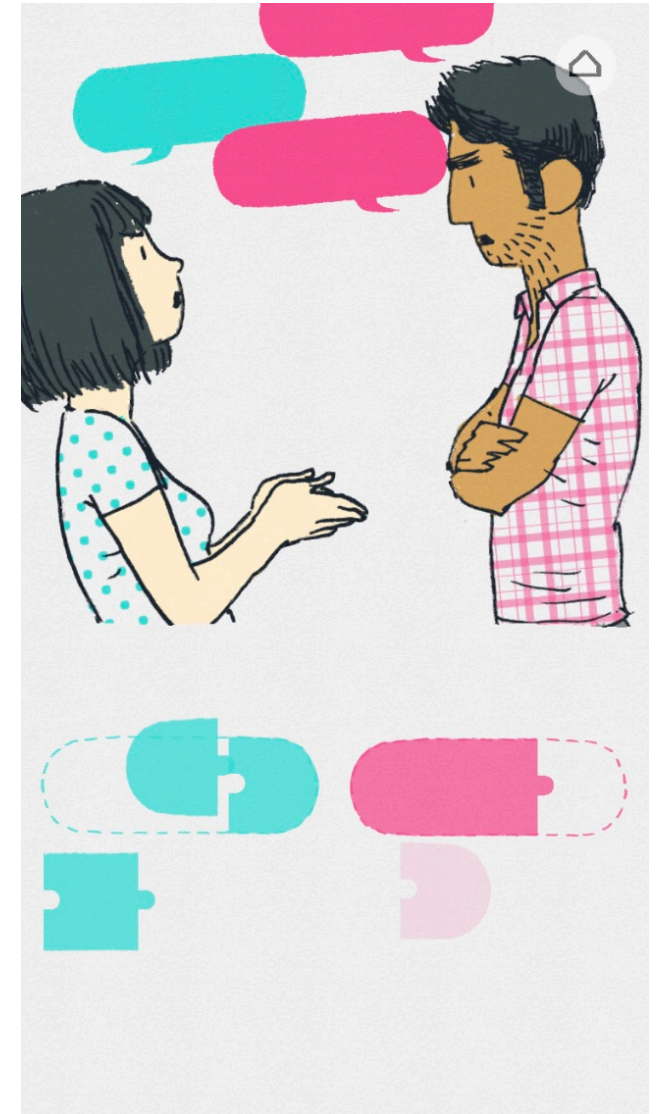
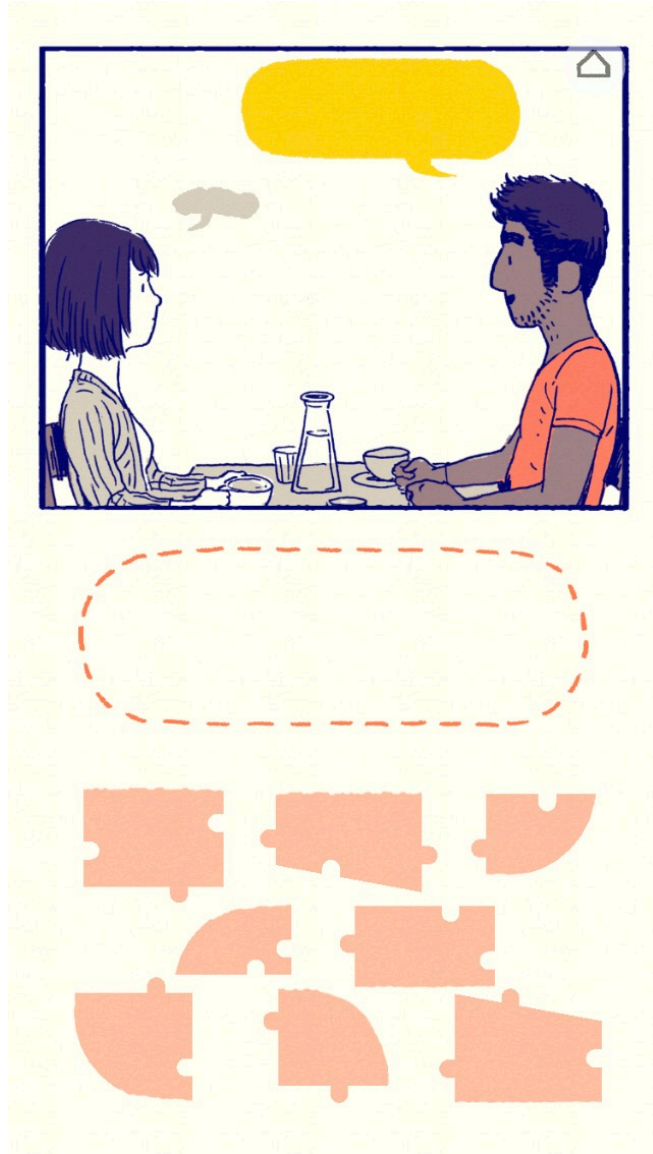
Fits the moral physics of the storyworld

Game of Thrones: Ice from Fire Telltale Season 1

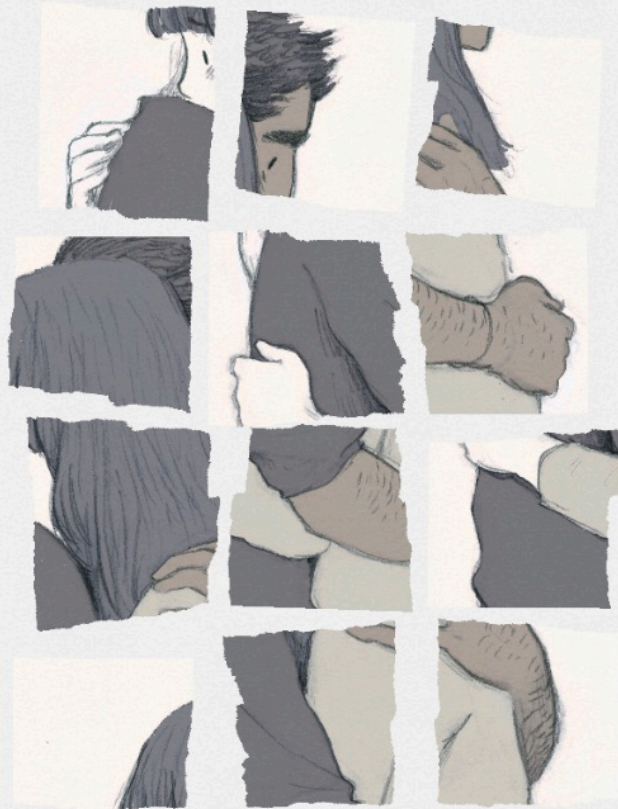




# Florence (2018) Dramatic agency through expressive enactment



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

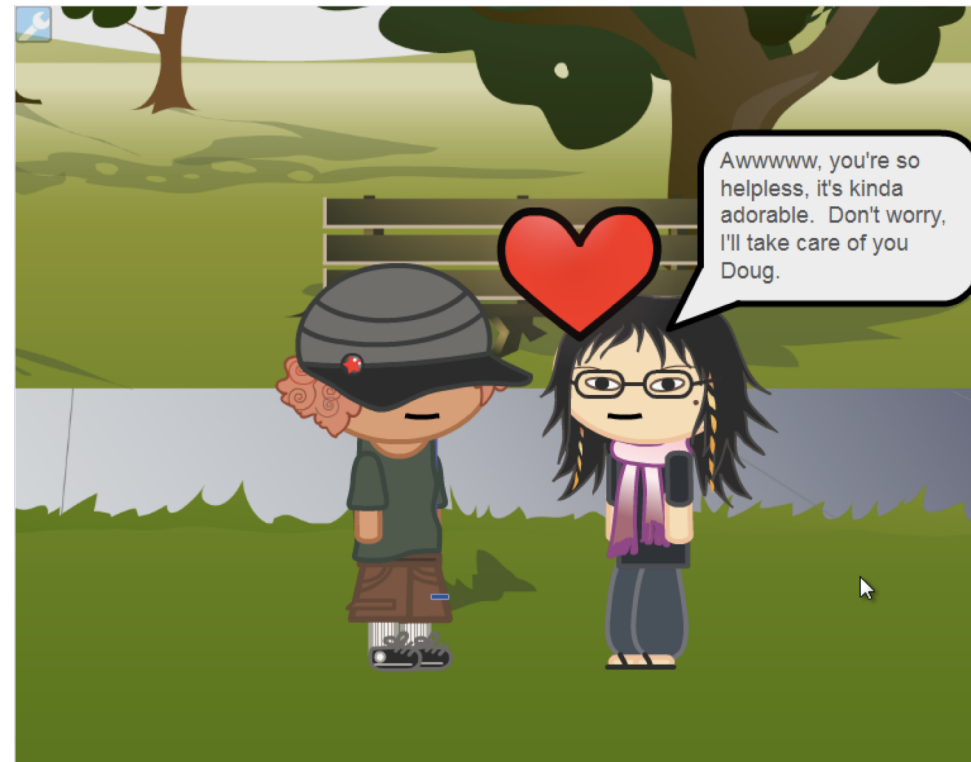




# Complexity : Computer-based simulation games using narrative as tokenized elements

## 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

**Blood and Laurels: Part 2**  
By Emily Short

Marcus is deeply embroiled in a plot against the Emperor of Rome. His patron, Artus, is trying to maneuver all the key elements in place to take over the Empire, but Marcus has been given a different prophecy about what is going to happen, and the question of whom to trust has become very pressing.

**Achievements**

Achievement Name	Status
Elderly Emperor	Incomplete
Young Emperor	Completed
Adoptee	Incomplete
Emperor-killer	Incomplete
Witness	Completed
Lover	Incomplete
Patron	Incomplete
Republican	Incomplete
Younger Husband	Incomplete

More Versu Stories  
About

# 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

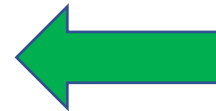
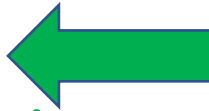
FLOW – “the Zone”

**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

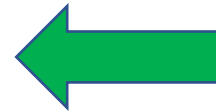
# System Simulations

**AVOID COLLAPSE INTO  
TOKEN MANIPULATION**

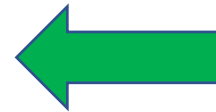
Expressive game  
mechanics



Social sim w moral physics that  
interprets the world



Recognition/insight into  
patterns of lived experience  
Vicarious pleasures



Dramatic contrasts within common  
scenario

**AVOID TEMPTATION to  
REPRODUCE REALITY**

Parameterized construct  
with constants and variables

Understanding through  
replay

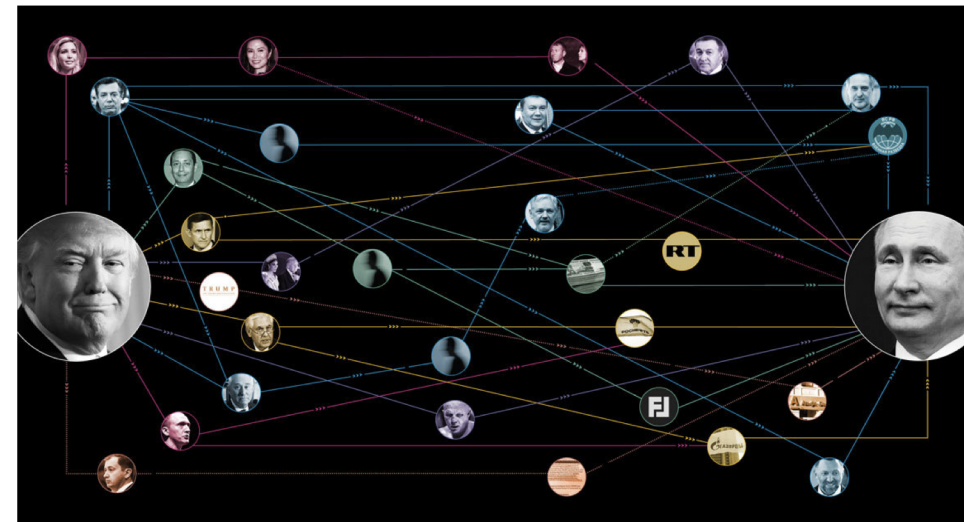
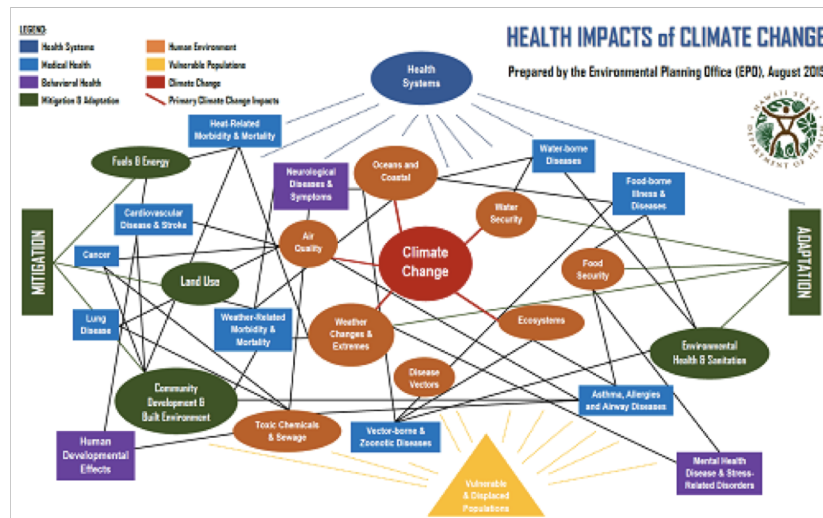
FLOW – “the Zone”

**CLOSURE - Catharsis**

Insight into processes →  
PREDICTION, CONTROL

# 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!

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@janetmurray (Twitter)

<http://inventingthemedium.com>

<http://penlab.gatech.edu>

<http://dilac.iac.gatech.edu>