Chapter 1
Narrative Definitions for Game Design: A Concept-Oriented Study of Nine Computer Game Design Guidebooks

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ABSTRACT

Enhancing the benefits of learning games by utilizing narratives or narrative elements is not a new idea. Many existing learning games utilize more or less story structures, virtual worlds, and various characters as a part of a story. Computer game genres, such as adventure games and role-playing games, have received a lot of attention in the field of serious games by researchers and game developers. Hence, the potential of narratives for learning support is already clearly recognized. However, narratives have not yet offered unambiguous solutions to the design of learning games. For example, more often than not the use of embedded stories does not lead to a desired outcome that is an entertaining and pedagogically effective game. Moreover, it is not theoretically clear what is the best way to utilize narratives in order to ease, support, and heighten the player’s learning process through computer game playing. This is a multidisciplinary design task and research problem that calls for interdisciplinary concepts and models. Existing narrative computer game design guidebooks and serious game design guidebooks outline the computer game designers’ current opinions on the potential of narrative game design. In this chapter, the authors focus on the concept of narrative and the definitions game designers form of the concept. The purpose is to fathom game designers’ conceptions of narrative in the analysis discussed in the chapter, reveal the theoretical background that dominates the designers’ thinking, and adduce the consequences of current narrative concept usage. Additionally, the chapter determines three levels of narrative phenomenon, in which narrative should be named and consistently defined within the computer game design discussion. Moreover, the chapter uncovers blind spots in the use of narrative-
related concepts, whilst further, if possible, providing suggestions for improvements. Furthermore, the chapter proposes a composite model of narrative definition that should be extensive enough for game narrative design purposes. Additionally, a new concept (co-storyliner) for the discussion related to the player’s role in narrative computer game is proposed. Finally, the analysis results and conclusions, especially the proposed model of narrative definition, will be discussed from the viewpoint of the needs of narrative serious game design.

INTRODUCTION

There is growing discussion related to narrative in serious game design. This discussion concentrates on at least two larger subjects: the benefits that narrative can entail for learning purposes and the narrative possibilities of computer games. Two paths of discussion exist as independent research fields touching both academic participants as well as representatives from various practical fields. Thus, the question of narrative serious games design is highly multidisciplinary, and the topic includes both theoretical and practical aspects.

In the research and development of narrative learning game design, one extremely challenging point is the concept of narrative itself. Since various disciplines and theoretical lines use the concept in substantially different ways, there is a strong possibility that researchers and game designers do not understand each other. Subsequently, it remains unclear as to which concepts of the research field and wider discussion may be connectable or at least comparable to one another. In addition, this confusion advances futile controversies. Thus, arguably, there is a need for coherent concepts for narrative game design including narrative, story, and other concepts related to the definitions of these basic constructs. But before these concepts and definitions can be formed, it is important to understand the conceptual and theoretical roots upon which the contemporary discussion is based.

In this chapter, the definitions of narrative and story in nine game design guidebooks will be examined. The aim is to fathom game designers’ conceptions of narrative: the basis that necessarily has an effect on game designers’ narrative design work and opinions related to it. By using guidebooks, it was presupposed that the researchers would attain the various views of designers better than, for example, by interview. The definitions will be compared against the basic lines of existing narrative theory. In this way, the possible theoretical roots of these practical definitions may be revealed. Thus, the higher goal of analysis is to reveal the extent to which similarities can be drawn between individual game designers’ conceptions and narrative. This is in addition to gauging the points at which they substantially differ. Behind the presupposition of designers’ differing conceptions is the situation of the field of narrative theory: separate narrative theory lines answer the question of “what is narrative?” differently. In addition, it is assumed that the analysis of designers’ narrative definitions will reveal the needs of game narrative design discussion in relation to several levels or aspects of the narrative phenomenon. Thus, one aim of this analysis is to determine these levels and to uncover blind spots in the use of narrative-related concepts, whilst further, if possible, providing suggestions for improvements. In the guidebooks, the definition may be conveyed explicitly or implicitly, or it may be consistent or inconsistent, but there must be some kind of definition, at least as a background assumption. This does not mean that designers would be held hostage by predetermined rules. In fact, true creativity requires some basic rules within or against which to play.

The kind of research discussed in this chapter could be characterized as concept-oriented interdisciplinary research. Phrasing of a question quite