Narrative in Games
Games and Narrative: a continuum..
There's a conflict between interactivity and storytelling: Most people imagine there's a spectrum between conventional written stories on one side and total interactivity on the other. But I believe that what you really have are two safe havens separated by a pit of hell that can absorb endless amounts of time, skill, and resources.

-Walter Freitag, game designer.

"Where gameplay is all about interactivity, narrative is about predestination. There is a pervasive feeling in the game design community that narrative and interactivity are antithetical."

- Mateas and Stern, “Interaction and Narrative”

... the fundamental qualities that make a good game have remained unchanged and elusive. Consumers still flock to buy original, addictive, and fun games, leaving many flashy products with million-dollar budgets languishing in the $9.99 bin. These costly failures demonstrate that the consumer does not desire a cinematic experience, but rather a quality gaming experience.

-Sid Meier, game designer.

http://www.jesperjuul.net/text/clash_between_game_and_narrative.html
Previous attempts
Recent successful attempts
Theory: Ludology vs. Narratologism

• Narratologist / Narrativist
  – scholar who uses “narrative and literary theory as the foundation upon which to build a theory of interactive media.” – M. Matteas

• Ludology
  – most often defined as the study of game structure (or gameplay) as opposed to the study of games as narratives or games as a visual medium.” – Game-research.com

Plot vs. Narrative

• Plot and narrative are often used interchangeably, but they don't necessarily operate as such.

• Plot refers to the pattern of events in a narrative; the sequence of events: the causal chain of “what happened and why.”
  – Princess was kidnapped. -> Hero finds out. -> Hero must rescue the princess by completing these tasks. -> If hero completes task, princess is saved.

• Narrative is the larger narrated story. This can exist without a plot or as a larger system in which plot exists.
  – Narrative does not necessarily require a causal chain. Could be a history of events or sequence, technically the level progression in Tetris could be a narrative.

http://www.slideserve.com/julius/games-and-narrative
Winter: Games tell stories

• A game’s **narrative** is the aspects of a game that contributes to it telling a story
  – Questions concerning whether games are narratives, or whether narrative provides just one way to look at games are still actively debated.

• **Narrative** is also used to describe the story itself

• Computer games stretch the notion of narrative
  – The interactivity of computer games, like the interactivity of hypertext, pushes hard against existing theories of linear narrative
  – No longer just one privileged story being told; many possible ways to experience a non-linear narrative (computer game, hypertext fiction)

http://classes.soe.ucsc.edu/cmps080k/Winter07/lectures/narrative.pdf
Embedded vs Emergent Narratives

• **Embedded narrative**
  – Pre-generated narrative content that exists prior to a player’s interaction with the game
  – Cut scenes, back story
  – Are often used to provide the fictional background for the game, motivation for actions in the game, and development of story arc

• **Emergent narrative**
  – Arises from the player’s interaction with the gameworld, designed levels, rule structure
  – Moment-by-moment play in the game creates this emergent narrative
  – Varies from play session to play session, depending on user’s actions

• Game design involves employing and balancing the use of these two elements
Narrative descriptors

- A **narrative descriptor** is an element of a game that communicates aspects of its story to the player
  - Broad concept, which encompasses most visual elements of a game and its surrounding context
    - Instructional text
    - Cut scenes
    - Interface elements (joystick, buttons, controller, and how they’re used)
    - Visual elements comprising the field of view of the player
You are the hero, ‘Link’!

The hero of this game, Link, is a brave youth who must fight against the evil Ganon all alone. Link’s adventure develops both in the Overworld, a beautiful natural place with woods, lakes and mountains, and in the Underworld, a place much more complex than that which lies above.

Ganon possesses the Power of Triforce. In order to overthrow Ganon, you have to complete the ‘Wisdom’ of Triforce with the eight hidden pieces. These pieces have been hidden somewhere in the Underworld mazes.

Can Link possibly invade Death Mountain to overthrow Ganon with the help of the completed ‘Wisdom’ of Triforce.

Princess Zelda’s fate is unknown.

In this game you are the hero, Link. You must enter the world of Link. Let the fabulous adventure begin.

Many enemies stand between you and a successful rescue. Put aside your fears and march on. As you go forward, you will solve many mysteries. You are the one who can conquer the Evil Ganon.
Cutscenes

Now, open the sealed door and send the Evil Incarnation of Darkness into the void of the Evil Realm!!

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ygYaWh0fio
Interface elements
Visual elements

- So do the visual elements of the game places you in space
- Wrap-around space also contributes to this feeling
- UFO ties into cultural understandings
Narrative through mechanics

http://penny-arcade.com/patv/episode/narrative-mechanics
Embedded Narratives
Barry Ip: Narrative interventions

1. narrative presented as passive game screen;
2. narrative presented as on-screen text;
3. narrative presented as cut scene;
4. narrative presented as cut scene combined with on-screen text;
5. narrative presented as combination of gameplay, cut scene, and on-screen text;
6. narrative presented as combination of gameplay, sound, and textual cues;
7. short game prompts (mission hints or pointers) presented as on-screen text;
8. short game prompts (mission hints or pointers) presented as a cut scene;
9. short game prompts (mission hints or pointers) presented simultaneously as cut scene and on-screen text;
10. short game prompts (mission hints or pointers) presented as an integral part of gameplay;
11. short game prompts (mission hints or pointers) presented as gameplay, sound, and textual cues;
12. credit roll and/or ending sequence.
## Table 3. Summary Statistics for the Chosen Games

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game</th>
<th>Total Game Time</th>
<th>Types of Narrative Delivery</th>
<th>Total Length of Prescribed Narrative Components (Including Cut Scenes, Prompts, On-Screen Text, etc.)</th>
<th>Percentage of Prescribed Narrative as a Proportion of Total Game Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Legend of Zelda</td>
<td>6 hr 30 min</td>
<td>Simple level completion screens, on-screen text</td>
<td>2 min</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Secret of Monkey Island</td>
<td>6 hr 35 min</td>
<td>Cut scene, on-screen text</td>
<td>1 hr 49 min</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flashback</td>
<td>6 hr 40 min</td>
<td>Cut scene, on-screen text</td>
<td>13 min</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shenmue 2</td>
<td>18 hr 50 min</td>
<td>Cut scene, on-screen text, quick-time events (QTE)</td>
<td>4 hr 52 min</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resident Evil Code Veronica X</td>
<td>9 hr 5 min</td>
<td>Cut scene, on-screen text</td>
<td>1 hr 37 min</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Fantasy X</td>
<td>46 hr</td>
<td>Cut scene, on-screen text</td>
<td>9 hr 14 min</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half-Life 2</td>
<td>12 hr 5 min</td>
<td>Cut scene, audio and textual cues</td>
<td>5 min</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fable</td>
<td>8 hr 55 min</td>
<td>Cut scene</td>
<td>1 hr 31 min</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Godfather</td>
<td>11 hr 45 min</td>
<td>Cut scene, audio and textual cues</td>
<td>1 hr 9 min</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halo 3</td>
<td>10 hr</td>
<td>Cut scene, audio and textual cues</td>
<td>43 min</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table A1. Summary of Information Given in Back Stories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game Title</th>
<th>Method of Delivery</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>(See section on Archetypes in next article for more details.)</th>
<th>Objectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The Legend of Zelda         | Written in instruction booklet; a shorter version is shown on title sequence before game start (text format) | A long time ago, in a fictional place called Hyrule | Link—hero  
Princess Zelda—herald  
Impa—ally  
Ganon—shadow | The world of Hyrule is in chaos. A Triforce of Power has been seized by Ganon’s army. Ganon has also captured princess Zelda of Hyrule, the guardian of the Triforce. Link hears this story, and seeks to find the Triforce and rescue the princess Objectives are implied: three trials; meeting a beautiful woman and her dead, jealous suitor; finding a way to get to the ghost |
| The Secret of Monkey Island| Written on game packaging                                                         | Monkey Island, in the Caribbean   | Guybrush Threepwood—hero  
Beautiful woman—amima, herald  
Dead, jealous suitor—shadow | Objectives are implied: three trials; meeting a beautiful woman and her dead, jealous suitor; finding a way to get to the ghost |
| Flashback                   | Written on game packaging                                                         | Bizarre alien planet              | Conrad Hart—hero  
Mutant forces—shadow | A hero with amnesia needs to get back to planet Earth and stop invading mutant forces. The hero witnesses the murder of his father by a mysterious man called Lan Di. Di is in search of a sacred artifact called the Phoenix Mirror, which the hero’s father was in possession of. Assisted by friends and allies, the hero embarks on a journey to find Lan Di and to discover the secret of the Phoenix Mirror |
| Shenmue 2                   | Written in instruction booklet; short introduction is also provided on game start (see the section on Cut Scenes, Text, and Prompts) | Yokusuka, Japan, 1986; Hong Kong   | Ryo Hazuki—hero  
Iwao—hero’s father  
Lan Di—shadow  
Master Chen—herald, ally  
Gui Zhang—ally  
Mad Angels—threshold guardians  
Lishao Tao—mentor, ally, herald  
Yuanda Zhu—mentor, ally, herald | The hero witnesses the murder of his father by a mysterious man called Lan Di. Di is in search of a sacred artifact called the Phoenix Mirror, which the hero’s father was in possession of. Assisted by friends and allies, the hero embarks on a journey to find Lan Di and to discover the secret of the Phoenix Mirror |
### Table 5. Summaries of Observed Game Structures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game</th>
<th>Observed Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Legend of Zelda</td>
<td>Branch and linear—branching is observed during free roaming (i.e., exploration of world map), but reverts to linear structure when specific level is selected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Secret of Monkey Island</td>
<td>Linear, but branching is evident within level confines. Player may explore subsections and side quests before embarking on main objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flashback</td>
<td>Linear—evidence of branching is observed only within specific levels (e.g., alternative routes toward the same end)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shenmue 2</td>
<td>Linear, but branching is evident within level confines. Player may often explore a range of subsections and side quests before embarking on main objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resident Evil Code</td>
<td>Linear—largely dictated by predefined routes with limited opportunity for branching beyond confined sections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veronica X</td>
<td>Linear, but branching is evident within confines of story progression. Player may often explore a range of subsections and side quests before embarking on main objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Fantasy X</td>
<td>Linear—largely dictated by predefined routes with limited opportunity for branching beyond confined sections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half-Life 2</td>
<td>Linear, but branching is evident within level confines. Player may often explore a range of subsections and side quests before embarking on main objective</td>
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Three act structure

http://www.cod.edu/people/faculty/pruter/film/threeact.htm
The Amnesia problem

Amnesia is a concept that appears in 139 games

Alan Wake
When famous novelist Alan Wake goes on vacation with his wife Alice, he has no idea that the idyllic town of Bright Falls will soon be the site of a terrible battle between good and evil that could threaten everything, even Wake’s own sanity.

Alan Wake’s American Nightmare
The story of Alan Wake continues as he faces his twisted doppleganger, Mr. Scratch, in this downloadable installment of the Alan Wake franchise.

Alone in the Dark
What happens when you cross the granddaddy of

http://www.giantbomb.com/amnesia/92-286/games/
“Emotional rollercoaster”

http://www.musik-therapie.at/PederHill/Structure&Plot.htm
Pacing

http://penny-arcade.com/patv/episode/episode-07-pacing
Take home (Ximplification)

• Everything contributes to the narrative
  – Intro screen
  – Framing
  – Interaction
  – Cut scenes / videos

• Structure and Pacing