

Stories, probes, and games

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This paper is a reflection on the potential of narrative video games for human sense making and perspective taking. Such games are considered in the context of storytelling and reflective action as the two core foundations of human sense making. I propose that narrative video games allow a form of player storytelling at the intersection of the game's grand narrative and reflective action in a virtual world. I further propose that such games have the potential to create empathy for other people's situations and perspectives in life.

Keywords: narrative, storytelling, video games, sense making, action, perspective taking, values

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have long argued that narrative, especially in the form of storytelling, is at the core of human sense making for individuals and for cultures (Bruner 1987; MacIntyre 1981). There is good news and bad news about this. On the one hand, stories allow people to feel a sense of control, agency, and meaning in a world often filled with uncertainty, complexity, and even chaos. Stories impose patterns, beginnings, middles, and ends, and causal relationships on a world that rarely comes so cleanly cut. On the other hand, stories can lead to self-deception for individuals and cultures as a whole when they tell mentally comforting tales that are false or, even worse, support for prejudices and hate.

There has always been, in human history, a method of sense making competing with stories. This is what I will call the circuit of reflective action (Gee 2004; Schön 1983). In this circuit, humans form a goal, take an action towards the goal, reflect on what the outcome of the action means in terms of progress towards the goal, and, then, act again in attempt to move closer to their goal. The reflection after (or even during) action requires humans to have an "appreciative system" in

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terms which they can appreciate whether the results of their action are good or bad for their purposes (Schön 1983). They have to assess the outcomes of previous actions in order to modify their further actions or even their goals if need be.

The circuit of reflective action, like storytelling, can be good or bad. It can lead to productive results by paying careful attention to the world's responses to our actions (which constitute probes). This is surely the historical basis of many important human discoveries, such as smelting iron, growing crops, and domesticating animals. But, both people's goals and appreciative systems are formed in and through value-laden cultural transmission. Such transmission can go awry and people can come to value results that are, in the end, bad for them or other people. A given culture might appreciate the results of binding women's feet to make them very small, but it is not good for the women. An individual may like the macho feel of chewing tobacco, but they are liable to get cancer anyway.

Storytelling as a vernacular form gave rise to literature. The circuit of reflective action as a vernacular form gave rise to empirical science. Both literature and science, however, are prone to good and bad uses along the same lines as their vernacular forms, though both have, at their best, the potential to transcend cultures' and individuals' self interest just enough to offer some sort of pan-human sense making and hope.

Life is a sort of (highly consequential) game played with the cards one is dealt. We inherit stories from our cultures and social groups that tell us that the world is or should be a certain way. We probe the world with our actions and we find it a certain way, often regardless of our hopes and desires in the matter. Within this context, we make decisions, act, and suffer the consequences good or bad. As we do so, moment by moment, we tell ourselves a story that attempts to make sense of this situation, of how we have decided and acted with the hand our culture and the world has dealt us. This story, influenced by our cultures, of course, and by however directly we want to face reality (or not), is our ongoing, emergent, and often revised "identity story". It is the story about who we are in the face of what we have been given and what we have made of it.

By and large, when people tell identity stories — based on what they were faced with and what they did about it — they are healthier the more they can tell themselves a story where they were agents and in control in the face of the "way things are". Some people face lives replete enough with power that this is not hard. For others — handed much worse cards — such stories are harder, but not always impossible, to tell. No one wants to feel a victim of circumstances.

For most of human history, while each human played the hand they were dealt, they could not, save in imagination, play the hands other people were dealt. Sure, they could listen to a story, read a book, or watch a movie about other people's ways with "reality" — such as a king or a pauper — but they could not actually play

their cards and spin an identity story for them. But now humans can, indeed, play hands they were not dealt and construct identity stories that are not really (just) their own. In this way, people can today have second, third, fourth, and multiple lives. It is digital interactive media, like video games, that allow for this possibility.

Narrative based video games, games like *Civilization*, *Deus Ex*, *Half-Life*, and *The Elder Scrolls*, and many others, are games that tell a story (not all games do). However, like all video games, narrative based games involve players making decisions and taking actions whose results they must assess to prepare for future action towards their goals. Thus, such games contain both storytelling and the circuit of reflective action, as does life.

However, in a game, the player plays a character who has been handed cards, explicated by the game's story and virtual world, that are not the cards the player as a "real" person has been handed. However, a good part of the attraction of such games is that players have to make decisions and take actions in this context, suffer the consequences (good or bad), and construct a story of what sort of agent, decider, actor, "person" they have been, a story of how they dealt with the cards they were handed. Given lemons, did they make lemonade, give the lemons back, or strike fear in the lemon giver's heart?

A player of a video game is an interesting hybrid creature (Gee 2007). The player is part real person in the real world and part virtual character in a virtual world, the character the player "controls". As players tell a story about how they dealt with the "game cards" they were handed, this story is also an odd hybrid. It is a mixed story about how the real person dealt with difficulties and challenges of the game itself as a set of problems and how the real person embodied the virtual character in mind and movement to create an identity story within the narrative and virtual world of the game. Thus, there is the potential here for players to learn something about their real selves and real lives (to add to their own identity story) and for players to learn something about who they would or could be in a different world, a second life. And this latter discovery can, no doubt, inform their real identity stories in the real world, if their play is deep enough.

This odd hybrid creature and hybrid story gets odder yet in the world of multiplayer video games. In such games — like multiplayer *Halo* or the massive multiplayer game *World of Warcraft* — real people have avatars (fictional characters) that interact with other real people via their avatars. Players can communicate with each other — and act together — either knowing their real identities or just in terms of their fictional ones. In games like this the real and the virtual become even more interlaced, the stories of who we are and who we could or should be become more interlaced, as well. Our hybrid stories become social, intersecting with, influencing, and being influenced by other player/characters' stories. How real life spills into the game and how the game spills into real life is now an open area for

research. If real life hands you lemons, one option how is to exit reality and lead a 300 person guild to victory in *World of Warcraft* (provided the lemons weren't in the poorest parts of Africa, say, with no electricity).

Through such games, people get to decide, act, and live in other people's shoes or even in shoes no human have ever worn. As a player, I can be a SWAT team member or even a firefly in search of a mate. A pacifist can go to war, a woman can be a man and a man can be a woman or either one can be a dog or a hippo (no hippo games yet, but I keep hoping).

When I played *SWAT4* (a great game, by the way) I had to decide, act, and suffer the consequences of the sorts of stories, rules, and world SWAT team members inhabit. I had to play by their rules and values (no Rambo stuff here; it is all vigilance, trying to save people, and doing all you can to avoid shooting even the "bad guys", while you are not always sure who is "bad" and who is a hostage), I had to play with the cards they were handed, and suffer the consequences of my decisions. I had to tell an identity story both over time as the game unfolded and at the end of the game, an identity story about what "I" had done and why and what it meant about me as a real person, a gamer, and as an inhabitant of a SWAT avatar.

What did I learn? I learned great respect for what SWAT people do. I learned I had no desire whatsoever to do it in real life (it is too dangerous and nerve wracking). And I learned that I, as both a real person and a fictional one, am poor at constant unrelenting vigilance and attention to details. Since I have long known that in real life I am terrible with details, it dawned on me that learning how to be more vigilance might be the way to go here. But, for me, the most important part of my SWAT experience is that it seems now to be part of my own identity story in the real world. I have played SWAT, I am a gamer, I have emotionally stood in SWAT shoes, I know a bit about what the world looks like from their viewpoint, and I can see what aspects of identity become important and possible when life hands you such cards. This seems to me good. It, perhaps, expands my storytelling capacity in terms of empathy and respect for the world and others.

It is possible, of course, to play a game and stand in the virtual shoes of someone who in real life we would consider evil. For example, there is a right wing Neo-Nazi game called *Ethnic Cleansing* (it is just what you would think from its title). The danger in playing such a game is, of course, that the player may gain sympathy for the devil, and, perhaps, even convert to the devil's side. Indeed, that is what the Neo-Nazi game makers hope for. But, too, perhaps, by standing in a white supremacist's shoes, we could come to know their world better and be better able to combat and convert them. There are, of course, deep ethical dilemmas here, not unlike reading books written from the perspective of evil, though, perhaps, deeper because in such a game we have to act in the name of the evil, supporting our actions with some plausible identity story.

Video games are today what they are. The interesting thing to reflect on is what they could be. How far could we take playing the hands other sorts of people were dealt. It seems to me entirely good if the rich — who are getting so much richer these days — would have to play with the cards poor people are dealt (including some people who have lost their jobs due to rich people's speculative habits).

Indeed, there is a challenge that some players of *The Sims* (a game that simulates families and communities) have given each other to live out a life of a poor single parent trying to get his or her children out of the house and safely on the road of life as potentially successful adults (Gee & Hayes 2010). This challenge was inspired by Barbara Ehrenreich's book *Nickel and Dimed*.

When players finish the challenge they have to write a sort of graphic novel (using images from *The Sims*) about the life they lived as a poor single parent, the decisions they made, the actions they took, and the consequences they suffered. They have to write a version of their virtual identity story as a poor single parent. The story, though, must also deal with how the software of *The Sims* as an entertainment simulation intersected with one's attempt to live the life of a poor single parent in the virtual world (since it is not fun to live a life of poverty, it is not easy to set up *The Sims* to do it — players have to abide by a long set of rules of what they can and cannot do in the simulation given its affordances to live a richer rather than a poorer life). This is yet another interesting hybrid storytelling form.

Video games are a technology that allows us to deal with other people's stories as if they had been handed to us. They allow us to tell stories of how we fared and who we were when we were in their shoes. They allow us to probe virtual worlds with different responses than our own "reality". Compared to oral language, writing, books, and movies, video games are a brand new technology. What is their potential for the future of us humans as storied, storying, and probing beings? We will see.

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