CMPS 148/248: Interactive Storytelling

Story

January 12, 2010
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Narratology

- **Narratology** – a structuralist analysis of narrative
  - Enabling move: separating the “objective” story from the presented story

- **Story/fabula** – The objective sequence of events that constitutes the story

- **Discourse/sjuzhet** – The presentation of the story (always involves manipulation)

- **Diegesis** – The story world, the time-space continuum of the story (the story is a sequence of events in the diegetic world)

- **Narration** – the mechanics by which the discourse is produced from the story (e.g. third vs. first person etc.)
The narrative situation

Diegetic universe

1 → 2 → 3 → 4 → 5
Story

Discourse

1 → 5 → 3 → 2 → 4
prolepsis (flash-forward)
analepsis (flash-back)

Focalization

Interpretation
In order to be able to talk about interactive narrative, one must be able to talk about narrative in different media (since various forms of interactive narrative will constitute new media).

Classical narratology tends towards privileging specific media

- Radical media relativism argues that signifier can’t be separated from signified
  - therefore there’s no way to talk about “narrative” in the abstract

Other theorists have so generalized the notion of narrative, that it ceases to form a coherent category

- Narratives of identity
- Grand narratives of history
- Cultural narrative

Ryan’s goal in this chapter is to define a notion of narrative powerful enough to define a coherent category, but general enough to be medium independent.
Consider “narrativeness” a scalar value (more or less narrative) rather than a boolean value (is or is not a narrative)
  
  - Do this by defining 8 narrative dimensions – if a specific media instance strongly has all these properties, then it has very high narrativeness (a “classical” story)
  
  - Subsets of the dimensions can be considered for specific purposes

• Spatial Dimension
  
  - 1. Narrative must be about a world populated by individuated existents

• Temporal Dimension
  
  - 2. The world must be situated in time and undergo significant transformations
  
  - 3. The transformations must be caused by non-habitual physical events
• Mental Dimension
  – 4. Some of the participants in the events must be intelligent agents who have a mental life and react emotionally to the states of the world
  – 5. Some of the events must be purposeful actions by these agents, motivated by identifiable goals and plans

• Formal and Pragmatic Dimensions
  – 6. The sequence must form a unified causal chain and lead to closure
  – 7. The occurrence of at least some of these events must be asserted as fact in the story world
  – 8. The story must communicate something meaningful to the recipient
The cognitive skills of narrative interpretation

• Understanding a narrative involves the exercise of multiple cognitive skills
  – Focusing thought on specific objects cut out from the flux of perception
  – Inferring causal relationships between states and events
  – Situating events in time
  – Reconstructing content of other people’s minds based on their behavior

• But the exercise of these cognitive skills alone does not make something a narrative – only when all of these skills come together to construct a stable mental image do we have narrative
Narrative modes

• In order to develop a media-free narratology, we need to understand the various mechanisms by which narrative scripts can be evoked
  – A narrative script is the mental image of the narrative
  – The standard way of evoking narrative scripts is for someone to tell someone else that something happened (narrating a story)

• A narrative mode is a distinct way to bring to mind the cognitive construct that defines narrativity

• Ryan defines a number of dimensions that characterize different narrative modes
  – These dimensions are not completely independent
Narrative modes (continued)

- **External/Internal**
  - In external mode, narratives are encoded in material signs
  - Internal mode does not involve textualization

- **Fictional/Nonfictional**
  - Whether the narrative involves this world or a possible world

- **Representational/Simulative**
  - Representational mode encodes a fixed sequence (isolates a fixed possibility)
  - Simulative mode is productive of multiple possibilities

- **Diegetic/mimetic**
  - In diegetic mode, the narrative is communicated through telling
  - In mimetic mode, the narrative is communicated through showing
Narrative modes (continued)

• Autotelic/Utilitarian
  – In autotelic mode, a story is told for its own sake
  – In utilitarian mode, a story is subordinated to another goal

• Autonomous/Illustrative
  – In autonomous mode, the story is new to the receiver
  – In illustrative mode, the story retells and completes a story, depending on the receiver’s previous knowledge

• Scripted/Emergent
  – In scripted mode, story and discourse are fixed
  – In emergent mode, discourse and some aspects of story are created live

• Receptive/Participatory
  – In receptive mode, the recipient plays no role in discourse or story
  – In participatory mode (subcategory of emergent), the active participation of the recipient actualizes and completes the story on the level of discourse and/or story
• Determinate/indeterminate
  – In determinate mode, the text specifies enough points along the story arc to form a definite script
  – In indeterminate mode, only a few points are given – the recipient fills in the rest

• Retrospective/simultaneous/prospective
  – The recounting of past, current, or future events

• Literal/metaphorical
  – In literal mode, the narrative satisfies most or all of the 8 definitional dimensions
  – In metaphorical mode, there are violations of a number of the dimensions
  – The goal of this distinction is to recognize the expanded notions of the term “narrative” without sacrificing the precision of the core construct
What are media?

- Two contrasting views: the pipe vs. language
  - The pipe view enables transmedial analysis but ignores the affordances of different media
    - E.g. TV – a transmissive medium, but has its own affordances
  - The language view admits the affordances of different media, but risks radical media relativism

- The language notion of media is primary – there’s nothing to transmit through a pipe unless it has first been encoded in language

- There may be no pure pipes – things that look like pipes may all have language-like affordances

- Since the language view is primary, Ryan wants to find a middle ground that recognizes the material support of semiotic languages, will avoiding both the media relativist and pipe views
Three ways to analyze media

• Media as semiotic phenomena – broad categories of sign systems
  – Language
  – Images
  – Music

• Media as technologies
  – Allows us to drill in on specific material supports – fractures broad categories of sign systems into specific subtypes
  – E.g. Ong’s analysis of the shift from oral culture, to writing, to printing

• Media as cultural practice (communities of practice)
  – Lack a distinct semiotic and technological identity (e.g. newspapers vs. books)
  – Evolution of media forms depends on cultural pressures
Narrative differences across media

• Narrative differences across media play out in three different narrative domains
  – Semantics (plot or story)
  – Syntax (discourse)
  – Pragmatics (uses of narrative)

• Plot or story
  – Film prefers dramatic narratives structured by Aristotelian arc – TV prefers episodic narratives with multiple plot lines – computer games prefer quest narratives with a single plot line divided into multiple autonomous episodes

• Discourse
  – Comics represent time via space using distinct frames, film presents a continuously moving image with edits

• Uses of narrative
  – Blogging (posting of private diaries), tabletop RPGs (group improvisational stories)
Genre vs. medium

• A medium is defined by a semiotic language and a technological support that provide specific expressive affordances.

• A genre is a set of explicit rules for using a medium in a specific way.

• The distinction can be fuzzy:
  – A medium is defined by cultural forces, but so is a genre (genre can reside in communities of practice).
  – Different media employ different semiotic languages, but genre conventions can be understood as semiotic sub-languages.

• Examples:
  – The print novel is a medium – horror stories and detective stories are genres.
  – Film is a medium – the light romantic comedy and the road movie are genres.