Ludology

- Ludology is the study of games, with an emphasis on the formal elements of games (rule systems, entities, attributes)
  - The general term for the humanistic study of games is games studies – the term ludology is generally reserved for the formalists
  - Ludology is most commonly associated with being anti-narratology – the ludology vs. narratology debate
    - Wikipedia: “While scholars use many different theoretical and research frameworks, the two most visible approaches are ludology and narratology.” Careful here – nobody really calls themselves a ludologist or narratologist. There is no single theoretical or methodological framework that describes either position. There are terms from a debate, not actual research strategies.
  - The three readings for today are written by three influential scholars who early on called for a new, autonomous discipline for studying games
    - Espen Aarseth – *Genre Trouble*  
    - Markku Eskelinen – *Toward Computer Game Studies*  
    - Gonzalo Frasca – *Simulation versus Narration: Introduction to Ludology*

Games vs. narrative

- Games have representational elements and rule systems
- Much of the game vs. narrative debate turns on whether one should consider the rule system or representation primary

Narrativists  
Paradigmatic form: hypertext  
Academic pedigree: literary theory

Ludologists  
Paradigmatic form: games  
Academic pedigree: games studies
Genre Trouble

- Games must be defended from the colonizing influence of narrative and textual analysis
  - With semiotics, the notion of “text” generalized to all of material existence
  - But the essence of games can’t be captured by semiotic analysis
- Within traditional academic circles, games are seen as a low-culture phenomenon
  - Some scholars try to recuperate games by relating them to high-culture phenomena (like narrative)
  - But this high/low dichotomy doesn’t lead to interesting theory or methodology, and risks missing what’s truly new about games

Games are not textual

- “Games are not "textual" or at least not primarily textual: where is the text in chess? We might say that the rules of chess constitute its "text," but there is no recitation of the rules during gameplay, so that would reduce the textuality of chess to a subtextuality or a paratextuality.”
- “Any game consists of three aspects: (1) rules, (2) a material/semiotic system (a gameworld), and (3) gameplay (the events resulting from application of the rules to the gameworld). Of these three, the semiotic system is the most coincidental to the game.”
- “Likewise, the dimensions of Lara Croft’s body, already analyzed to death by film theorists, are irrelevant to me as a player, because a different-looking body would not make me play differently. When I play, I don’t even see her body, but see through it and past it.”

Games are not intertextual

- Intertextuality refers to the meaning of a text being derived from its relationships to other texts
  - In contemporary literary theory, there is no autonomous meaning in a text, only a web of meaning
- “It follows that games are not intertextual either: games are self-contained. You don’t need to have played poker or ludo to understand chess, and knowledge of roulette will not help you to understand Russian roulette.”
- “Knowing Star Wars: The Phantom Menace will not make you better at playing Pod Racer (Juul 2001a). Unlike in music, where a national anthem played on electric guitar takes on a whole new meaning, the value system of a game is strictly internal, determined unambivalently by the rules.”
An aside: Super Columbine Massacre RPG

Narrativism

- The ideology that narrative is the only mode whereby we
  - Communicate with each other
  - Make sense of the world (and our own lives)

- Everything is narrative
  - "Life is a story, this discussion is a story, and the building that I work in is also a story, or better, an architectural narrative."
  - "Underlying the drive to reform games as 'interactive narratives,' as they are sometimes called, lies a complex web of motives, from economic ("games need narratives to become better products"), elitist and eschatological ("games are a base, low-cultural form; let's try to escape the humble origins and achieve 'literary' qualities"), to academic colonialism ("computer games are narratives, we only need to redefine narratives in such a way that these new narrative forms are included")."

Translation

- Stories can be translated across media (novel to comic book, to movie, to TV series, to opera, …)
  - "In the various versions of a story, key events and relationships remain..."
  - "...in the versions of a game, the rules remain."

- Games can be translated across media (board and dice, to a live role-play out in the woods, to numbers and letters on a screen, to a three-dimensional virtual world…)
  - "...in the versions of a game, the rules remain."

- "But when we try to translate a game into a story, what happens to the rules? What happens to the gameplay? And a story into a game: what happens to the plot? And, to use Marie-Laure Ryan’s example (2001), what player, in the game version of Anna Karenina, playing the main character, Holodeck style, would actually commit suicide, even virtually? Novels are very good at relating the inner lives of characters (films perhaps less so;); games are awful at that, or, wisely, they don't even try."

Story-generating systems are not stories
Story-game hybrids: the adventure game genre

- First evident in textual adventure games
  - Notes that this genre is alive and well as a hobby form (IF)
- The desire to tell a story is in conflict with the game rules
  - Need to force the linearization of events
  - Compared to games like Civ, these games are generally not replayable
  - “Most critics agree that the Miller brothers (Myst) succeeded eminently in making a fascinating visual landscape, a haunting and beautiful gameworld, but to experienced gamers, the gameplay was boring and derivative, with the same linear structure that was introduced by the first Adventure game sixteen years earlier. Nice video graphics, shame about the game.”
- The biggest aesthetic problem for these games is believable characters
  - Early adventure games avoided characters
  - Later games introduce scripted, repetitive dialog
  - Unlike narrative media like novels or film, games are unable to express interpersonal relationships and inner life

The computer game is the art of simulation

- “The hidden structure behind these, and most, computer games is not narrative -- or that silly and abused term, “interactivity” -- but simulation.”
- “In the adventure games where there is a conflict between narrative and ludic aesthetics, it is typically the simulation that, on its own, allows actions that the story prohibits, or which make the story break down. Players exploit this to invent strategies that make a mockery of the author’s intentions.”
- Often games like RPGs will employ narrative fragments, but they are completely superfluous

Electronic literature

- In this class we’re not talking much about electronic literature, though it’s under the umbrella of interactive narrative
  - Hyperlink literature is a canonical instance here
  - Quick look at victory garden
- But electronic literature is not a game/literature hybrid, but fully literature
  - Wants to remove it from consideration from the debate
  - What is it about electronic literature that makes it “not a game”?
- Interestingly, the real game/literature hybrid, IF, is still active, but “seems to have little influence on either game culture or literary culture in general.”
Simulation-based interactive stories impossible

- A technical impossibility argument
- Simulation-based approach to narrative would involve simulating both characters and an author
- This is more than an AI-complete problem, because the system would have to be better than a human author in that it would have to write the story reactively and in real time
  - How might we argue back?

Towards Computer Game Studies

- Markku comes out swinging
- “So if there already is or soon will be a legitimate field for computer game studies, this field is also very open to intrusions and colonizations from the already organized scholarly tribes. Resisting and beating them is the goal of our first survival game in this paper, as what these emerging studies need is independence, or at least relative independence.”
- “For example, as we shall soon see, if you actually know your narrative theory (instead of resorting to outdated notions of Aristotle, Propp, or Victorian novels) you won’t argue that games are (interactive or procedural) narratives or anything even remotely similar. 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.”

The narrative situation

- Diegetic universe
- Story
- Discourse
- Focalization
- Prolepsis (flash-forward)
- Analepsis (flash-back)
- Interpretation
The gaming situation

Game universe

Action sequence

Configurable elements

Interpretation

Configuration (goals)

Observation

Dynamic universe

Formation of explicit goals, not only interpretation

Interpretive

Exploratory – actively opening up new content

Configurative – changing game state along predefined relationships

Textonic – adding new content to the game

Focalization in games involves exploring the rule system – the player can actively control focalization

The narrative and game situation are different

Therefore games are not narratives

And interactive narrative is impossible!? (at least high-agency interactive narrative)
**Time in games**

- Order – relationship between user time and time in the game (there may be multiple levels)
- Frequency – whether events and actions happen only once, an unlimited number of times, with some limit, are undoable or not
- Speed – the pace of the game, and whether pace is controlled by system, player, or both
- Duration – the player’s relationship to the duration of the game and individual game events
- Time of action – when the player is allowed to act
- Simultaneity – player’s relationship to simultaneous events

**Simulation vs. Narration**

- Frasca argues that what’s fundamentally different between games and narrative is that games can simulate while narrative represents
- To simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains to somebody some of the behaviors of the original system
- The sequence of signs produced by a simulation might look the same as a static representation, but the experience of producing that sequence (playing) is radically different
  - Computational media artifacts are machines – generative sign systems

**Advergames and political games**

- Advergames and political games may be the cutting edge of developing a simulation rhetoric
- Question: what does Super Mario Brothers simulate?
Comparing narrative and simulation

- *Germinal* – a novel about a strike held by mine workers – the workers lose
- *Bread and Rose* – a film about a strike of janitorial workers in LA – workers win (though leader deported)
  - These stories depict the issues of worker rights and the fight for living wages
  - But they only show one possibility – narrative is inherently binary (the protagonist wins or not)
- Simulation can present a space of possibility
  - A strike game would allow players to explore this space

Anti-Aristotle

- Augusto Boal’s *Theater of the Oppressed* is a participatory street theater for people to explore options for responding to injustice
- Boal critiques Aristotelian drama for presenting irrevocable outcomes (dramatic necessity) and for turning off critical powers (engagement and identification)
- *Videogames of the Oppressed* – games that allow people to explore options through simulation
  - Share simulations in a social context

Paida and ludus

- *Paida* – games conceived as open-ended play
- *Ludus* – games conceived as having strong goals
- Four different ideological levels
  - *Paida rules* – govern the manipulation of the gameworld
  - *Ludus rules* – determine the winning condition
  - *Meta rules* – govern player modification of the game
- Rhetoric operates at all four levels