

# **WHY PEOPLE PLAY GAMES INSTEAD OF READING BOOKS**

**CAFÉ SCIENTIFIQUE**

10<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER, 2014

**PROF. RICHARD A. BARTLE**

UNIVERSITY OF **ESSEX**

## INTRODUCTION

- TODAY, I'LL BE TALKING ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN **GAMES** AND **STORIES**
- STORIES ARE **ROUTINELY** PRIVILEGED **ABOVE** GAMES
  - PEOPLE TALK ABOUT STORIES **FOR** GAMES
  - **UNLIKE** GAMES, LITERATURE AND DRAMA HAVE BEEN STUDIED FOR **HUNDREDS** OF YEARS
- I PERSONALLY PREFER TO PRIVILEGE **GAMES** ABOVE **STORIES**
- THIS IS BECAUSE GAMES ARE **MACHINES** FOR **GENERATING** STORIES

## BEAR KOMBAT

- HERE'S A PICTURE OF TWO BEAR CUBS **PLAYING**



- GAMES ARE **OLDER** THAN STORIES

## STORY

- WHAT **IS** A STORY?
- "A STORY IS A NARRATIVE OF EVENTS ARRANGED IN THEIR TIME SEQUENCE"
  - E. M. FORSTER, *ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL*
- SO:
  - (USUALLY FICTIONAL) **EVENTS** HAPPEN
  - SOME OF THESE ARE **SELECTED** AND PRESENTED IN THE ORDER THEY WILL BE **READ** (IF NOT OCCURRED)
  - THE WAY THEY ARE **TOLD** IS A **NARRATIVE**
  - THE RESULT IS A **STORY**

## PLOT

- A **PLOT** IS **NOT** THE SAME THING AS A STORY
- PLOTS ARE **PREDEFINED** AND INCLUDE **CAUSALITY**
  - AN EVENT HAPPENS **BECAUSE** A SITUATION, EVENT OR SERIES OF EVENTS **PRECEDED** IT
- EXAMPLE: HERE IS A **TWO-EVENT** STORY:
  - I ATE A BAR OF CHOCOLATE. I WAS SICK.
- DID THE CHOCOLATE **MAKE** ME SICK OR CHEER ME UP BECAUSE I WAS **ALREADY** SICK?
  - OR “THAT’S TWO THINGS OFF MY BUCKET LIST”?

## NARRATIVE

- A NARRATIVE IS THE **TELLING** OF A STORY
  - CONVEYING THE **PLOT** THROUGH THE **DEVICE** OF THE STORY
- IT USUALLY MEANS THE STORY AS A **WHOLE**
  - AT WORDS-ON-A-PAGE LEVEL, IT'S **DISCOURSE**
- **BACKSTORY** IS THE NARRATIVE OF EVENTS THAT **PRECEDED** THE STORY'S EVENTS
- IT'S USUALLY ONLY FELT **INDIRECTLY**
  - THE CHARITY WORKER DOES GOOD TO ATONE FOR HER TIME IN PRISON FOR CREDIT CARD FRAUD

## HISTORY

- **HISTORY** IS THE **RETELLING** OF A SERIES OF CAUSALLY-CONNECTED **PAST** EVENTS
  - **UNCAUSALLY**-CONNECTED ONES ARE **RECORDS**
- FOR **NON-FICTIONAL** EVENTS THERE IS **NO** PLOT CREATED BY A GOD-LIKE **AUTHOR**, BUT THE **CHARACTERS** CAN STILL HAVE PLOTS
  - THE **GUNPOWDER PLOT**
- **HISTORIANS** LOOK AT **RECORDS** TO EXPLAIN AND INTERPRET THEIR **CAUSALITY**
  - BUT THESE CHAINS OF EVENTS **AREN'T** PLOTTED

## FOR GAMES

- WE HAVE **FIVE** TERMS DEFINED HERE:
  - STORY
  - PLOT
  - NARRATIVE (AND DISCOURSE)
  - BACKSTORY
  - HISTORY
- LET'S APPLY THESE TO **GAMES**
- A **STORY** IS A LINEAR RETELLING OF EVENTS
  - NOT NECESSARILY THE **SAME** FOR **EACH** PLAYER
  - NOR FOR THE SAME PLAYER EACH **REPLAYING**



## PLOT

- A PLOT IS A POSSIBLY **NONLINEAR** SERIES OF EVENTS PREDETERMINED BY THE DESIGNERS
- IT INTRODUCES **SOME** SIGNIFICANT EVENTS
- THAT SAID, **MOST** EVENTS COME FROM INTERACTING WITH THE **GAME SYSTEM**
- THESE **ARE** PREDEFINED, IN THAT THE GAME SYSTEM EMBODIES ALL EVENTS THAT **CAN** OCCUR
- BUT THEY'RE **NOT** PREDEFINED **AS EVENTS**
  - THEY'RE PREDEFINED AS THE OUTPUTS OF A **SYSTEM** FOR **GENERATING** EVENTS

## PLOTLESS GAMES

- GAMES DON'T **HAVE** TO HAVE PLOTS
- **NO** ABSTRACT GAMES HAVE THEM, BECAUSE PLOTS REQUIRE A **FICTION** FOR THEIR CONTEXT
- ABSTRACT GAMES **DO** STILL CREATE STORY
  - ITS **IMPLICIT** IN THEIR MECHANICS
- REMEMBER THAT **AMAZING** GAME OF *TETRIS* WHEN YOU WERE CLOSE TO THE TOP AND JUST NEEDED **ONE** LONG BRICK THEN AT LAST IT CAME AND YOU COLLAPSED ALMOST THE WHOLE STACK?
  - THERE WAS NO **PLOT**, BUT WHAT A **STORY!**

## NARRATIVE

- FOR GAME DESIGNERS, **NARRATIVE** USUALLY MEANS THE WAY THE **PLOTTED** EVENTS UNFOLD FOR THE PLAYER
- IS **DOESN'T** MEAN THE WAY THE EVENTS THAT ARISE FROM THE **GAME SYSTEM** UNFOLD
  - THEY CALL THAT **GAMEPLAY**
- **DISCOURSE** IN GAMES MEANS:
  - QUEST STEPS, PLOT POINTS, QUICK TIME EVENTS, ...
  - MECHANICS, GAME LOOP, CORE GAMEPLAY, ...
  - (WELL, IT WOULD IF DESIGNERS **USED** THE TERM...)

## BACKSTORY

- **BACKSTORY** COVERS THE EVENTS THAT TOOK PLACE **BEFORE** THE PLAYER STARTED PLAYING
- BACKSTORY IS **NOT** HISTORY
  - BACKSTORY IS ACTUALLY **PREHISTORY** THAT GIVES AN EXPLANATORY CONTEXT
- **HISTORY** IS WHAT YOU GET WHEN PLAYERS **RETELL** WHAT HAPPENED DURING PLAY
- THEY SELECTIVELY **CHOOSE** WHICH EVENTS FROM THEIR **RECORD** OF PLAY TO **RELATE**
  - THIS **INTERPRETED** STORY IS THEIR **HISTORY**

## STORY MATTERS

- THESE STORIES – THESE **HISTORIES** – ARE THE ONES THAT **MATTER** FOR GAMES
- IF YOU CAN'T **TELL** ANOTHER ATTENTIVE PLAYER WHAT **INTERESTING** THINGS HAPPENED, NO INTERESTING THINGS **DID** HAPPEN
- IF **THAT'S** THE CASE, THEN WHY WERE YOU EVEN **PLAYING?!**
  - NO **DECISIONS** TO MAKE, NO **OBSTACLES** TO OVERCOME, NO **UNEXPECTED** SITUATIONS, NO **EMOTIONAL** OR HEART-STOPPING **MOMENTS**

## EXPLANATION

- IN PLAYING A GAME, **YOU** CAN CAUSE EVENTS TO OCCUR THAT FOR **YOU** ARE SIGNIFICANT
  - OR COULD **LEAD** TO SOMETHING SIGNIFICANT
- YOU'RE LOOKING FOR **EXPERIENCES** TO USE AS **BUILDING BLOCKS** IN YOUR STORY
  - SOME YOU **IGNORE**, SOME YOU **HOLD ON** TO
- **OTHER** PEOPLE MIGHT THINK YOUR STORY IS GARBAGE, BUT IT'S NOT **FOR** THEM
- YOU'RE PLAYING THE GAME SO **YOU** HAVE FUN
  - FUN IS THAT WHICH **YOU'D** RELATE AS A STORY

## NOVEL IDEA

- AN **ACCOMPLISHED** STORYTELLER CAN TELL A VERY **POWERFUL** STORY IN A BOOK
  - A REGULAR PERSON WOULD TELL A WEAKER STORY
- HOWEVER, THE NOVELIST'S STORY IS **NON-SPECIFIC**, THEREFORE **DILUTED**
  - THE REGULAR PERSON'S STORY IS **SPECIFIC** TO THEM PERSONALLY, THEREFORE **POTENT** TO THEM
- PEOPLE WHO PLAY GAMES **RATHER** THAN READ STORIES **ARE** IN FACT READING STORIES
- THEY'RE READING THE STORIES **THEY** THEMSELVES ARE **WRITING** THROUGH PLAY

## TO SUMMARISE

- PLAYING A GAME SPINS A SERIES OF **EVENTS**
- PLAYERS HAVE SOME **SAY** IN **WHICH** EVENTS
- THEY RETELL **SELECTED** EVENTS AS **STORIES**
- THEREFORE GAMES ARE **MACHINES** THAT PLAYERS EMPLOY FOR CREATING **STORIES**
- WHEN YOU **PLAY** A GAME, YOU **DIRECT** IT TOWARDS THE EVENTS BEST **FOR YOU**
- **EVERYONE** LIKES STORIES, BUT THEY LIKE THEIR **OWN** STORIES MOST OF ALL