The Personal Experience of Narratives in Role-Playing Games

Michael Hitchens[1], Anders Drachen[2]

[1] Department of Computing, Macquarie University , 2109 North Ryde, Australia {michaelh@ics.mq.edu.au}
[2] Center for Computer Games Research, IT University of Copenhagen, Rued Langgaards Vej 7, 2300 Copenhagen, Denmark
{drachen@itu.dk}

Abstract

The role of story and narrative within games has been debated at length. By taking the approach that narrative can be understood with games, but only by incorporating the dynamics of game play and by accepting that existing models of narrative must be modified, this paper examines the place of narrative within role-playing games. Narrative can be defined as a description of a series of events. The description that narrative represents is experienced by the players, in an individual and personal manner. The implications of this for familiar concepts such as story and text are examined, and definitions proposed for them in the role-playing game context. Each can be best understood as unique to each participant in the game. The result shows that existing theories can be applied to the gaming context, but only with significant modification. The definitions proposed also allow for an initial consideration of how narrative is constructed in role-playing games.

1. Introduction

Narrative has long been recognized as an important factor in many areas of human experience, such as literature, history, cultural studies and art (Bal 1997 and Genette 1990). There has been extensive debate about the nature and place of narratives in games (Juul 2001, Lovlie 2005, Pearce 2005 and Simons 2007). Despite the effort expended, what exactly constitutes the narrative of a game (or even whether such a thing exists at all) remains to be properly resolved. In general the debate has not reached any real conclusion, partly because it has taken place in the absence of any great clarity of definition of the terms being used. This need for concrete definitions has been recognized (Frasca 2003a). Existing work on narrative can be used in proposing definitions, but consideration must also be given to the defining features of games (Juul 2001). It can be asked whether game narratives exist at all. Juul (Juul 2001) asks "Do games tell stories?" If story is taken to mean some chronological sequence of events, and depiction can be considered a form of "telling", then we would answer that some games do tell stories, but that this is not the same as saying that games *are* stories. They clearly are not. It also leaves the manner of "telling" undefined. Yet many games have elements associated with narratives, e.g. characters and plots. To quote Schut (Schut 2003): "*A game such as Monkey Island may have practically everything we associate with a story: a plot of causally-linked events, a set of characters including protagonists and antagonists, and a dramatic set of conflicts that culminates in a climax and ends in a resolution, among other things.*"

If narratives are defined as "a description of a series of events" (Cambridge University 1995) then Role-Playing Games (RPGs) (for example *Baldur's Gate* or *Morrowind*), most non-digital RPGs and even many single-player first person shooter computer games, are narratives. Yet claiming games as simply a sub-type of narrative ignores the role of actual game play. Narrative, to employ a cliché, is not the whole story of games, but it is a facet of some of them. This implies that existing narrative theory may not be fully equipped to explain them, though as Ryan (Ryan 2001) states: "*The inability of literary narratology to account for the experience of games does not mean that we should throw away the concept of narrative in ludology; it rather means that we need to expand the catalog of narrative modalities.*"

If it is accepted that existing theories are insufficient to explain exactly what the narrative in a game is, we must consider how those theories can be elaborated. A single paper is too short, given both the size of the problem and the extent of the existing literature, to present a complete solution. Instead we present a first step, within the context of a particular type of game – the RPG. This form is chosen as it exists in both digital and non-digital forms and examples involve widely varying numbers of participants (from a single player and their computer to the thousands). It is hoped, if the current effort is successful, that it might form the basis for a more general consideration of the place and definition of narratives in games. Game play is dynamic and, as it relies upon input from the player, can at least possibly differ for each player. Any narrative will be experienced by a player as a result of their game play. As the game play of each player differs, so their narratives may differ. Consideration of narrative often begins with the text. Indeed one author (Bal 1997) defines narrative not independently, but as part of the term "narrative text": "*A text in which an agent relates ('tells') a story in a particular medium*". For a RPG narrative can a text be identified? By what process is it created?

This paper represents an attempt at synthesizing existing theory relevant to narratives in a games context (particularly that of RPGs), and providing a framework for

their discussion. This includes both their creation and content, particularly from the perspective of the personal experience of a "reader". The intention is to provide a basic theory of narrative as it appears in RPGs, drawing from existing theory (narratology) and other work, notably Aarseth's cybertext (Aarseth 1997), Possible Worlds Theory (Herman, Jahn & Ryan 2005) and RPG theory. In developing the framework we hope to at least begin to answer the above questions about the text (and other equivalents to concepts from existing narrative theory), demonstrate that the game narrative is a distinctly personal experience for each player and examine the process of producing a narrative in the RPG context.

The understanding of how narratives operate in games is important for a variety of reasons, notably, the potential use within automated storytelling engines (Louchart & Aylett 2004, Mateas & Stern 2003, Peinado, & Gervás 2004, Riedl & Young 2005), computer games, virtual reality trainers and simulators, etc. If the construction of such software is not based on a proper understanding of game narratives and their construction, they are likely to be handicapped in their delivery of flexible and compelling narratives.

2. Existing Narrative Theory and Games

Most existing narrative theory deals with the analysis of narratives from a fixed, pre-existing, text (which for the moment may be understood as a physical manifestation, e.g. a book or film). Even approaches such as reader-response theory (Tompkins 1980) and hermeneutics (Zalta 2007), deal with the individual interpretation and/or experience of the text, not with the *construction* of the text. Games involve their players in ways that many (though not necessarily all) other media do not. A player of a game is part of the game, while a reader is not part of a book. This is fundamentally different to the situations envisaged by such theories as reader-response, where the individual experience of the reader is based on, but does not continuously contribute to the formation of, the work being experienced.

Game play is dynamic. Whatever the narrative in a game is, it will likewise be dynamic, not static and there is no author-audience relationship as in static narratives as there is no passive audience. The fundamental point is that the reactions of the "reader" or "audience" will affect the future course of the narrative and in a way that is, at least potentially, unique to them, resulting in a personal experience of the narrative that is noticeably different to that of other readers. While we do not ignore the consideration that has been given to the interaction that occurs between the reader of a standard narrative text and that text, whatever that reader process may be, it does not, in such cases; result in any changes to the text, which is static and pre-existing. The reader's interaction in those cases is interpretive, not configurative. In games it is both.

An approach to narratives that, similarly to games, places the "reader" in a central and configurative position in relation to the text is Aarseth's notion of cybertext (Aarseth 1997). Aarseth views the text as a machine consisting of three parts: operator (an extended concept of the reader), verbal sign and medium; and explicitly including a performative aspect. The cybertext machine is: *"A mechanical device for the production and consumption of verbal signs"* (Aarseth 1997).

Two important concepts of cybertext are: 1) That the textual machine explicitly includes the operator; 2) That cybertexts are: *"Texts that involve calculation in their production of scriptons"*[1]. The implication is that the calculation usually, if not always, depends upon some input from the operator. Therefore the resulting scriptons (or verbal signs) will differ from operator to operator - at least if their input differs. Given a realistically wide possibility of input, as in most digital games, it is unlikely that two operators will give the same input. Therefore different operators produce different - i.e. *personal* - outputs. It is from the outputs, the scriptons, that the operators perceive the narrative (if it is a narrative text in the first place). The same situation arises if Aarseth's three-part cybertext model is extended by adding additional, simultaneous, operators. Would the scriptons they produce and experience be the same? If not, it is likely that there would be many occasions where their individual personal narratives would also differ. This potential dynamism is an important characteristic of such narratives, although the consequences of multiple simultaneous operators are not discussed by Aarseth.

3. Narratives and Role-Playing Games

Within RPGs, most players control the actions of a single character within a fictional world. The remainder of the fictional world beyond the player-controlled characters is controlled and described by one or more Game Masters (GMs) (for non-digital RPGs) or computer software and possibly GMs (for the digital forms). The experiences of the player characters within the game world can easily be viewed as a series of events. Through the game play, each player perceives the events that occur in the game world. This can be considered a form of description. The play of a RPG can then be considered from one perspective as a described series of events – a narrative under the definition quoted above. This does not completely characterise a RPG, rather narrative is one way of looking at such games. In much the same way we can consider a human being's

---

[1] Calculation does not have to be taken as implying digital electronic activity. It can be extended, to cover situations where the scriptons are a result of some process that is simultaneous with, or at least immediately proceeds, their reception. E.g. the *I Ching*.

chemical components, but that does not tell us everything there is to know about a human being. An extensive literature on RPGs exists; readers may start with (Fine 1983) and (Mackay 2001).

While contending that RPGs have a narrative aspect, it is important to retain sight of the differences between this and other narrative forms. The narrative experienced by a game player is a result of participating in a creative process. This has been recognised for example, in (Crawford 2003) and (Murray 2000). The narrative in a RPG is depicted in the game play and the participants in the game are parties to the creation of the narrative. There is not a single agent "telling" the story, rather all participants have a part to play in this activity. A RPG narrative is not made for an audience, but for the people participating. It is created and experienced by those participants as a dynamic process and that process must be understood if these narratives themselves are to be understood. Participants do not have full pre-knowledge of how the narrative will develop (unlike actors in traditional theatre, using a fixed script) – it may evolve in ways unforeseen by any participant. Even in a heavily scripted computer game the exact order of events, and the precise actions attempted by players are unknown in advance to the designer and hence to the code.

In order to define narratives as they exist in RPGs it is important to include not only the necessary components for analysis but also the actual process by which they (and the narrative itself) are shaped. Traditional narratology has much to offer in considering the elements of RPG narratives, and providing tools for their analysis and discussion, but little contribution to the understanding of the process of formation of these narratives or of the imaginary worlds in which they take place[2]. To this end we will draw upon another philosophical and literary model, that of Possible Worlds (Herman, Jahn & Ryan 2005). This will allow us to model the view-point of each participant in the process and the contributions each makes to the others' understanding of the imaginary world they share.

4. A Model for Narratives in RPGs

A narrative in a RPG is here defined as a description through game play of a series of events created by the interaction of two or more participants. The manner of description is deliberately undefined, as players will experience and contribute to game play, and draw their conception of the game narrative, from a number of sources, including their own and other players' contributions and their own conception of the game state. The narrative experienced by a player will be informed by

the sum total of their game play experience. This form of narrative does not have an audience, in the sense that a work of traditional dramatic theatre has an audience that is separate from the actors performing their parts. There is no requirement for the existence of spectators who are supposed to "read" the work. Role-players, of either the digital or non-digital variety, rarely play so that non-participants may spectate. Before considering the process of narrative creation in RPGs, some terminology is necessary:

Participants: A participant in a RPG narrative is one who can affect the future course of the narrative by interaction with other participants. A participant need not be a human being (it could be a computer program) nor may the nature or type of interaction of each participant be equal. Note that this definition excludes someone watching a recording of the play of a RPG. Such an audience has no means of interacting and affecting the future course.

Text: If there is narrative in RPGs, as experienced by a participant, and narrative are conveyed by texts, what is the text? The experience of narrative, to employ Aarseth's (Aarseth 2007) terminology, comes directly from the *scriptons* (*"Strings as they appear to readers"*), so we need to identify these for a RPG. In looser terms, through what signs does the participant experience the narrative?

Different players in the same RPG will experience different scriptons. Consider two players, each controlling a character. One character may enter a building while another never does. Thus the scriptons experienced by the former, but not the latter, include some giving a depiction of the interior of that building. Other examples include private conversations or notes passed between participants. Personalisation of scriptons can be observed even in single player computer games. There players may make notes, or vocalise, and regard such actions as part of their narrative yet the other participant, the game software, is unaware of this portion of that participant's experience. Similarly the human participant will not be aware of everything that is part of the computation carried out by the software. It is clear that each participant in a RPG narrative has their own personal set of scriptons and each can distinctly differ from that of the other participant(s) in the game.

A further example makes the differences even more apparent. A player could decide that their character is in love with another game character. Yet the player may never voice that love, write down its existence or communicate its existence to any other participant in any explicit form. However some actions of the player's character will be affected by this emotion of the character. The emotion thus appears to have a genuine validity within the experience of that participant, and must be considered part of their individual narrative, even though it is never expressed in any concrete sign system.

While it is arguable that thought is a manifestation of a sign system it is certainly not a concrete one. Yet the player's unvoiced thoughts in the above form a part of their

---

[2] It may be contented that *fabula* deals with the imaginary world. However, the *fabula* is a selective view on the imaginary world and, as discussed below, these are separate constructs when considering role-playing game narratives.

narrative experience of the game. A key problem of narrative in role-playing games is that they are not wholly conveyed by a traditional text. We refer to the relevant thoughts of the participant as *imaginings*[3]. These are obviously personal to each participant. It appears that the individual narrative of a participant in a RPG is drawn from the sum of their perceptions (including their imaginings), which extends beyond any traditional form of text. Given the above the *personal text* of a participant in a RPG is that combination of manifestations in specific sign systems experienced by a participant during game play. Note the plurals and that it is particular to each participant. The personal text is the output (the scriptons) each participant receives from the game as cybertext machine. It may include utterances of themselves or other participants (in whatever media), their imaginings and pre-existing texts, such as game manuals, character information and story modules. This is similar to hermeneutics, where the text is not limited to concrete objects, but may extend to elements that are open to interpretation, such as experiences. The narrative experience may also be influenced by pre-texts, defined in (O'Neill 1995) as a text that "*exists before the event and is a source or impulse for the ... process*", for example when a game takes place in the imaginary world of a book, such as *Lord of the Rings*.

The personal text is added to during game play and is separate from a static text observable by a third party, such as the recording of a play session. The contribution a participant makes to the game narrative (their input to the cybertext machine) is based upon their personal text up to the point at which the contribution is made. The personal texts of the participants in a given RPG may have significant overlap, if the number of participants is not too large, but will often differ in crucial aspects. For larger games the difference may be considerable. The process of development of a RPG narrative and personal texts will be further considered in Section 5.

This definition of text gives us an insight into the status of narrative in RPGs. Narrative is a depiction of a series of events. The depiction is through the text. As, in our understanding, the text for each participant in a role-playing narrative is personal and distinct, so they must each have their own *personal narrative*. While we could speak of single narrative for a game, this is a hypothetical construct based on some amalgam of the personal narratives of the participants. What actually exists is the personal narrative conception of each player.

Narrative theory encompasses many concepts beside text and narrative. Prominent amongst those is the idea of the sequence of events represented in the narrative, both as they appear in the narrative and as they can be understood to occur in the fictional world. These orders can differ, by

use of techniques such as flashback. Terms such as story, plot, fabula and mythos are used around these concepts, and not all authors employ them in the same sense. We will adopt the terminology of Bal (Bal 1997), recognising that different terms may be applied to these constructs. A story, according to Bal is a "*series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors*[4]" and that are "*presented in a certain manner*".

The presentation of the story is through the text and both develop through the course of game play. As the participants in a RPG are likely to have different, personal, texts, they will also experience ("read") different personal stories. As with the personal texts, the personal story experienced by a participant may overlap in general features with that of some other participants, but there may also be crucial differences. At any moment in that process a participant will have a particular conception of the story to that point (and possibly intentions as to its future development). The participant's future contribution to the interaction will be based on their personal conception of the story. Creating a narrative through a RPG is both a dynamic and particularly personal experience, though one that is done as part of a group.

Key to the definition of story given above is that it is "presented" in a certain manner. Part of this presentation is the choice of rendering the events of the narrative and their order of presentation. Events may be presented in the story out of their "actual" chronological order. However, it is usually possible to deduce the order from the story. This ordering of events, according to the rules of the world of the narrative is referred to by Bal (Ball 1997) as the *fabula*. A fabula in a RPG narrative is then that conceptual ordering of events in a fictional world, according to the rules of that world, held by a participant and formed according to that participant's understanding of the story. Participants will derive an independent, individual, view of the fabula (analogous to text and story, their *personal fabula*) from their play experience. From this they gain a conception of what has occurred in the imaginary world and their future contribution to game play will be potentially heavily influenced by this. As the narrative process proceeds, and text and story are created, so is the fabula as understood by the participants developed.

Fictional stories take place in imaginary worlds. However, beyond such bald statements the imaginary world itself has attracted little attention from traditional narratology. Most narrative theory is a retrospective analysis, in that it begins with the text and proceeds to analyse other levels, such as (in the case of the approach we have adopted) story and fabula. As the text defines the fabula, statements about the imaginary world outside the scope of the fabula would be mere speculation.

---

[3] Whether such imaginings are sufficient to render the imaginary world, or at least each participant's view of it, ontologically complete, is an interesting question but not essential to the current argument.

[4] "Actor" here does not mean a player in a theatre drama but active entities, not necessarily human, within the story.

The situation for RPGs narratives is quite different. In their creation it cannot be known for certain at any particular point what part of the imaginary world may be relevant in all future iterations of text, story and fabula. Play may, in theory at least, progress to any part of that world, even sections not currently imagined in any detail. In one sense it could be argued that the imaginary world is not strictly necessary to our model. However, the narrative is a sequence of events experienced within the world, not the world itself. A player will form a conception of the imaginary world beyond the experiences of their character, in the same way that the conception a person in this world has of the world extends beyond their experiences. Beyond the personal narrative (and thus the personal text, story and fabula) the understanding of the imaginary world held by a participant will also be shaped by any relevant pre-text. These will allow participant to speculate about further parts of the world, not yet directly experienced. E.g., in a game with a city by the sea it would be reasonable to assume there are other settlements up and down the coast.

The conception of the imaginary world held by each participant will not be identical. As the participants' text/story/fabula will not be identical so their conception of imaginary world will not be. We are left with a set of imaginary worlds which agree in some (probably most) points and differ in others. This situation is obviously closely related to the theory of Possible Worlds. This theory has its origin in philosophy, but has been applied to narrative semantics. For example, (Eco 1984) as summarised by Ryan (Herman, Jahn & Ryan 2005) considers three types of worlds:

1. The possible world imagined and asserted by the author, which consists of all states presented as actual by the fabula.
2. The possible sub-worlds that are imagined, believed, wished (etc.) by the characters.
3. The possible sub-worlds that the reader imagines, believes, wishes (etc.) in the course of reading, and that the fabula either actualises or 'counter factualizes' by taking another fork.

As with the narrative theory we adopted in previous sections this, while useful, needs some alteration for our purposes. It identifies a singular fabula, and promotes the authority of the author, while we have neither a single fabula nor author. A participant having a plan for the future course of the game play will almost certainly have some conception of the parts of the imaginary world which will be the setting for that section of the (future) fabula. The imaginary world of a role playing game will contain elements not utilised in actual game play and which are not known to all participants.

The imaginary world of each participant, and the likely separate ones of their character(s), can then be understood as a possible world, although we will continue to use the former term in recognition of our departures from the base theory. The imaginary world is the conception of a fictional world held by a participant in a RPG narrative, formed and influenced by the personal text, story and fabula of that participant. Each participant's imaginary world can be a source of influence on the developing conception of the imaginary worlds of all other participants. This has some relation to the concept of transmedial worlds from (Klastrup and Tosca 2004). In our terms a transmedial world is an imaginary world where the shared conception of it is so widespread amongst the population that presentation of stories in it via different media is possible. Another related concept is that of storyworlds (Herman 2002). Storyworlds are the cognitive models held by readers gained from the verbal or visual expression of the narrative. They contain the readers view of what has happened in the narrative – in Herman's words: *"Who did what to and with whom, where, why and in what fashion"*. While this has similarities to the concept of imaginary world, being based on the individual reader's perceptions, it should be noted that it is applied only to the material in the (static) narrative and can be seen to be the individual reader's perception of the fabula. The conception of storyworld does not look beyond the information contained in the immediate text. It is also related to the concepts of "diegesis" (Montola 2003) and "imagined space" (Mäkelä et al 2005). Neither distinguishes between the possible worlds of the players and those of the characters, being concerned with the knowledge/viewpoint of the player. In many respects they are, however, parallel concepts.

Role playing games take place primarily for the participants. This does not mean that the narrative, cannot, in some form, be related to other parties. A modified form of the personal narrative can be extracted from the participant, e.g. by interviews or simple retelling. This will take the form of some type of text (written, spoken, etc.). The narrative of such a text will not be the personal narrative, as it will be conveyed to an audience in a more conventional author/audience fashion. We refer to the texts of such narratives as post-texts. A post-text is then a text that arises from a RPG narrative but is viewed or produced later and cannot be altered by interaction from its audience.

5. The Process of RPG Narrative Creation

Role-Playing Game narratives can be viewed as arising from cybertexts, which implies the existence of a process of creation. However, Aarseth's (Aarseth 1997) definition of cybertext is intentionally broad. In particular, it lacks specific detail of the nature of the process associated with the cybertext. This follows from the wide range of possible cybertexts Aarseth gives, in such a range the processes involved will vary considerably.

The discussion in Section 4 above leads to the conclusion that each participant in a role- playing game narrative has a personal instance of each element: text,

story, fabula and imaginary world. Each of these elements undergoes a development during the creation of the narrative. The difference between the conceptions held by the participants will vary over time, changing as they partake in the process. The differences will not simply increase, as this would eventually lead to unsustainably variant views, and the process breaking down. Participants will reconceptualise their view based on the output from the cybertext machine, with the resulting conceptions drawing nearer and separating in an erratic, unpredictable, fashion. As the narrative process unfolds, and the personal narratives develop due to the contributions to them made by all participants, the personal stories, fabulas and imaginary worlds will be updated. As events occur in the story, by being made explicit in the text, the fabula develops. As the fabula changes so must the imaginary world and the participant's conception of the narrative. The exact detail of this process will be different for each individual participant, and will not be the same as the process of creation of any actually recordable text. However, the outline for each participant should be broadly similar.

A RPG takes place when two or more participants partake in it. We define this period of real world time as a session. While the narrative is produced during the session, there will often be preparation for the session beforehand. The nature of this preparation will vary depending on the envisaged role of the participant (player, GM, computer software, etc.) but is vital to forming the initial state of each participant's imaginary world from which their contributions to the narrative begin to flow.

An initial conception of the imaginary world is required if a participant is to make contributions to the narrative. If these contributions are to make sense to the other participants, their conceptions need to be at least reasonably similar. The initial state of the imaginary world for a participant may have been formed, wholly or in part, from the narratives experienced in previous sessions. Even before the first session most participants will have formed a (possibly nebulous) initial conception of the imaginary world. This conception is part of what has been referred to as the premise (Edwards 2001 and Tychsen et al 2006). This initial conception may be formed by the reading (or production) of pre-texts or discussions with other participants. Between sessions further pre-texts may be consulted. The participants will likely not have identical imaginary worlds. They may not have equal access to, or may not have made equal use of, the available pre-texts. For example, a GM in a non-digital RPG may have a written plan of how the emergent, collaborative story of the game session is presumed to unfold, subject to the influence of the players. The software of a computer game has stored information concerning the actors and locations which the player will encounter. Such information is not normally available beforehand to players.

Similarly, if the session is one of a sequence then some participants may not have participated in all (or even any) previous sessions, for example in *World of Warcraft* where one player missed a raid in which others participated. Even participants that have played all previous sessions together may differ in their conceptions of the imaginary world, even if they are likely to be fairly similar. Such is the case in the simple example given above of one character entering a building that another does not. Most participants in RPGs interact with the imaginary world through a single avatar/character at any given time. The process of character creation is an important one in creating the participant's conception of the imaginary world. However, it is difficult to define this process in detail as it occurs at different times, and in varying ways. Character creation occurs before the first session, or during the first session (or, rarely, over a number of sessions), sometimes a mixture of both. Character creation refers to the process of producing a character in an initial playable state, according to the rules of the game in question. It should not be confused with character progression, the enhancement of skills and abilities of player characters common to many RPGs. Most, if not all, character creation requires at least some knowledge of the imaginary world (at the very least, genre and period setting) to enable a suitable character to be produced. However, the amount of such knowledge held by the participant during character creation will vary dramatically.

Production of RPG narrative consists of contributions made by all participants and the affects of these contributions on the personal text, story, fabula and imaginary world of each participant (including the contributer). The participants may only physically communicate with each other at the level of text; hence the basic ingredient is that of the textual contributions made by each participant. We posit that a RPG narrative is constructed by **a continual process of communication and feedback between the participants**. Each communication (at least potentially) affects the future communications.

We refer to all such communication as a *textual contribution*, as its primary contribution is to add to the personal text of each participant. The exact nature of each textual contribution will vary. It may be in the form of sound, writing, visual image, some combination thereof, etc. The textual contributions all include information originating from one participant and meant only for themselves (such as the imaginings discussed above). It can be seen that not all participants receive all textual contributions.

The intent of textual contributions will vary. Some will be informative about the state of the fictional world, some inquisitive. The ability to make such statements, especially in terms of the scope of application will be indicative of the power a participant has in forming the interactive narrative. For example, in a traditional non-digital RPG

most participants will only be able to make statements about the actions and thoughts of their particular character, within the environment of the fictional game world.

Only one participant (the GM) will be able to make statements about all other parts of the fictional world. Some contributions may be offered in a collaborative fashion, some may be competitive (meaning here to challenge or contradict the state of another participant's imaginary world, not as competition within the imaginary worlds).

Each participant takes the textual contributions they receive and adds it to their personal text. This in turn leads to updates in their personal story, fabula and imaginary world. These states are then used as the basis for their next textual contribution. We can then see that the RPG narrative process is a feedback loop, where the contributions of each participant lead to new states of the imaginary worlds and new textual contributions. This process is illustrated for a single participant in Figure 1. While the (personal) story, fabula and imaginary world are show as completely separate this is more caution than conclusion. We could, for example, have shown the fabula within the imaginary world. However, there is no definite information about how participants in RPGs conceive of the exact relation between these elements. Furthermore, the imaginary world is a total conception of the fictional world, where as the story and fabula are what happens to or concerns the participant's character.
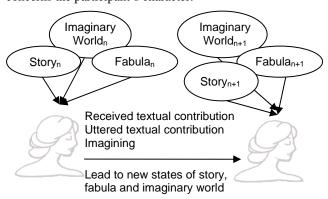

Figure 1: Textual contributions and imaginings update the participant's conceptions

We do not propose that there is a chronological (cause and effect) sequence in the updating of story to fabula to imaginary world. These changes more likely happen at least partly in parallel, although future research could resolve this question. However, the above does convey the continuing feedback loop that is observed in interactive narratives. A similar question also arises in regard to the logical relation between text, story, fabula and imaginary world. The contributions to each, and the communications between participants, are made at the textual level. This is the only direct connection between the participants, their conceptions drawn from the textual contributions

obviously having no direct link to each other. They are linked indirectly via the contributions each makes to the narrative process. Whether these contributions affect each of the personal story, fabula and imaginary world directly or whether there is a chain of causation, say from story to fabula to world, is less easy to say. Participants might process story changes first, and then deduce change to the fabula, or they might update each in parallel. Similar conjectures can be made in relation to the imaginary world.

The process described above is specifically concerned with the creation of the narrative of a RPG from the viewpoint of each individual participant. That is, the individual experience of the description of events within the imaginary world. It is not intended to be a model about the general role-playing process or to cover all aspects of what occurs as a part of game play. In this way it differs from other models that may appear related, such as the Process Model of Role-Playing (Mäkelä et al 2005). That model is wider, in that it covers all facets of the role-playing activity including many not addressed here, such as the social aspects of the role-playing activity, and less specific in that, given its wider scope, it is less able to detail individual processes of each facet of game play.

6.0 Conclusions

The above discussion has attempted to understand the narrative process at work within RPGs. Narrative was defined as the description of a series of events. Participants in the process experience this description through the game play. This is fundamentally different to many other narrative forms, in that the participants have an active role in shaping the future form of the narrative. The narrative as experienced by the participants in a RPG is a particularly personal one. This flows naturally when the application of concepts from traditional narrative studies to this context is considered. Narrative is a description of events. The text is the means by which this description is conveyed to the reader. In RPGs the reader is an active participant and the text is a multi-levelled and nuanced construct, including the thoughts of the participants. While this is a distinct departure from traditional narrative studies, the full experience of the player, and their ability to make private contributions to their own narratives, can only be understood when the text is considered in these terms. Once the text is understood as a personal construct, the story (the sequence of events as presented in a particular order, as opposed to the narrative, which is the description of the events, not the events themselves), the fabula (the sequence of events as they occur in the fictional world) and the imaginary world itself can all be seen to be best understood as further personal conceptions of the participants. While these terms are, again, familiar from narrative studies they have had to be significantly redefined for use in the gaming context. A definition of the

basic constructs, as they apply to RPG narratives, has allowed an initial understanding of the process of construction of such narratives. This is based around a cycle of contributions based upon the personal conceptions of the participants and which in turn update those conceptions. The simultaneous nature of these sub-processes means that much work here has still to be done. The approach taken here is very much a structuralist one, something that has fallen out of favour in recent decades. However, that does not mean that such an approach is without its uses, especially in a nascent discipline such as game studies. As Frasca (Frasca 2003b) has said: *"Formal approaches are limited … but they are probably the easiest way to uncover the structural differences between stories and games. I personally see this structural approach as a first, necessary, step in video game studies, which we will definitely outgrow once it helps us better grasp the basic characteristics of video games."* The post-structuralist approaches in other disciplines have been built on preceding structural ones. We will, as Frasca says, go beyond the structural, but only once they are understood. The choice of this particular structural approach is also based on the extensive experience of the authors in both computer game playing and pen and paper roleplaying (amounting to a combined 40-plus years in each). The different levels proposed by traditional narratology (such as fabula and story) match very precisely with our experience of unfolding narratives within such games. That difference, between the presentation of the narrative through the interaction and the building of a personal picture of the imaginary world and the events within it is exactly what we, and many players of such games, have experienced.

References

Aarseth, E. 1997. *Cybertext*. Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press.

Bal, M. 1997. *Narratology*, 2nd ed. University of Toronto, Toronto.

Cambridge University. 1995. *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP.

Crawford, C. 2003. *The Art of Interactive Design: A Euphonious and Illuminating Guide to Building Successful Software*., San Francisco, No Starch Press.

Eco, U. 1984. *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Bloomington: Indiana UP.

Edwards, R. 2001. *GNS and other matters of role-playing theory*. Available at: http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/1/

Fine, G. 1983. *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Frasca, G. 2003a. Ludologists Love Stories Too. in: *Proceedings of Digra 2003*. Available at: http://www.digra.org/dl/db/05163.01125.

Frasca, G. 2003b. Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology, in *Video/Game/Theory*. Wolf, M. & Perron B. (eds.), New York Routledge.

Genette, G. 1990. *Narrative Discourse Revisited*. Ithaca. Cornell University Press.

Herman, D. 2002. *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative. Frontiers of Narrative Series*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press.

Herman, D., Jahn, M. & Ryan, M. (eds.). 2005. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative*. London, Routledge.

Juul, J. 2001.Games Telling Stories. *Games Studies*, 1(1), Available at: http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/.

Lovlie, A. 2005. End of Story? Quest, narrative and enactment in computer games. in *proceedings of Digra 2005*. Available at: http://www.digra.org/dl/db/06276.38324.pdf. (2005)

Klastrup, L. & Tosca, S. 2004. Transmedial worlds - rethinking cyberworld design in *Proceedings International Conference on Cyberworlds 2004*. p.409-416.

Louchart S & Aylett R. 2004. Emergent narrative, requirements and high-level architecture. in *Proceedings of SETN04*. p. 298 - 308.

Mackay, D. 2001. *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*. London: Macfarland.

Mäkelä, E., Koistinen, S., Siukola, M. & Turunen, S. 2005. The process model of role-playing. In *Dissecting LARP*, p.205-236. Oslo, Knutepunkt.

Mateas, M. & Stern, A.. 2003. Integrating Plot, Character and Natural Language Processing in the Interactive Drama Façade, in *Proceedings of TIDSE 2003*, p. 139-151.

Montola, M. 2003. Role-Playing as Interactive Construction of Subjective Diegeses. In *As Larp Grows Up - Theory and Methods in Larp* p.80-89. Copenhagen, Knutepunkt.

Murray, J. 2000. *Hamlet on the Holodeck; The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. Cambridge. MIT Press.

O'Neill, C. 1995. *Drama Worlds: A Framework for Process Drama*, Heinemann.

Pearce, C. 2005. Theory Wars: An Argument Against Arguments in the so-called Ludology/Narratology Debate. in *Proceedings of Digra 2005*. Available at: http://www.digra.org/dl/db/06278.03452.pdf.

Peinado, F. & Gervás, P. 2004. Transferring Game Mastering Laws to Interactive Digital Storytelling". *in Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Technologies for Interactive Digital Storytelling and Entertainment, TIDSE'04*. p. 48-54.

Riedl, M. & Young, M.. 2005. Open-World Planning for Story Generation. *in Proceedings of the International Joint Conference on Artificial Intelligence 2005*. p.1719-1720.

Ryan., M. 2001. Beyond Myth and Metaphor. *Games Studies*, 1(1), Available at: http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/ryan/

Schut, K. 2003. Technology tells a tale: digital games and narrative. in *Proceedings of Digra 2003*. Available at: http://www.digra.org/dl/db/05150.17157/

Simons, J. 2007. Narrative, Games and Theory. *Games Studies*, 7(1), Available at: http://gamestudies.org/0701/articles/simons.

Tompkins, J. ed: 1980. *Reader-response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-structuralism*. Baltimore. John Hopkins University Press.

Tychsen, A, Hitchens M., Brolund T. & Kavakli, M.. 2006. Live Action Role-Playing Games: Control, Communication, Storytelling and MMORPG Similarities. *Games and Culture*, 1(3), p. 252-275.

Zalta, E. ed. 2007. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford Stanford University Press.