# Narrative History I: Japanese and Western Roleplaying Games

Videogames as Multimodal

#### What is Narrative Design?

- "A narrative designer has tremendous influence on the game's story and how it meshes with gameplay to deliver the intended player experience" (Breault 1).
  - Narrative design thus pertains not only to a game's plot or its storytelling, but to the coherent
    integration of a game's systems, mechanics and other representational elements with its narrative
    themes.
  - Narrative design is how videogames build their fiction without only cinematics or words.
- 3 tasks of a narrative designer
  - Writing
  - Design
  - Collaboration
- Fundamentally iterative and adaptive creative process of varying importance.
- Game design is "the art of crafting the player experience... Once you define that experience, every aspect of your game design should work toward delivering it" (Breault 9)
  - Depends on the interplay of all aspects of a videogame's multimodality.
  - What media modes do videogames incorporate—and to what effect?

## <u>Game Design</u>

- How do we make the game fun?
- How do we engage players throughout the game?
- How do we balance challenge and playability?

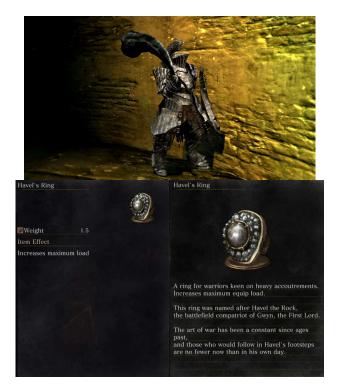


Narrative Design

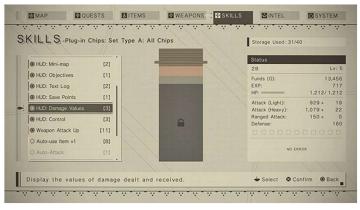
- How do we make the game meaningful?
- How do we make the different elements of the game coherent?
- How do we effectively merge story and gameplay?



#### Videogames as Multimedia



Writing and Worldbuilding Dark Souls



User Interface

NieR: Automata



Concept Art Psychonauts 2

#### Animation



Grand Theft Auto: Vice City



Grand Theft Auto IV

**Music** Undertale

<u>Snowdin Town (Pacifist)</u> Snowdin Town (No Mercy)

#### History of the Western Role-Playing Game (WPRG)

- Inspired directly by *Dungeons and Dragons* as digital adaptations.
  - Preceded by fantasy text adventures like *Colossal Cave Adventure* (1976) and *Zork* (1977).
  - Early games *Wizardry* (1981) and *Ultima* (1981) focused on the dungeon crawling and stat management aspect of *DnD*.
- Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar (1985)
  - Featured a story more about character selfactualization than defeating an evil force.
  - All NPCs can be interacted with and have individual names. Some can be recruited.
  - Genre became defined by non-linear exploration and player-driven character building (agency).
    - In what ways does Baldur's Gate succeed and/or fail in this promise?





#### WRPG History cont: Interplay, Bioware, Bethesda

- Interplay: Fallout (1997), Baldur's Gate (1998), and Planescape: Torment (1999)
  - All drew on TTRPG inspirations to offer a digital, singleplayer campaign experience with high replayability.
  - *Baldur's Gate* allowed players to import their own assets for the game to personalize their character.
    - E.g. avatar portrait, voice lines, backstory
- *Baldur's Gate II* (2000) and Bioware's following games put a large focus on nuanced character interactions involving friendship building and romancing.
  - E.g. Dragon Age's Approval system
- Bethesda's *The Elder Scrolls* games executed the spatial promise of early WRPGs, building massive 3D worlds explored in a first-person perspective.





#### History of the Japanese Role-Playing Game (JRPG)

- Defined as a genre by *Dragon Quest/Warrior* (1986)
  - Designed and written by Yuji Hori
  - Streamlined, cartoonified *DnD/Wizardry* with more numbers hidden and mechanics revealed through NPC conversations.
- Dragon Quest IV (1990) and Dragon Quest V (1992) began experimenting with storytelling.
  - DQIV is divided into multiple short story chapters focusing on a different character.
  - DQV is a bildungsroman-style story taking place over generations of a character's life.
- Other early series like Shin Megami Tensei and Phantasy Star expanded the genre to horror and sci-fi worlds, respectively.
  - SMT's characters were more self inserts that develop moral alignments based on in-game choices.





### JRPG History cont. (1988-1997)

- Final Fantasy II/IV (1991) and Final Fantasy III/VI (1994)
  - FFIV
    - Features an anti-hero redemption arc.
    - Characters are defined by their class archetypes and skillset.
    - They also have their own narrative agency.
  - FFVI
    - Drew on cinematic techniques for framing cutscenes and introducing musical motifs.
    - Characterization now more fluid. No longer tied to DnD archetypes/classes.
- Final Fantasy VII (1997) and onward
  - The JRPG was a set of mechanical conventions as well as a genre continuously evolving storytelling techniques and characterization.
  - Set the stage for modern 'serious' AAA blockbusters like *The Last of Us* and *God of War* (2018).

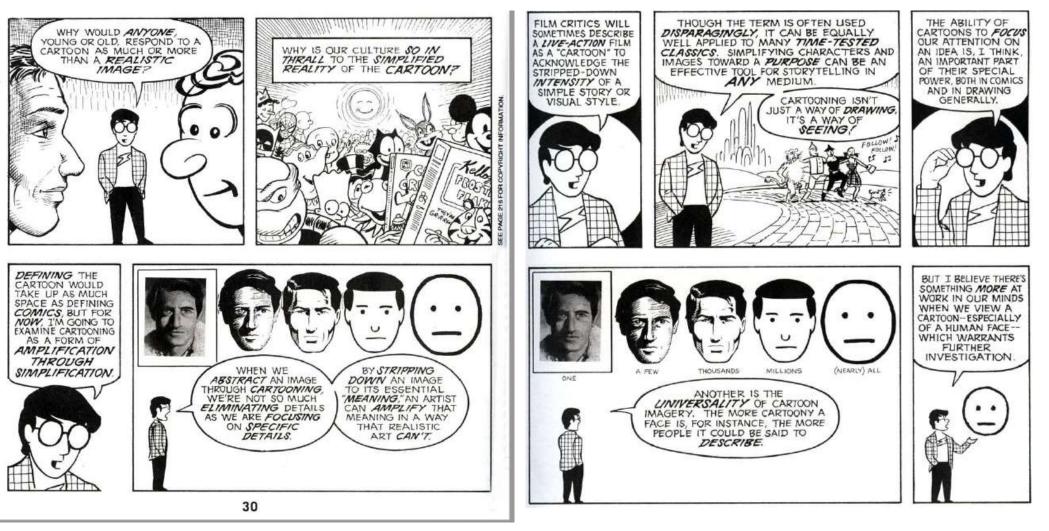
Crew:Why are we robbing crystals from innocent people? Crew:That's our duty.







#### Amplification through Simplification (McCloud)



#### Paratexts as Narrative Design





Theme of Love (Rosa's Theme) – Nobuo Uematsu



Akira Toriyama



#### Other Paratexts

CHAPTER I

POLITICAL HISTORY



The Dark Ages of Britannia is the name given to that long span of time when the infamous Triad Of Evil stalked the lands and challenged all for the supremacy of the soul.

The First Era of the Dark Ages came to an end with the downfall of the evil Wizard Mondain and his many minions, as chronicled in Ultima I. The Lords of the lands were weak and scattered, rendered ineffective by factional wars. It was only through the valiant efforts of an itinerant adventurer that the foul Mondain was tracked to his hidden lair and slain.

But a few years of restless peace followed Mondain's downfall. So long had the world shuddered beneath Mondain's yoke that many found it hard to believe he had been really vanquished. In truth, his teachings did not disappear. Mondain's apprentice Minax rose to power soon thereafter to challenge the fledgling city-states that were beginning to evolve. The Terrors had begun anew.

Minax's powers upon maturity greatly exceeded those of her evil mentor. With these powers she was able to rain wholesale destruction upon the planet, twisting and corrupting everything. Her foul web spread through time itself, ensnaring all who sought to oppose her. Finally, there arose a hero out of legend who dared face Minax in her own fiery castle and destroy her. Thus ended the Second Era of Darkness, as told in Ultima II.

