

# Irreconcilable Differences: Game vs. Story

by

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In this article the following definitions are assumed:

*Game* - a competition with direct conflict between participants.

*Story* - a fictional account of something that happened to someone.

*Interactivity* - choice which determines outcome.

In the interactive entertainment industry there is often a vague or common use of the terms 'story' and 'game' which erroneously implies - even though the speaker may know it to be untrue - that story and game are one and the same aspect of interactive design, and one and the same experience for the interactive user. This inaccuracy is understandably not important to the general public, or even to veteran users of interactive products, because it doesn't affect their enjoyment of a product labeled with either descriptor.

But clear definitions of each concept should be critically important to designers, because without an understanding of what a story and a game are as both methods and techniques of entertainment, the possibility of achieving emotional involvement is greatly diminished and ultimately left to chance. Understanding story and game, and the relationship between the two, is a prerequisite to the construction of, as opposed to the categorization or marketing of, interactive entertainment which achieves sustained emotional involvement.

In the definitions for story and game offered at the beginning of this essay, I've defined them as elements of technique to be used in design. This not only aids in construction, but allows for theoretical discussion of those hybrid products which might have some aspects of story and some of game, without insisting that they be forced into either category. As will be seen, there are problems with mixing story and game, but that shouldn't be our point of departure. The immediate goal is not to classify or limit designs at all, but simply to identify what each process brings to the interactive drawing board, so that it can be used to best effect.

On the surface it doesn't look like there's any real reason to confuse the two terms. Certainly there are common-language uses of both words that intrude on each other's turf - a "Cinderella story" in sports, say, or "running a game" on someone, as used when accusing someone of making up a story for the purpose of deceit - but our definitions seem to steer us clear of these grammatical rocks. Still, this kind of fraternization

between terms can be seen to reach all the way into the interactive designer's workshop, as is evidenced by any number of interviews in which designers talk openly about new *game* ideas in the works, when in fact there is little or no actual game-driven interactivity in the design or final product. If we were sure that this was only a result of colloquial usage it might be all right to dismiss it. But how sure can we be that the designers themselves are not confusing the two, or that they have any real idea what defines each as a method of entertainment?

There are, of course, similarities in the methods of each which may lead to confusion. The most basic of these similarities is the fact that both games and stories derive their emotional power from uncertainty of outcome. When preparing to engage in a story or witness a game, almost all of our involvement centers around what will happen at the end - which we expect, or at least hope, will contain both the greatest moment of uncertainty of outcome, as well as the resolution of that uncertainty. Of course we're interested in the sights along the way - great plays in sports and games, wonderful emotional moments in film and literature - but we're interested in those sights as stepping stones to, and portents of, the ending. Who will win the game? What will happen to the hero in the final act?

But there is also a critical difference between story and game as it relates to uncertainty of outcome. Simply put, the emotional power of a story's outcome is generated by a storyteller through pre-determined and organized techniques and methods, which the audience witnesses. This contrasts sharply with the emotional power of a game's uncertainty of outcome, which is derived from witnessing a contest which is *not* pre-determined.

Examples of the clash between these two forces abound in both passive narrative forms and in real-world gaming. Movies about sporting events are often unfulfilling because of the preparatory effects which narratives must use to generate emotional involvement. Because of these preparations - particularly various forms of foreshadowing - the dramatic outcome of any story is often logically known, or at least suspected, before it is revealed. At first seemingly counterproductive even in stories of a non-sports nature, this "tipping of the hand" actually allows the storyteller to work with or against the audience's beliefs or suspicions, prompting the audience to doubt, moving them to hope, all through an ageless methodology based on creating tension. But in sports-oriented stories all of this preparation for effect works directly against the unprepared effect necessary for suspense in games.

As the story aspects of a sports story generate tension through foreshadowing, this necessarily renders the last at bat, the final shot, the big race as more predictable than they would be if occurring in real life. Who doubts the hero in a baseball movie will hit the desperately needed two-run homer in the final at-bat? Contrast this with the emotions felt when the game is live and it's your favorite player at the plate and you have no predictive clues as to what will happen. Sure, your favorite player's hitting .400 lately, and the pitcher's last start was shaky, but that's nothing compared to the foreshadowing you'll be prompted and goaded with in a well-crafted story. If instead of a live event you're now watching a movie where the batter's abandoned and now reclaimed son is

waiting breathlessly in the stands, under the wing of his mother, who still loves this man who left her for his dreams, would you bet the batter getting a hit?

Notice, too, what happens when moments in real life games become too story-like, as did crippled Kirk Gibson's famous home run, which won a playoff game for the Dodgers in the bottom of the ninth inning in the 1988 World Series. These moments, veering uncomfortably close to manufactured drama, are almost always described as (and literally were in this case - repeatedly) "a moment a screenwriter would come up with": meaning, a real event has happened by chance in exactly the same way it would be executed dramatically. This intrusion of perceived effect (narrative preparation) can make an audience perceptibly uncomfortable, even though they know that what happened was not prepared in advance.

Drama must be wary of leaning too close to the unpredictability of gameplay as well. There is the case of a theatrical play in which the staging of a picnic scene called for two actors to be opposite each other, down stage (closest to the audience), tossing a ball back and forth. The director hoped to use a layering of actions on stage to increase the depth of dramatic meaning in the scene, but the audience's attention was instead solely focused on the actors playing catch, riveted by the thought that at any time the actors might loose an errant throw and literally drop the ball. Playing catch is not a game by the present definition, yet the simple reality (interactivity) of the process completely destroyed suspension of disbelief in the drama. If, instead, one actor was pitching and the other trying to get a hit, the drama of such a blatant contest would surely demolish any interest in the stage play.

The above are instances in which gameplay and story seem to damage each other. To see why this happens - why it *must* happen - we need to look closely at how the emotional power of games and stories are destroyed for an audience.

We've said that in both game and story the ending holds the payoff. For an audience interested in hearing a story there's more than just a simple social gaffe committed when one member reveals the ending, because the possibility of fully experiencing the story is destroyed. Revealing the ending damages a story's power because all of the preparedness in the beginning and middle is revealed for what it is: manipulation. Because that manipulation is intended to support uncertainty of outcome, and now does not, the audience's ability to enter into a state of suspended disbelief is crushed. In fact, although the compromising of uncertainty of outcome in a story is perhaps the greatest damage that can be done, anything which intrudes upon suspension of disbelief precludes audience involvement in a story.

But how can the ending of a game be revealed, when the events of a game aren't prepared beforehand, or suspension of disbelief be shattered when there is no suspension of disbelief? Yes, a friend might let out the final score of a game you'd taped for later viewing, but that's the same kind of destruction of uncertainty of outcome that cripples storytelling. The real distinction between stories and games as it relates to preclusion of audience involvement centers not on uncertainty of outcome itself, but on the relative

state of mind of the audience.

Where stories require suspension of disbelief before emotional involvement can take hold, games conversely require active belief that each participant is trying as hard as they can to achieve victory. If a player were to intentionally try to lose, then this belief on the audience's part would be misplaced, which is why scandals involving fixing or throwing sporting events are so damaging. When an audience does not believe that the outcome of future games is unprepared, the integrity of the sport as a whole comes into question, with the consequence that the audience cannot care about or become emotionally involved in those contests.

So not only are story and game achieving their emotional power through uncertainty of outcome in exactly opposite fashions, but the power derived from one method destroys the power of the other. The audience must on the one hand disbelieve in the preparedness of stories, and on the other believe in the unpreparedness of games. If we believe in the preparedness of a story, that is if we openly, consciously admit that it's all rigged, then it holds no emotional weight. Similarly, if we disbelieve in the unpreparedness of a game (believe it has been prepared), it's meaning is void. For stories and games to be joined, the audience would have to be able to enter both states of mind simultaneously.

If what's desired in interactive entertainment is emotional effect on par with the best that stories and games can present to an audience, then story and game must not be made interdependent and allowed to cancel each other out. (Since I wrote these words twelve years ago, every possible permutation of merging story and game has been tried, and no solution has overcome this basic schism.)

For those products where gameplay is primarily important, pre-determined story elements must necessarily be segregated. One common way of combining the two in such titles is to treat gameplay as tactical (via discrete missions or levels), while the story plays out in a separate strategic narrative. For products where storytelling is the focus, gameplay (as defined above) must remain segregated, and interactivity must be carefully tailored to fit any narrative structure. Titles taking this approach are significantly fewer, however, precisely because computers are incapable of providing interactive stories. In most such cases, faux interactivity (e.g. puzzles or branching dialogues) are substituted for actual gameplay in order to preserve the emotional power of the narrative.