Game Design as Narrative Architecture

Ludology vs. narratology

- Ludology → focus on gameplay mechanics → Gameplay > Narrative
- Narratology → Study games along with other storytelling media → Gameplay + Narrative

4 types of narrative spaces:

Key agreements

- Not all games tell stories
- Many games have narrative aim
- "Theres no one future of games"
- Gameplay > stories
- Games can tell stories differently

1. Evocative spaces:

Spaces that draw upon pre-existing narrative associations from other media

Designers don't need to fully tell the story, they rely on what players already know

Built through:

- Intertextuality: connections to known stories
- Genre conventions

It quickly establish tone, mood, and expectations

Players can mentally fill in gaps using prior knowledge

Less original storytelling, depends on familiar tropes

Example of games: Dark Souls

2. Enacting stories:

Spaces structured so that players perform or enact narrative experiences

Narrative experienced as:

- Sequence of actions
- Goal-driven progression

Structured through:

- Narrative scaffolding (levels, mission, etc.)
- Scripted sequence

Not fully open as designers still guide player experience

Balance player freedom + narrative control

Example of games: The last of us

3. Embeded narratives:

Narrative information is pre-placed in the environment waiting to be discovered

Exists in:

- Spatial layouts
- Objects, clues, environmental details, etc.

Delivered through:

- Environmental storytelling
- Diegetic elements

Structure:

- Often non-linear
- Players construct story out of order

Exploration → discovery → interpretation

Narrative is fragmented and reconstructive

Example of games: BioShock

4. Emergent narratives:

Arises from interaction between game systems + player choice

Not pre-authored but comes from:

- Rule-based systems
- Dynamic interactions

Designers create narrative potential not fixed storylines

Players create unique experiences

Example of games: Minecraft