An Analysis of the Debate and How It Changed Everything: Narratology vs. Ludology

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**INTRODUCTION**

Video games will rot your brain. Something that people have told us during its inception into the modern world; however, little did they know that the video game industry will one day take its place in the world as one of the best mediums to tell a story and challenge its audience. The video game industry is an ever-growing industry where innovation flows through its veins causing it to grow into a field that is more immersive and compelling. Video games have also evolved into a field of study, a discipline that dives deep into what makes them a unique form of entertainment and medium of expression. At the heart of this growing field of study, lies an exchange of views that has set the standard for game development: the dichotomy between ludology and narratology. This debate covers the differences and similarities of the two: ludology, a discussion which focuses more on the mechanical aspects of video games which argues for games to be understood through their unique interactive nature, and narratology, an approach that views video games as narratives similar to films and books – a medium to tell a story. This written work aims to dive deeper into this debate, acknowledging its historical context, examining the difference in the arguments from both sides, and ultimately finding a middle ground between the two for a more integrated approach. As games continue to develop and grow, the ludological and narratological aspects of both become not just an academic exercise, but also an important understanding that will benefit the innovation of game design and player experience. By diving deeper into this debate, this paper hopes to discover deeper insights on what makes video games unique and how they are a powerful vessel of interaction and storytelling.

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT : LUDOLOGY**

The term ludology was popularized by Gonzalo Frasca, a prominent figure in the field of game studies who is known for his contributions as a researcher as well as a game designer, in 1999. The word ludology is derived from ‘ludus’ the latin word for game. According to Frasca’s study, *Ludology Meets
Narratology: *Similitude and Differences Between Games and Narrative*, he defines *ludus* as a defined set of rules, and where these rules can be transcribed and easily transmitted into different players (Frasca, 1999). *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*, a study by Jesper Juul, who is a Danish game designer that is also a significant figure in the field of ludology, focuses on the concept of failure and the effects it has on the games’ players. Juul dives into the emotional processing, specifically emotions that are brought by frustration and failure. Juul states that experiencing failure can be both painful and pleasurable (Juul, 2013), and that this emotion is what drives the players to maintain a constant urge to strive and improve.

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT: NARRATOLOGY**

Narratology is the emphasis on narrative elements and storytelling in video games and how it is considered to be crucial in its development. This perspective in game development suggests that video games can be an influential medium for storytelling. Similar to film and television, it can offer an immersive experience through the means of cyberdrama. Janet Murray, an American professor in the School of Literature, Media, and Communication at the Georgia Institute of Technology, also a significant figure in the foundational controversy of Game Studies in the debate between Narratology and Ludology, argues that video games are a new medium in the modern day and age to tell narratives and serve as a tool to tell stories. In her work *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, she mentions the debate between Narratology and Ludology. In her work, she states “This wide range of narrative art holds the promise of a new medium of expression that is as varied as the printed book or the moving picture” (Murray, 1997).

Video games started to be recognized as a formal medium of art around the late 20th and early 21st century. Specifically, this recognition was set into stone by *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association* (2011), where the Supreme Court ruled, in a 7-2 decision, that video games were protected under the First Amendment as other forms of media. Clearly stating the place of video games as a legitimate medium of artistic expression to be experienced by its audience – the gamers.

**THE LUDOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**
The ludological perspective in video games focuses on the study of video games primarily as rule-based systems, where mechanics and gameplay, along with their interactive elements are what defines the immersive experience they provide. Within the ludological perspective lies three key aspects:

- **Game Mechanics and Rules**

  Ludologists emphasize on the rules and mechanics that control the flow of the game as well as the actions of the players and the response of the game in accordance to its system and the interactions of the players. This key aspect of ludology…

- **Player Agency**

  Ludology focuses on the decision making aspect of gameplay from the players. The strategic conditions that the game implies upon its players is what activates their sense of achievement once well-planned plays leading to succession in the game.

- **Interactivity**

  A tenet of ludology is centered around the interactive nature of video games. Different from other forms of media such as films and books, video games require constant interaction from its audience to create progress into the game, leading to a more proactive experience based on the situations created by the video game.

  Tetris, a game that has proven itself to be enduring through time, is a great example of a video game that follows the idea of ludology. Players are given nothing but blocks at the beginning of the game, no back story, no characters to be introduced, or villains to defeat; just blocks. The aforementioned key aspects of ludology is also evident in Tetris; the mechanic of the game is to rotate the blocks before a player places them on the ground, or they fall into place. Completing a row of blocks would clear that row, creating more space for the player to place more blocks. Player Agency is noticeable at every point of the game as players are constantly forced to make decisions that would keep them in the game.

**THE NARRATOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The narratological perspective in video games focuses on how they are centered around the narrative they tell. They are believed to be an interactive method of narration where the nature of video
games allow a deeper level of immersion. Within the narratological perspective lies 3 key aspects that define their unique characteristics:

- Storytelling and Plot Development

  Games, in the narratological perspective, are meant to tell stories. The stories that they tell should contain all aspects of a story that you would find in any other medium (books, films, TV-shows, etc). This includes how the narrative is structured, the development of the plot, and how the story progresses as the player gets deeper into the game. Video games can consider using elements of a story such as the climax, conflict, and resolution, similar to the traditional methodology in telling a story on film or writing.

- Character Development

  This perspective in game studies focuses on the characters of the game. This includes their backstories, motives, and interaction with other players with other players or characters. The narratological analysis not only involves the plot of the game, but also the characters it consists of – their development throughout the progression of the story as the players get deeper into the game, up until the change of their motives as the resolution of conflict is reached.

- Symbolic and Thematic Elements

  The symbolic and thematic elements in a video game is one of the many ways that developers can connect with their audience. It involves cultural symbolism made within the boundaries of the game, its community, and any societal conversations that can be used to convey deeper topics in the narratological aspect of the game. Games can utilize themes that cover heroism, identity, and even morality (more on that later), in which developers can play around with these themes in order to shape their players’ interpretations of the story. This is similar to how authors of stories and books shape the reactions and interpretations of their readers or audience according to the story they write.

  A great example of a game that codes itself within the narratological perspective is Naughty Dog’s The Last of Us, a game initially released in 2013. The game was able to convey its story and allow the players to question their morality and idea of heroism. For the sake of those that have not yet played the game, I will make sure to leave out any spoilers, but the game was able to masterfully convey the
emotion of each character and project them towards their players – making them feel what the characters feel and think the way they do as well. The way the game paced its plot progression and character development made it something special and recognized by the entire community of players. Leaving players questioning the decision made by the protagonist to be morally justified or just plain ignorance.

**INTEGRATION AND INDEPENDENCE**

The Ludological approach, independent from any narratological aspects, focuses on the rule-based systematics of video games. This is most important during the development of the core mechanics of video games as it is the aspect of video games that promotes engagement of players and offers them a sense of challenge. On the other hand, the narratological approach, independent of any ludological aspect, focuses on the story that the game is aimed to tell. This approach primarily focuses on seeing video games as a narrative medium to tell its own story. It emphasizes storytelling, character development, and depth. This is most important during the development of the aesthetic of the game – the immersive world that the game is set in, the captivating narratives that bring the world to life, creating the emotional connection between game and player.

**MODERN PERSPECTIVES AND DEVELOPMENT**

Contemporary game development successfully integrates both ludological and narratological aspects in order to create more depth and engagement with players. The perspectives of both ludology and narratology have evolved past their inceptive dichotomy. Game developers and designers now frequently recognize that the mechanics of gameplay and the aspects of storytelling are not mutually exclusive, but their integration is imperative to level up the immersion and rich experience in gaming.

**CASE STUDY ANALYSIS**

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt is a critically acclaimed role-playing game developed by CD Projekt Red released in 2015. The game is set in a rich and immersive open-world fantasy universe that is massively inspired by the Slavic mythology. The protagonist role is played by Geralt of Rivia, a Witcher, also known as monster hunters, who is searching for his adopted daughter that is being hunted down by a powerful supernatural force known as the Wild Hunt. His journey takes him through the immersive
landscapes, from fighting griffins to helping villagers, fulfilling each quest, meeting new people and slaying new monsters. I have picked this game not only because of its well written and executed narrative, but also because of its attention to detail when it comes to its combat system that shows the integration of both the aspects of ludology and narratology.

The game is celebrated for its complex narrative, branching storylines from the past two installments, but making sure that players that have no background of the past two games feel connected by providing context clues to help them understand the situation. Each character that is imperative to the progression of the story goes through their own character development, especially Geralt’s. The game also makes use of its deep connection with Slavic mythology by creating this immersive open-world sandbox that is populated by different people and monsters that you meet, interact, and fight with along the way. Despite its deep narratological key aspects, the Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt does not disappoint in its mechanics.

The game is also renowned for its intricate combat mechanics that prevents players from just smashing the melee button and expecting their enemies to die. Geralt is equipped with Witcher Signs such as: Aard, a simple telekinetic thrust that can stun, repel, knock down, and disarm opponents. Igni, a pyrokinetic burst that can repel and ignite opponents. Yrden, a trap-like magical sign used by witchers against both monsters and humans. Quen, a magical sign that forms a protective shield that defends the caster from any physical and magical attack; and lastly, Axii, a magical sign that can manipulate the minds of their target, either confusing their enemies or calming down their troubled allies. These are few of the many tools to consider whenever witchers find themselves in combat with monsters, or worse, humans.

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt is a paragon to modern video game studies as it implements both concepts from ludology and narratology, which is why it serves as a great case study for this written work. It is a great integration between gameplay mechanics and immersive storytelling – setting a high standard for future game development, also serving as a benchmark for the progressive evolution of game design.

**CONCLUSION**
The dichotomy between ludology and narratology has sparked multiple opinions on which side is right and which side is wrong; however, what emerged from this discussion is something that pushed the boundaries of game development even further. The integration of both narrative storytelling and compelling, immersive, and challenging game mechanics is what forms a game worthy of attention and prestige. Through the historical journey that video games have gone through, it is evident that the industry is not just aimed towards the purpose of entertainment, but it is also a complex field of study and creativity.


