**Chapter Title**: GAME40246 - Narratology for Games & (With a Reflective Comparison from Dr. Ian Sturrock from Teeside University)

**Author Names**: Nia Wearn, Dr. Ian Sturrock

**Author’s notes - We conceived this chapter to showcase two similar modules in different UK universities, both within programmes with strong Games Design focuses. They are both detailed separately and we’ll reflect on each other’s courses. This is a rare opportunity for the authors to reflect on courses within the same sphere as their course.**

**Course #1 -** GAME40246 - Narratology for Games

**Course University**: Staffordshire University

**Course College/School**: Digital, Technologies and Arts

**Course Department/Program**: Games and Visual Effects

**Course Level**: *Undergraduate*

**Course Credits**: 30

**Course Length**: 24 weeks

**Course Medium**: *typically Face to Face but has been adapted to Distance learning in the past and has run online over the 20-21 Academic Year*

**Course Keywords**: *Narrative, Introduction, TWINE*

**Catalog Description** (~125-250 words): Within this module, you'll be looking at understanding narrative in games, from analog and tabletop roleplaying games, to modern character driven games, along looking at the history of interactive fiction and it’s future. We’ll also be developing interactive narrative games in twine, as well as looking at the role of the narrative designer in the industry today.

**Course Purpose and Objectives** (~250-750 words):

The Course has 4 learning outcomes, aligned with the academic level of the students (first year undergraduates)

1) ANALYSE THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF A COMPUTER GAME.

2) DEMONSTRATE A KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF STORY STRUCTURES, CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT AND NARRATIVE ELEMENTS.

3) CRITICALLY APPRAISE OTHER GAMES AND PRODUCE COMPETENT JUDGEMENTS OF THE POSSIBLE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THEIR NARRATIVE.

4) COMMUNICATE A LOGICAL AND COHESIVE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE WITH CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IN THE FORM OF A NARRATIVE STRUCTURE DOCUMENT FOR A COMPUTER GAME.

The Narratology for Games module (the UK standard term for a course taught as part of a larger programme of study) serves several purposes. Primarily it’s to give the students grounding in Narrative theory. The first semester focuses on auto-ethnographic play analysis and consider how narrative theory reflects real world play encounters - this is done by grouping them together and getting them to play a TRPG of their choice, and reflecting on the play that upholds in the group session paying particular emphasis on character creation world building and narrative engagement.

This does lead naturally to a lot of Freytag Pyramids and Heroes journey circle diagrams but it’s often the first time the students have considered in any great detail how narrative can be influenced by players, or how hard managing the expectations of players can be. Dipping their toes into auto-ethnographic analysis works well too to remind them they are starting on an academic path where we’ll encourage them to stop considering themselves just to be players of games – but designers and producers of them too.

The team RPG aspects of the first semester also need to work on introducing students to not just group work as an abstract concept but building the foundation of their roles in future groups projects, a prospect all of the students on this course will face in later years as part of their studies. Students are often used to group work in a school based setting but have never needed to navigate it as adults with competing agents of their attention and other priorities coming into play. Making them responsible for how they manage the group and the TRPG play sessions, even with time set aside on timetables, begins to lay the foundations of how they are expected to work in groups going forward in their academic careers.

There is a final aspect to the inclusion of group work in the first semester, as this is a popular first year module it is key in helping students create friendship bonds and feel a sense of belonging to the university and the course. Some TRPG groups thrown together by the computer in the first semester are still playing when they graduate 3 years later, and you can see the benefit of having a support network of like minded individuals in place form the first week. ‘Belonging’ is a key metric used to gauge students' apparent happiness with the course and the inclusion of having creative group work can help facilitate that.

The second semester too has analysis as a key aspect of the first assignment, but this time focussed on modern games, using the last 5 years as a time frame for them to choose from. Tying this back to theory covered in the first semester helps them consider the role of narrative theory in the games they are more used to playing. Finally the students are asked to create a game in the text based narrative engine TWINE. This was brought on board to incorporate a more practical element to the module in line with the overall vocational nature of the department the course sits in. The students have some experience with other game engines, mainly Epic Games’s Unreal Engine and Unity - but no base scripting or coding knowledge. We also ask them to display much of this analysis in the form of flow diagrams – this again to help them consider how they communicate their ideas to teams so specific aspects aren’t lost in walls of texts. Hopefully this is a skill they bring into play later on when they form part of collaborative groups into produce games and they need to communicate ideas to them.

**Course Context** (~100-500 words):

As mentioned above the course is a first year undergraduate module that is offered as an optional choice across two of the department degree programmes. These are the BSc (Hons) Computer Games Design and BSc (Hons) Computer Gameplay Design and Production. The module was a core component of the BA (Hons) Games Studies, a more theoretical degree programme but that is no longer recruiting. The module and it’s content and assessments does not differentiate between the students from the different courses and has no differing assessments. Primarily this is due to the introductions nature of the module and it’s position within the degree programmes. Neither of the courses have any interviewing aspects and students are accepted onto the degree programmes with college or school credits, or UCAS (the University and College Admissions Service, the UK wide body that manages university admissions) points alone. Both degree programmes have large intakes, with Computer Games Design being taught over two campuses, the main one in Stoke-on-Trent and a Satellite city campus in East London. In the 20/21 academic year the combined intake onto these courses from both campuses is 190 students, 98 of these chose to study Narratology for Games.

Since there are no specified requirements for entry onto the courses, a deliberate choice to open up the degree programmes to as wide a range of possible candidates as possible, then there is no prior experience that can be relied upon in the students coming onto the module. Predominantly the students that do apply for the courses have studied games at college level, typically vocational based courses at a level lower than university, usually studied between the ages of 16-18. Most starters on UK University courses are aged 18 or 19. Typically they are interested in computer games but they have very mixed backgrounds in it’s studies. Because of this the module is deliberately set at an introductory level.

Both the Games degree courses mentioned above are three year full time programs that focus on different aspects of preparing students to design computer games using game engines or to make assets using 3DS Max. BSc (Hons) Computer Games Design has a much wider range of options then BSc (Hons) Computer Gameplay Design and Production, which has a much narrower focus of core games design skills but in both cases the Narratology for Games module sits apart from others on those degree programs. It’s optional and it doesn’t necessarily influence any of the modules elsewhere in the degree programs but it has other effects that are less tangible. Students come out of the module being able to call themselves ‘games designers’ for the first time – and often TWINE games turn up in Games Jams and projects going forward.

Interestingly the students' familiarity with Tabletop RPG systems varies a great deal but over the last few years we have noticed a trend where they are increasingly familiar with systems and games, and the conventions of play involved, even if they hadn’t played one. They are often eager to play and experience a campaign.

**Course Pedagogy** (250-500 words):

The first year Narratology for Games module has, as many long standing in ever evolving programmes do, had an interesting history of being split, merged, moved around and eventually settled into its slot as a popular optional choice in the raft of first year choices. It’s first semester is typically taught in a large lecture space, or in the 20/21 academic year over Microsoft Teams Live events. The first hour is used as taught content and the remaining two hours set aside for the groups to be able to play their TRPG games. The second semester moves the teaching to a large lab space to allow them to design their TWINE games.

These teaching spaces have also derived from the necessity of trying to fit a large module, that if taught on campus is spread over two locations, into what is a limited resource of lab space. With the practical nature of much of the programm delivery lab space is at a premium and Narratology for Games has always worked as a way to take the pressure off other, even larger modules.

These constraints have shaped much of the way the module is taught - alongside continual ‘sense checks’ with job descriptions for game narrative roles of information gleaned from members in the industry in those roles, usually through Twitter threads. Employability, and key skills that align to specific job descriptions or developing skills that allow students to build up portfolio items are at the foremost of what we teach and how we plan modules. It’s this push on practical skills that introduced TWINE as a game engine and the inclusion of getting students to make games as opposed to just analysing them and writing essays as the module stood a few years ago. This change in focus also came from listening to student feedback about what else they would like incorporated into the module in it’s future incarnations.

**Course Texts, Games, Software, and Hardware** (~200-500 words):

There are two types of suggested texts for this module, the four ‘required’ by the module descriptor, the document that is signed off by the quality department of the university that forms the blueprint for how the module should be taught. In the case of Narratology for Games these are:

* Bateman, C. (July 2006) Game Writing Narrative Skills for Videogames. USA: Charles River Media
* Crawford, C. (Oct 2004) Chris Crawford on Interactive Storytelling. USA: New Riders
* Bal, M. (2009) Narratology, Introduction to the Theory of Narrative. University of Toronto Press, 3rd Ed
* Murray, J. (1997) Hamlet On the Holodeck. The Free Press

Since this is a long standing module it’s not unusual for these descriptors to have some outdated elements. In this case the suggested texts are not not entirely reflective of the range of suggested texts and papers that are linked in the weekly topic sessions.

The first semester directs students to choose a Tabletop Roleplaying Game (TRPG) of their group’s choosing. Previous incarnations of the module directed students to a specific version of Advanced Dungeons and Dragons but it was felt this was too restrictive so in recent years this has been opened out. This however poses a problem of making sure the systems available to the students, from the wide range of available titles is suitable for the task in hand of playing approximately 10 - 12 hrs of play in the semester, and that the system is accessible to those who have never played, or run a campaign before. The team are considering specifying, or supplying a series of one shot campaigns for future versions of the course to see if this levels the playing field a little.

In the second semester the focus shifts to using TWINE, an open-source narrative engine that allows the students to create non-linear text games. The assignment has a specific emphasis on the production of the narrative game and the journey of the designer though planning, production, playtesting and acting on feedback. This use of iterative design cycles is a key element here as it ties in to a wider philosophy of what we as a programme consider good standards in games design and as a model is reused in digital and analog games throughout the students courses.

The decision to use TWINE came from a number of avenues in short succession, while also felt it stood alone as an engine that could be introduced afresh to the students as opposed to needing to lean on tuition from other modules. This was especially necessary when BA (Hons) Games Studies students had Narratology for Games as a required module, and they had no other exposure to engine based practical modules elsewhere in their degree programme.

**Course Assignments** (~500-1500 words):

There are two assessments in each semester of the module 1-1 & 1-2 are the first semester ones and entirely revolve around the analysis of the TRPG and 2-1 & 2-2 are focussed on analysing modern computer games and creating the game in TWINE.

**1-1 Reflect on engaging in a paper-based RPG (15%)**

In your Blackboard play Journal reflect weekly about your play experiences either as the player or Games Master for your group.

The paper-based RPG that you choose is entirely up to your group – as is which of you takes on the role of Games Master.

You should play a module - a pre-written 'adventure'.

**1-2 Analyse the RPG Module Played in regard to course theory (35%)**

Apply course theory to your paper-based RPG experience in an analytical essay.

Look at analysing the characters, how they work in the group and identify key points in the overall narrative, particularly in comparison to the pre-written ‘adventure’.

The word count is 1000 words +/- 100.

**2-1 Analyse a modern computer game (15%)**

Briefly analyse the narrative structure of a character driven game released in the last 2 years.

Use flow charts to represent the branching narratives of the story and discuss the development of the main protagonist throughout the game.

Word count is 1000 words +/- 100.

**2-2 Design and Produce a Narrative Based Game (35%)**

Using Story Dice as concept starters and Twine (or an engine of your choice) produce a narrative driven game.

You should document the planning, playtesting & production of your game in a Blackboard journal.

You are expected to reflect on playtesting feedback and as well as any future developments

As is typical in assignments in the programme all other reading is suggested for ‘deeper dives’ into a specific subject as opposed to required to pass the course. They are seen as ways of enriching the learning experience as opposed to adding to the assessment requirements for the course. The process by which assignments are set and approved should be noted here, There is no capacity for extra credit or or anything to that degree. The students are expected to understand the assignments - they are covered and referred to frequently, and ask questions if there is any ambiguity. They are moderated internally by domain specialists not on the teaching team and must align to learning outcomes that have been approved by the quality department of the school. The teaching team are open to looking at drafts of the students' essays in which they can send back feedback on anything that they feel is missing in regards to the assignment brief but only a small proportion of students send drafts for feedback. The journals mentioned in assignment 1-1 also receive feedback form the staff so that the students know they are on the right track as far as what’s required of them to complete the assessment.

This level of assistance is felt is needed due to the variable nature of the background of the students coming into the course, especially where they may not have done much, or any academic writing before these assignments. Much is made of assistance the library and the academic skills team can give in helping students write essays in the correct manner, further highlighting an important element of this module is familiarising the students with the services the library team can provide.

**Course Assessment** (potential bulleted list):

***1-1 Reflect on engaging in a paper-based RPG (15%)***

*Criteria / Contribution %*

* *Character Creation 33%*
* *World Building 33%*
* *Narrative Engagement 34%*

Mapped Learning Outcomes - 2) DEMONSTRATE A KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF STORY STRUCTURES, CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT AND NARRATIVE ELEMENTS.

***1-2 Analyse the RPG Module Played in regard to course theory (35%****)*

*Criteria / Contribution %*

* *Narrative Analysis 45%*
* *Character Analysis 45%*
* *Spelling, Grammar, Presentation and Word Count 10%*

Mapped Learning Outcomes - 3) CRITICALLY APPRAISE OTHER GAMES AND PRODUCE COMPETENT JUDGEMENTS OF THE POSSIBLE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THEIR NARRATIVE.

***2-1 Analyse a modern computer game (15%)***

*Criteria / Contribution %*

* *Representations of Narratives 40%*
* *Discussion of the Protagonist Development 40%*
* *Spelling, Grammar, Presentation and Word Count 20%*

Mapped Learning Outcomes - 1) ANALYSE THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF A COMPUTER GAME.

***2-2 Design and Produce a Narrative Based Game (35%)***

*Criteria / Contribution %*

* *Planning 25%*
* *Playtesting 25%*
* *Production 25%*
* *Reflection on Feedback 25%*

Mapped Learning Outcomes - 4) COMMUNICATE A LOGICAL AND COHESIVE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE WITH CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IN THE FORM OF A NARRATIVE STRUCTURE DOCUMENT FOR A COMPUTER GAME.

**Expanded Course Outline** (500-1500 words/whatever necessary to complete the table):

 Semester One - September / October - December

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Week or Module #** | **Topic** | **Class Topics/Activities** | **Assignments** |
| 1 | Introduction | Write first assignment blog post covering your experiences with paper-based RPGs, research into the topic and desired personal development. |  |
| 2 | *Characters* | *Research and document the character creation process for the chosen paper-based RPG. Include inspiration and source materials for the created character as well as the end result (‘character sheet’). Discuss desired playstyle and plans for character development.* |  |
| 3 |  Observing Narrative Play |  Actual play of the paper-based RPG should begin, and the first session should be chronicled on the blog.  |   |
| 4 |  Establishing a World: Narrative in Games  |  Continue to play and log the play sessions. Additional reading should be done through-out the module to further the student’s knowledge. Make notes and begin to plan the analytical essay. Consider how course theory may be applied to analyse key events and moments. First drafts may be made at this stage, with placeholders left for further developments. |   |
| 5 |  Applying Narrative Structure Theories to Games |   |
| 6 |  Transmedia Storytelling and Games |   |
| 7 |  Narrative as a Marketing Model  |   |
| 8 |  Analytic Writing  |   |
| 9 | Assignment Workshop (Drop in Help) |  |
| 10 | Assignment Workshop (Drop in Help) |  |  |
| 11 | Assignment Workshop (Drop in Help) |  |  |
| 12 | Assignment Workshop (Drop in Help) |  | Hand in both parts of the assessment for Semester 1 (1-1 & 1-2) |

 Semester Two - January - May / April

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Week or Module #** | **Topic** | **Class Topics/Activities** | **Assignments** |
| 1 | *Project Planning* | Plan your approach to the narrative game project. Blog about your initial ideas, potential interpretations of the story dice and the logistics of the project – this would include Gantt charts, contingencies, and other project management resources.  |  |
| 2 | *Formulating Plot and Character for Narrative*  | *Continue to update the blog with your plans. At this stage you should have an outline for the characters in the game, explain your reasoning and begin to develop the outline of the game.*  |  |
| 3 |  Semantics |  At this stage you should be nearing the end of your initial planning phase. There should be a blog post applying course theory to your game outline and considering how best to implement it. Refine your concept into an ‘elevator pitch’ for delivery.  |   |
| 4 |  Elevator Pitches and Prototyping  |  Pitches. Students pitch their final concepts. Keep the blog updated with any reflection, thoughts on how hearing other pitches may have changed your mind. At this stage you should begin work on the prototype.  |   |
| 5 |  Writing for Games – Part One |  Write: there should be regular progress updates on the project. Apply lesson theory to create a visual representation of the proposed narrative – flow charts, subway maps, etc.  |   |
| 6 |  Writing for Games – Part Two |  Prepare a prototype of the narrative game so that you can receive valuable playtesting feedback. Continue to write. |   |
| 7 |  Playtesting and You |  Playtesting. Blog about the performance of the playtests, any results and reflect on feedback received. Form plans to iterate and respond to the feedback.  |   |
| 8 |  Narrative Roles in Industry  |  Continue to update your blog with progress posts. |   |
| 9 | Assignment Workshop (Drop in Help) | At this stage you should aim to wrap-up work on the game and its documentation. Outline your essay if you have not already and create a visual representation of the chosen game’s narrative.  |  |
| 10 | Assignment Workshop (Drop in Help) |  |
| 11 | Assignment Workshop (Drop in Help) |  |
| 12 | Assignment Workshop (Drop in Help) | Complete and submit the essay for assessment. There should be a final blog post with evidence of the final product for your game. Reflect on the final product in comparison to your original plans and industry practices.  | Hand in both parts of the assessment for Semester 2 (2-1 & 2-2) |

**Course Best Practices** (250-1000 words):

With a course that has so many roles to fill as this one does then considering best practices from it is easier split into a number of different elements. Previous incarnations have had the course split up into two smaller modules in different academic years but we found students didn’t see a link between the introductory module in the first year and the advanced module and when the opportunity to combine them into a large module arose it was seized upon.

The group dynamics aspects of the course has also led to the content being moved around and recorganised. Previously the RPG element was in the second semester but it frequently caused upset and interpersonal issues with groups that formed and cut across other existing friendship groups or where interpersonal issues had arisen in individuals. The constraint on a single system also caused upset amongst students too as they felt ‘hemmed’ in by the choice of the tutor at the time.

Before the inclusion of TWINE as a game production element the module had an almost entirely written based set of assessments, covering the analysis of different texts from various angles. Both ‘Choose Your Own Adventure’ books and Classic point and click adventures were used as the basis for students assessments and analysis but we found after a few years of this that plagiarism was rife and increasingly the ‘key’ to a game or adventure book was available online. The move to getting students to create their own games has helped a lot with this, but shifted the burden of teaching and support to be less led by academic skill and more on the technical side and those with the knowledge of the engine. As we’ve grown the teaching team there is a level of upskilling required from the staff in order for them to support the students and this has been further magnified by having classes taught simultaneously over two campuses as we have in the last year. The adhoc, open source nature of TWINE development has meant there is not a great amount of formalised support for the engine as there is in other more developed systems.

Developing the practical side of the assessment has also meant recalibrating and managing the student’s expectations of the assessment process. Previous experience of tooling up the technical side of an assignment often leads students to be over concerns on the finished project and not the journey of getting there. We encourage our students to embrace failure and reflect on it for their future learning and development but this is often a hard lesson for new students to face, even on what is effectively a ‘low stakes’ module in the scope of their study. This was particularly evident when we had a mix of technically minded students from Games Design and Gameplay and the more academically focussed students studying Game Studies. The move from lecture hall in the first semester to computer based labs in the second semester was done with supporting these students in mind but often this resulted in students suffering from ‘imposter syndrome’ when they saw the work of others.

We used narrative picture based ‘story dice’ in order to give the students some constraints and direction for their TWINE games. This works well for the most part in bringing in some innovation to their stories and games, but the task of ‘rolling’ 100 + dice rolls was laborious. Each dice roll was photographed so the team has a library of ‘rolls’ to use and assign to students which has helped speed up the process significantly for future years.

Finally the task of organising students into play groups for the first semester continues to be problematic and time consuming - compounded by the fact that students can transfer courses, and optional modules up until the 3rd week of teaching. This either means a lot of swapping and changing out of members in groups, or time spent chasing group members who appear on the enrolment information for the module but may have transferred out or withdrawn. This year we didn’t form groups until the 4th week of teaching, but that then gave the students little time to settle into groups before they began playing.

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic led the university to move primarily online teaching and Narratology for Games moved to entirely online tuition using Microsoft Teams as a facilitation method. Large scale Live events were put in place to limit bandwidth issues for the students and make use of the Question and Answer function they provide. Breakout channels were also put on Teams for students to use, in the first instance, to work on group tasks in the context of the larger lectures and then for the running of their TRPG sessions. The move to online means we’ve also needed to suggest digital systems of managing games such as Roll 20. We left the option to manage their groups and plan sessions in the hands of the students. The plans for teaching next semester, where we’ll move to teaching TWINE via online instruction will mirror how we teach other game engine based classes with a mix of large scale online lectures and online tutorials.

**Future Course Plans** (250-500 word):

Much of the future plans for this module are currently on hold while we assess the viability of various modules continuing online as the institution moves to a blended system of learning. How this module is taught in the future will depend greatly on the feedback received from students and the grades of the work they submit this year. We will need to find some way of assessing if he group work has managed to do at least some of it’s planned job in helping with the student’s sense of belonging and capacity to make friends, already strained by having so much online tutorial as opposed to that happening in class, and a limiting of on campus

Other changes are planned involved a restructuring of the degrees in which this option sits. While it is a popular module it is an outlier in terms of the larger picture of the aims of the courses. The need to make sure the learning on the course as a whole is relevant and maps onto employability options means for modules like this there needs to be a case made that the skills taught on it are relevant to the employment opportunities that are, or will be available.

If the module does continue then the key areas the team will look at will be the practicality of the assessments and ways of easing the creation of groups, and if we move to use one shot adventures to ease some of the issues with managing groups and making sure the students have a comprehensive play experience in which to analyse.

As the Games Industry continues to recognise narrative contributions to games, and those that write them then the module will have more to draw upon in terms of defining skills required for those students who are looking at entering that aspect of the industry, or looking at developing narrative aspects in games they design then the module, in whatever form it has in the future will continue to embrace these elements, as it has done in the past.

**Reflective Commentary**:

*Ian Sturrock:* I’m quite envious that I’ve not yet been lucky enough to teach D&D as part of a formal learning process, or better yet, to get taught D&D as part of a formal learning process! I do encourage my own games design students to learn to play tabletop RPGs as early as possible in their leisure time, and to try to GM a campaign during their years as undergraduates. So many great game designers, genre fiction writers, and genre TV showrunners cut their teeth as Dungeon Masters back in their own college days that I sometimes think that running a good D&D game at the university’s TTRPG club may be almost as big a predictor of industry success, for game designers, as is their academic attainment.

You mention the possibility of recommending standard one-shot D&D campaigns -- I think the current (5th edition) Starter Set is a superb introduction, probably the best introductory version of D&D that I’ve seen in almost 40 years of personal play and GMing. It’s also well priced for student budgets.

It’s also great to see you moving away from a more theoretical, essay-based analysis of existing interactive fiction and into students making Twine narratives. My own students take to Twine very happily and fluently, as third years, and having seen your account of the Narratology for Games module running so well for first years, I am contemplating ways in which to start students learning Twine a couple of years earlier, if possible.