

"Divergence from a story's path is likely to make for a less satisfying story; restricting a player's freedom of action is likely to make for a less satisfying game."

- *Greg Costikyan* (Costikyan 2000, par. 1)

"Every medium has been used to tell stories. That's true of books and theatre and radio drama and movies. It's true of games as well."

- *Eric Goldberg* (Costikyan 2000, par. 1)

Videogame studies are in their infancy when compared to other, more established fields of academic study. This has led to extensive debate within the academic community on how best to approach the study of videogames - from a purely "game" driven perspective (Ludology), or utilising the existing base of narrative studies (Narratology). The above quotes from Costikyan and Goldberg demonstrate the often "polar" nature of these debates - but I believe this is a false dichotomy. An understanding of *both* narratology and ludology is desirable to develop a truly critical understanding of games and game-play.

I have chosen to discuss these subjects in the context of the game *Dungeon Crawl Stone Soup* (*Dungeon Crawl*) for two key reasons. Firstly, with most modern games the influence of traditional narrative is obvious - cutscenes in these games are structured and designed in much the same way any scene is within a traditional cinematic film. Voiceovers and monologues are often used to convey important plot elements. Characters will move and look a certain way in order to convey personality. *Dungeon Crawl* contains none of these "modern" elements - at its most basic level it is a display of ASCII characters on a screen (Appendix 1, fig 1), although a graphical "tiles" version is also available (Appendix 1, fig 2). This allows me to examine whether narratology is relevant to understanding of all videogames, or just those with modern standards of graphics and sound.

Secondly, *Dungeon Crawl* is a non-linear game. Whilst the underlying goal is the same each time (delve deep into the dungeon and retrieve the Orb of Zot), every single level (and its contents - items, monsters, treasure, etc.) is randomly generated each game. Most modern games have "chapters", "levels" or "set pieces" that contain a static plotline easily tied to narrative conventions. The designers explicitly state that gameplay is their core concern and not traditional narrative in the game's manual when they state that *Dungeon Crawl* "aims to be a tactical fantasy-themed dungeon crawl. We strive for strategy being a concern, too, and for exquisite gameplay and interface. However, don't expect plots or quests" (Henzell et al 2011, par. N)

In the context of understanding games, what exactly constitutes "narratology" (or a "narratologist") has never been clearly defined. Gonzalo Frasca notes that the primary

problem in the so called "ludology vs narratology debate" is that "narratologist" has a different meaning within the game studies community than it does outside of it (Frasca 2003, 1-2). In respect to game studies, Frasca defines a narratologist as "a scholar that either claims that games are closely connected to narrative and/or that they should be analyzed - at least in part - through narratology", but notes that in the Humanities it is "a scholar who studies narratology, a set of theories of narrative that are independent of the medium of representation". (Frasca 2003, p. 1-2). Given that this essay deals with game studies specifically, I will be using Frasca's internal definition of narratologist to frame what narratology means in relation to games and game-play.

To understand how narratology (the study of narrative theories) can apply to games, we must define what constitutes a narrative. Literary theorist J. Hillis Miller contends that any narrative comprises of three main components: Firstly, that a narrative has "an initial situation, a sequence leading to a change or reversal of the situation and a revelation made possible by the reversal of the situation" (Miller 1990, 77). Secondly, that there is "some use of personification whereby character is created out of signs" (Miller 1990, p.77)., using the examples of words on a page or sounds in the air for written and oral narrative respectively. Finally, there "must be some patterning or repetition of key elements"(Miller 1990, 77). Miller also notes that some narratives will draw their meaning by playing ironically against these components - narratives which have a "bad ending", for example, instead of the reversal of the situation. (Miller 1990, 77)

As a game, *Dungeon Crawl* contains all three of Miller's narrative components. The player's character starts at the top of a deep dungeon with a handful of skills, but too weak and inexperienced to achieve his/her end goals - the initial situation. Through defeating monsters and discovering more powerful items the character becomes stronger - the sequence that leads to a change or reversal of the situation. The "revelation" or outcome made possible by the changing situation is the character's retrieval of the Orb of Zot from the dungeon depths - or the character's demise. *Dungeon Crawl* creates character out of signs - it is a stylized depiction of a fantasy adventure with a cast of different characters in the form of monsters, the player character and various deities. (Each race has its own descriptive paragraph in the game's manual, as well as unique aptitudes that impact gameplay (Henzell 2011, Appendix 1)). Finally, *Dungeon Crawl* also contains patterned structures of space (the dungeon and its various sub-branches), progress (levelling up and development of character skills) and time (in the form of game turns).

Dungeon Crawl shares strong parallels with the traditional narrative structure of the *Monomyth*, or Christopher Volger's "The Hero's Journey". Volger's hero's journey consists of twelve steps (Rollings & Adams 2003, 95-96), almost all of which are

directly mirrored by gameplay aspects in *Dungeon Crawl* (see Appendix 2). Based on the developer's philosophy statements in the manual, this does not appear to be intentional (Henzell 2011, par. N) - which makes it an interesting angle of analysis given that this "story-like" nature that emerges from gameplay makes it possible for players of *Dungeon Crawl* to tell others what happened in their game in a manner that is mostly comprehensible to someone who has not played the game at all.

When players speak about their adventures in *Dungeon Crawl* (posts in *Dungeon Crawl* forum threads will often the prefix of "YASD" (Yet Another Stupid Death) for failures, or "YAVP" (Yet Another Victory Post) for successful ascensions), their gameplay experience is told in a similar fashion - they speak of the initial class/race choice they made, what deity they chose to follow, the uniques that caused them particular challenges, the powerful artifacts they found, what branches of the dungeon they visited and how they managed the journey back to the surface. Each game is a distinctly unique tale, and sharing these stories with other players forms a strong portion of the game's appeal and longevity. Jesper Juul debates whether players telling stories of a game session is a narrative function of a game itself and warns against indiscriminate use of the term narrative, stating "if everything is a narrative, it is of course not very useful to say that video games also can be described as such" (Neilson et al 2008, p1-2) - but the ease of telling a *Dungeon Crawl* story due to the similarities to the Hero's Journey should not be discounted.

Ludologists have presented a number of reasons why solely treating games as narrative is not a holistic approach - the most notable of which is that solely viewing games as narrative "can lead us to overlook the 'intrinsic properties' of video games" (Frasca 2003, 1-2). However, even Ludologists cannot agree entirely on what elements are necessary in a game - out of eight different game scholars studied by Salen and Zimmerman on the subject of defining games, not one aspect received the approval of all eight - most elements received the approval of three or less of the scholars. However, seven out of the eight agreed that "a game proceeds according to rules that limit players", and three of the eight agreed that "decision making" is involved. (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, 79).

Dungeon Crawl's core gameplay is built almost entirely around rules. (the game's instruction manual clocks in at over 22,000 words). These rules range from how to interact with the game (button "x" performs action "y") to limitations (you may worship only one deity at a time, Demigod characters may not worship a deity at all) and consequences (turning on "Wizard Mode" - *Dungeon Crawl's* debug mode - at any time during the game will prevent your game from receiving a score at the end as you have "cheated" the standard rules).

In addition to the rules presented to the player, the game itself operates on a series of "hidden" rules to create content for the player to explore and experience. Whilst every game's dungeon is generated randomly, this generation is subject to rules and limits to ensure that each game is as "fair" as possible - for example, it is extremely unlikely that the game will generate a dragon or extremely powerful artefact sword on the first level. It is not impossible, however - the designers purposely left in marginal odds of things not quite going as expected to keep things interesting each time you play, even after multiple games. (Henzell et al 2011, par. N)

Decision making is central to *Dungeon Crawl's* gameplay - so much so that the designers list "meaningful decisions" as one of their four "major design goals" (Henzell et al 2011, par. N). Whenever the player is presented with a decision - whether this is in a combat situation (do I spend the time to summon a creature to distract the horde of orcs running toward me, allowing me to more effectively use "area effect" spells, or do I retreat into the corridor immediately and fight them one at a time) or an inventory management one (do I wear the Ring Of Slaying +5 or the Ring of Invisibility? Do I have enough room to carry both?) - the choice should not be obvious, or a "no brainer".

Analysing *Dungeon Crawl* from solely the perspective of a "hardline" ludologist or a narratologist does not provide a truly critical analysis. Whilst focusing solely on the "game" aspects of rules and decision making reveals a significant portion of the overall "picture" of why *Dungeon Crawl* works as a game, examining the narrative aspects enable us to explore other valid reasons for *Dungeon Crawl's* longevity and popularity - such as the ease of telling the story of a player's game by virtue of the game's underlying "plot" strongly resembling the "Hero's Journey" - and this would not be exposed through use of ludology alone. Conversely, games contain many elements that are not present in traditional narrative structures such as rules and decision making, making an approach based solely on narrative undesirable for a truly critical analysis.

Appendix 1: Images

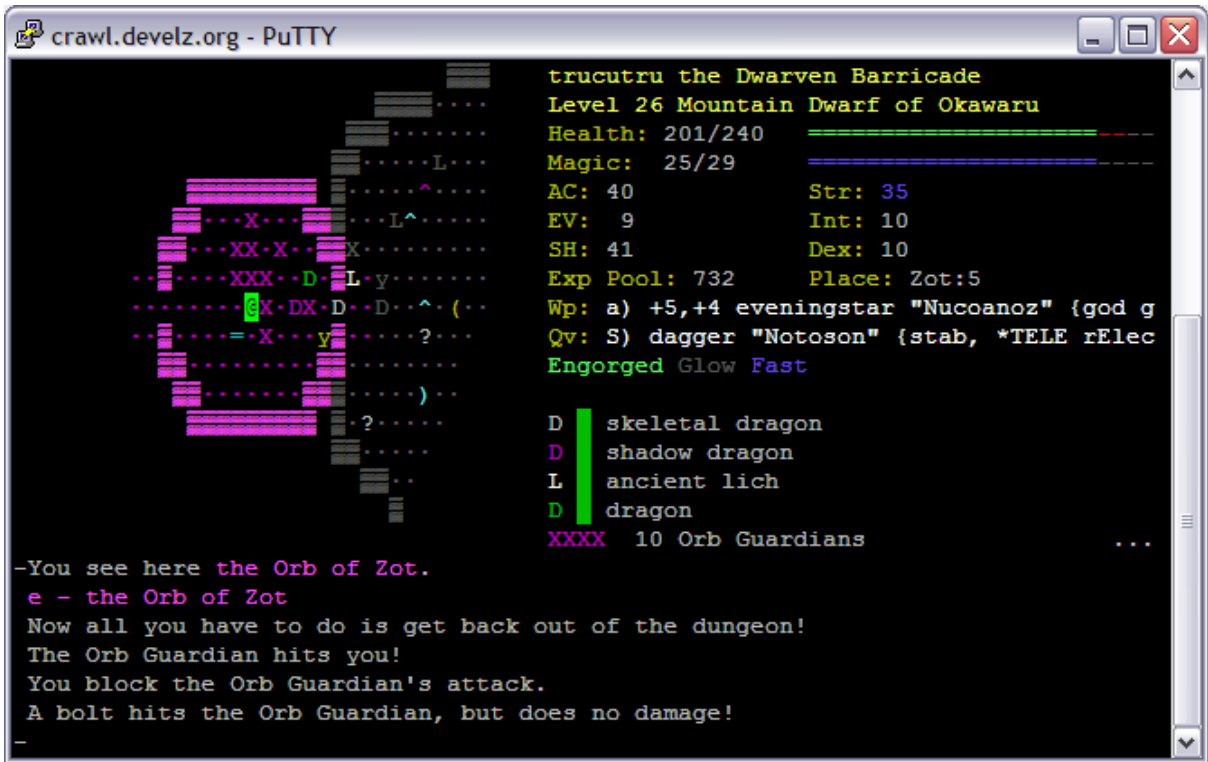


Fig 1: Dungeon Crawl Screenshot - ASCII



Fig 2: Dungeon Crawl Screenshot - Tiles Version

Appendix 2: Volger's Hero's Journey and *Dungeon Crawl*

Volger's Hero's Journey Step	<i>Dungeon Crawl</i> Equivalent
<i>The Ordinary World</i>	What lies beyond the exit to the dungeon - the surface world.
<i>The Call To Adventure</i>	Knowledge of "The Orb of Zot" and the powers it brings.
<i>The Refusal Of The Call</i>	Not directly present - although the player has the choice not to play. Also, leaving the dungeon without the Orb generates a "game over" state.
<i>The Meeting With The Mentor</i>	The player's choice of class/race combination determines what skills he/she enters the dungeon with, which guides the character's development.
<i>Crossing The First Threshold</i>	Entering the dungeon - starting the game.
<i>Tests, Allies & Enemies</i>	Defeating monsters (especially "uniques" - single instance monsters that will occur once per game and are usually stronger than other monsters), choosing a deity on the "temple" level, "levelling up".
<i>Approach to the Innermost Cave</i>	Retrieving at least three "runes" from dangerous dungeon sub branches so that the player can enter "The Realm of Zot"
<i>The Ordeal</i>	Traversing the Realm of Zot, which contains terrible monsters not found elsewhere.
<i>The Reward</i>	Obtaining the Orb of Zot
<i>The Road Back</i>	The Hero must return the Orb of Zot to the surface, which involves traversing the dungeon in reverse.
<i>The Resurrection</i>	As a consequence of retrieving the Orb of Zot, monsters are now more powerful and more numerous. The return trek is treacherous, the enemy has essentially "resurfaced for a final stand".
<i>The Return With The Reward</i>	The breakdown of the journey in a final score file once the character "ascends" to the surface. Sharing the tale with others.

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