STORY MACHINES

WHY YOU PLAY GAMES INSTEAD OF READING BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION

- TODAY, I'LL BE TALKING ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GAMES AND STORIES
- STORIES ARE ROUTINELY PRIVILEGED
 ABOVE GAMES
 - PEOPLE TALK ABOUT STORIES FOR GAMES
 - UNLIKE GAMES, LITERATURE AND DRAMA HAVE BEEN STUDIED FOR **HUNDREDS** OF YEARS
- I PERSONALLY PREFER TO PRIVILEGE GAMES ABOVE STORIES
- THIS IS BECAUSE GAMES ARE MACHINES FOR GENERATING STORIES

HP BOOM · HERE'S THE HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT EXPLODING

- THE RESULT IS A STORY

- THE WAY THEY ARE TOLD IS A NARRATIVE
- SOME OF THESE ARE **SELECTED** AND PRESENTED IN THE ORDER THEY WILL BE **READ** (IF NOT OCCURRED)
- EVENTS HAPPEN

• WHAT **IS** A STORY?

- **S**0:
- E. M. FORSTER, ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL
- "A STORY IS A NARRATIVE OF EVENTS ARRANGED IN THEIR TIME SEQUENCE"

STORY

PLOT

- A PLOT IS NOT THE SAME THING AS A STORY
- PLOTS ARE PREDEFINED AND INCLUDE
 CAUSALITY
 - AN EVENT HAPPENS BECAUSE A SITUATION, EVENT OR SERIES OF EVENTS PRECEDED IT
- EXAMPLE: HERE IS A TWO-EVENT STORY:

- | ATE A BAR OF CHOCOLATE. | WAS SICK.

• DID THE CHOCOLATE MAKE ME SICK OR CHEER ME UP BECAUSE | WAS ALREADY SICK?

- OR "THAT'S TWO THINGS OFF MY BUCKET LIST"?

PLOT AND STORY

- MUCH OF THE ENJOYMENT FROM A STORY COMES FROM RECONSTRUCTING ITS PLOT
 FIGURING OUT THE CAUSAL LINKS CONNECTING KEY EVENTS
- THIS ISN'T ALWAYS THE CASE, OF COURSE
 I LIKE CHEKHOV'S SHORT STORIES BECAUSE OF HIS
 CHARACTERS, NOT ANY DISCERNIBLE PLOT
- HOWEVER, REALISING WHAT CAUSED WHAT AND WHAT WILL CAUSE WHAT IS AT THE HEART OF WHAT MAKES A STORY COMPELLING

NARRATIVE

- A NARRATIVE IS THE TELLING OF A STORY
 - CONVEYING THE **PLOT** THROUGH THE **DEVICE** OF THE STORY
- IT USUALLY MEANS THE STORY AS A WHOLE - AT WORDS-ON-A-PAGE LEVEL, IT'S DISCOURSE
- BACKSTORY IS THE RETELLING OF EVENTS THAT PRECEDED THE STORY'S EVENTS
- ITS USUALLY ONLY FELT INDIRECTLY
 - THE CHARITY WORKER DOES GOOD TO ATONE FOR HER TIME IN PRISON FOR CREDIT CARD FRAUD

HISTORY

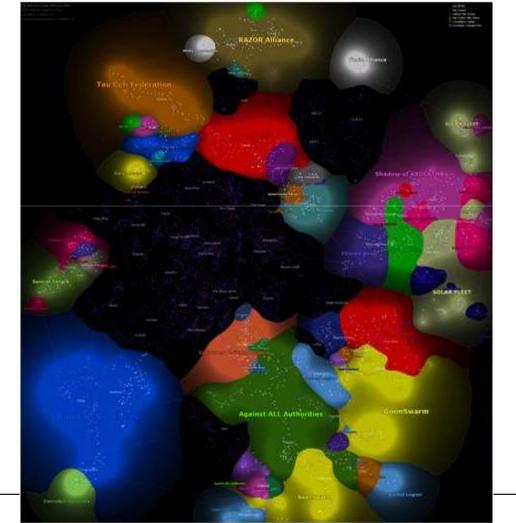
- HISTORY IS THE RETELLING OF A SERIES OF CAUSALLY-CONNECTED PAST EVENTS
 - UNCAUSALLY-CONNECTED ONES ARE RECORDS
- FOR NON-FICTIONAL EVENTS THERE IS NO PLOT CREATED BY A GOD-LIKE AUTHOR, BUT THE CHARACTERS CAN STILL HAVE PLOTS

- THE GUNPOWDER PLOT

 HISTORIANS LOOK AT RECORDS TO EXPLAIN AND INTERPRET THEIR CAUSALITY
 BUT THESE CHAINS OF EVENTS AREN'T PLOTTED

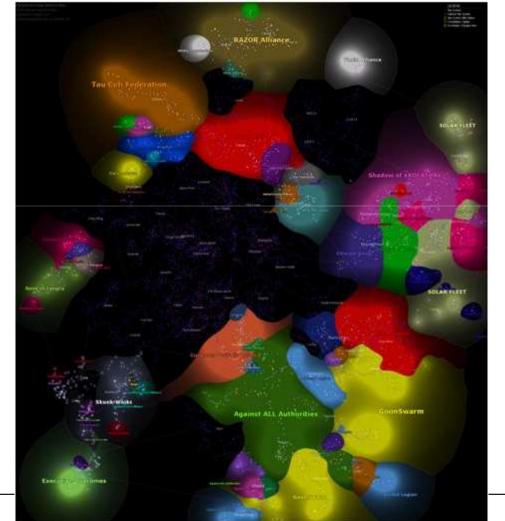
eve online

• 4TH FEBRUARY, 2009:



eve online

• 5TH FEBRUARY, 2009:



- NOR FOR THE SAME PLAYER EACH REPLAYING

- NOT NECESSARILY THE SAME FOR EACH PLAYER
- A STORY IS A LINEAR RETELLING OF EVENTS
- · LET'S APPLY THESE TO GAMES
- HISTORY
- BACKSTORY
- NARRATIVE (AND DISCOURSE)
- STORY - PLOT
- WE HAVE FIVE TERMS DEFINED HERE:

FOR GAMES

PLOT

- A PLOT IS A POSSIBLY **NONLINEAR** SERIES OF EVENTS PREDETERMINED BY THE DESIGNERS
- IT INTRODUCES SOME SIGNIFICANT EVENTS
- THAT SAID, MOST EVENTS COME FROM INTERACTING WITH THE GAME SYSTEM
- THESE ARE PREDEFINED, IN THAT THE GAME SYSTEM EMBODIES ALL EVENTS THAT CAN OCCUR
- BUT THEY'RE NOT PREDEFINED AS EVENTS
 - THEY'RE PREDEFINED AS A SYSTEM FOR

GENERATING EVENTS

NARRATIVE

- FOR GAME DESIGNERS, NARRATIVE USUALLY MEANS THE WAY THE PLOTTED EVENTS UNFOLD FOR THE PLAYER
- IS DOESN'T MEAN THE WAY THE EVENTS THAT ARISE FROM THE GAME SYSTEM UNFOLD
 THEY CALL THAT GAMEPLAY
- · DISCOURSE IN GAMES MEANS:
 - QUEST STEPS, PLOT POINTS, QUICK TIME EVENTS, ...
 - MECHANICS, GAME LOOP, CORE GAMEPLAY, ...
- WELL, IT WOULD IF DESIGNERS USED THE TERM ...

BACKSTORY

- BACKSTORY COVERS THE EVENTS THAT TOOK PLACE BEFORE THE PLAYER STARTED PLAYING
- IT'S USUALLY AUTHORED, FIXED AND IS THE SAME FOR EACH REPLAYING OF THE GAME
 NOT NECESSARILY, THOUGH...
- A NEW PLAYER TO EVE ONLINE WILL PERCEIVE ITS HISTORICAL CORPORATION WAR EVENTS AS BACKSTORY RELATIVE TO THEM

- THESE PREDICATE AND CONTEXTUALISE THE FUTURE EVENTS THAT WILL ARISE AS THE PLAYER PLAYS

HISTORY

• FOR A LONG-TERM EVE ONLINE PLAYER, THOSE SAME EVENTS ARE HISTORY

- THEY'RE THE PART OF THE PLAYER'S ONGOING STORY THAT HAS ALREADY BEEN READ

• THEY ONLY BECOME PART OF THE PLAYER'S STORY IN THE RETELLING

- OTHERWISE, THEY'RE JUST RECORDS OF EVENTS

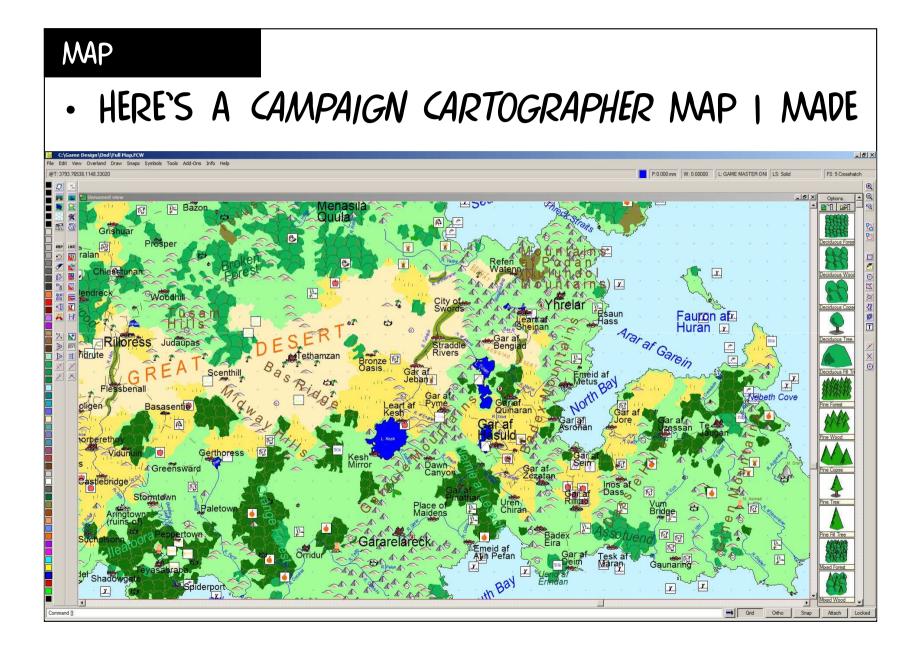
• WHEN PLAYERS SELECTIVELY **CHOOSE** WHICH EVENTS TO RELATE (TO THEMSELVES OR OTHERS), THIS INTERPRETED STORY IS THEIR **HISTORY**

STORY MATTERS

- THESE STORIES THESE HISTORIES ARE THE ONES THAT MATTER FOR GAMES
- IF YOU CAN'T TELL ANOTHER ATTENTIVE PLAYER WHAT INTERESTING THINGS HAPPENED, NO INTERESTING THINGS DID HAPPEN
- IF THAT'S THE CASE, WHY WERE YOU EVEN PLAYING?!
 - NO DECISIONS TO MAKE, NO OBSTACLES TO OVERCOME, NO UNEXPECTED SITUATIONS, NO EMOTIONAL OR HEART-STOPPING MOMENTS

THEME PARK OR SANDBOX

- NOVELS PRESENT A SERIES OF PLOTTED CAUSAL EVENTS AS A STORY
- GAMES (AN ALSO PRESENT A SERIES OF PLOTTED (AUSAL EVENTS AS A STORY
- HOWEVER GAMES ADDITIONALLY PRESENT A SERIES OF UNPLOTTED CAUSAL EVENTS FROM WHICH PLAYERS CREATE STORIES
- IN MMO DESIGN TERMS, PLOT-HEAVY GAMES ARE THEME PARKS AND PLOT-LIGHT ONES ARE SANDBOXES



PLOTLESS GAMES

- · GAMES DON'T HAVE TO HAVE PLOTS
- NO ABSTRACT GAMES HAVE THEM, BECAUSE PLOTS REQUIRE A FICTION FOR THEIR CONTEXT
- ABSTRACT GAMES DO STILL CREATE STORY
 ITS IMPLICIT IN THEIR MECHANICS
- REMEMBER THAT AMAZING GAME OF TETRIS WHEN YOU WERE CLOSE TO THE TOP AND JUST NEEDED ONE LONG BRICK THEN AT LAST IT CAME AND YOU COLLAPSED ALMOST THE WHOLE STACK?
 THERE WAS NO PLOT, BUT WHAT A STORY!

WHY PLOTS?

- IF GAMES DON'T NEED PREDEFINED PLOTS, WHY GIVE THEM ANY?
 - ARE PLOTS SIMPLY A WAY TO MAKE A WORLD SEEM MORE **IMMERSIVE**?
- WELL, IT TURNS OUT THAT **SOME** PEOPLE ARE **BETTER** AT CREATING PLOTS THAN OTHERS
- THE EVENTS PLAYERS INITIATE **AREN'T** ALWAYS THE STUFF OF WHICH GOOD STORIES ARE MADE
- AUTHORS CAN PLOT **POWERFUL** EVENTS THAT DELIVER MORE SATISFACTORY **ENDINGS**

EXCEPT...

- THAT'S **TRUE**, BUT IF YOU FOLLOW IT THROUGH THEN WHY BOTHER WITH **GAMES** AT ALL?
 - WHY PLAY A **GAME** WHEN YOU CAN READ A **BOOK** WRITTEN BY SOMEONE BETTER AT CREATING STORIES THAN YOU ARE?
- THE ANSWER IS THAT PEOPLE ARE INDIVIDUALS
- SOME THINGS ARE INCREDIBLY IMPORTANT TO YOU BUT NOT TO MOST OTHER PEOPLE
- GAMES ALLOW YOU TO CREATE YOUR STORY

EXPLANATION

- IN PLAYING A GAME, YOU CAN CAUSE EVENTS TO OCCUR THAT FOR YOU ARE SIGNIFICANT
 OR COULD LEAD TO SOMETHING SIGNIFICANT
- YOU'RE LOOKING FOR EXPERIENCES TO USE AS BUILDING BLOCKS IN YOUR STORY

- SOME YOU IGNORE, SOME YOU HOLD ON TO

- OTHER PEOPLE MIGHT THINK YOUR STORY IS GARBAGE, BUT IT'S NOT FOR THEM
- YOU'RE PLAYING THE GAME SO YOU HAVE FUN
 FUN IS THAT WHICH YOU'D RELATE AS A STORY

FOR YOU

- GAMES AS SYSTEMS ALLOW PEOPLE TO EXPERIMENT IN CREATING EVENTS
- THEY CAN PICK FROM THIS EVENT RECORD THE EVENTS THAT ARE IMPORTANT FOR THEM
- THESE WILL LEAD TO RETELLINGS THAT ARE IMPORTANT FOR THEM
- A PLOT-DRIVEN GAME **CAN** DO THIS, BUT BY NECESSITY ITS MEANING HAS TO BE **GENERAL**
- GAMES ALLOW PLAYERS TO WEAVE ALL IN-GAME EVENTS INTO THEIR OWN STORIES

AUTOMATION

- YOU CAN WRITE GAME-PLAYING **PROGRAMS** - CHESS, DRAUGHTS, ROGUE, ...
- SUCH A PROGRAM WOULD GENERATE A SERIES OF EVENTS THAT MAKE **CAUSAL** SENSE
- THAT DOESN'T MAKE THOSE STORIES THOUGH
- WHEN PLAYERS PLAY, THEY STRIVE TO CAUSE EVENTS TO OCCUR PURPOSEFULLY

- WHY THAT EVENT RATHER THAN SOME OTHER?

• IT MUST BE BECAUSE IT WAS SINGULARLY IMPORTANT TO THAT PARTICULAR PLAYER

CREATING STORIES

- WHEN I WAS ABOUT 12, I INVENTED THIS ... WELL, IT'S HARD TO SAY WHAT IT WAS
 - I CREATED A MAP OF A LOST CONTINENT
 - I POPULATED IT WITH ALL KINDS OF EXCITING AND INTERESTING THINGS
 - I INVENTED A CHARACTER, DR TODDYSTONE
 - I MOVED DR TODDYSTONE THROUGH THE LOST CONTINENT A DAY AT A TIME
 - I WROTE A DIARY OF HIS DAILY ADVENTURES
- I USED THE FRAMEWORK OF A ROLE-PLAYING GAME TO CREATE STORY - FOR FUN!

CREATING GAMES

- TODAY, I OCCASIONALLY USE GAMES TO CREATE
 BACKSTORY CONTEXT FOR OTHER GAMES
- FOR THE LAST BIG DED CAMPAIGN | DESIGNED,
 | USED CIVILISATION IV (MULTI-PLAYER)
 TO CREATE THE FANTASY WORLD'S HISTORY

- ELVES WERE THE BABYLONIANS, I SEEM TO RECALL

• I KNEW WHAT EVERY UNIT HAD DONE, WHAT CITIES THEY FOUNDED, WHEN TEMPLES WERE BUILT TO WHAT GODS - THE WORKS!

- LIKE DWARF FORTRESS, BUT SANE

CONCLUSION

- PLAYING A GAME SPINS A SERIES OF EVENTS
- · PLAYERS HAVE SOME SAY IN WHICH EVENTS
- THEY RETELL SELECTED EVENTS AS STORIES
- THEREFORE GAMES ARE **MACHINES** THAT PLAYERS USE FOR CREATING **STORIES**
- WHEN YOU PLAY A GAME, YOU DIRECT IT TOWARDS THE EVENTS BEST FOR YOU
- EVERYONE LIKES STORIES, BUT THEY LIKE THEIR OWN STORIES MOST OF ALL