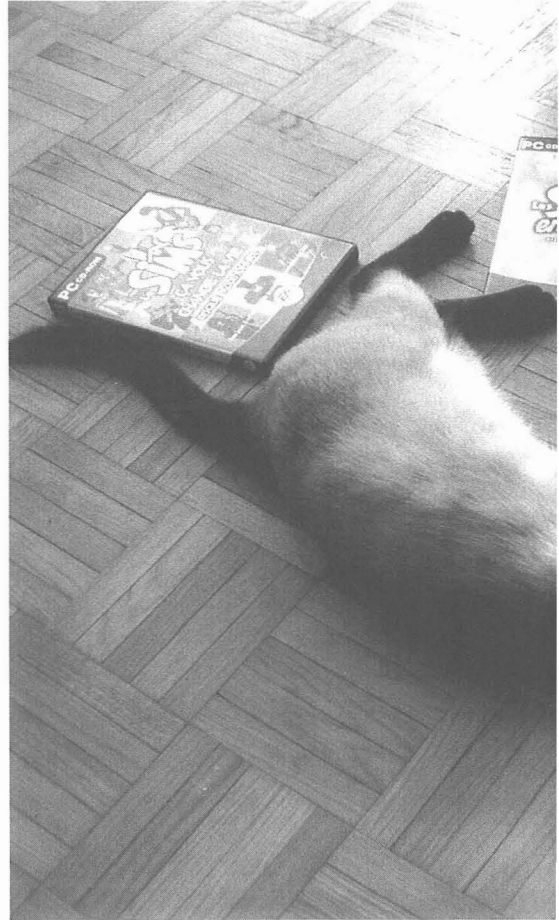


Corpus Simsi Or, Can a Body Tell a Story?

JOYCE GOGGIN





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In his essay, “The Gaming Situation,” Markku Eskelinen writes that whenever serious scholarly attention is devoted to computer games, it takes the form of rag-tag theoretical treatments colonized from the methods of literary analysis, theatre, drama and film studies. In a laudable attempt to establish the beginnings of a theory that could handle video games as games, rather than as some impoverished form of narrative or film, Eskelinen addresses the “unique dual materiality of cybernetic sign production,” which transpires both within the game and without, on the side of the player (2). Likewise, he is mindful of the distinction to be made between the *interpretative* imperative native to literature, theatre and film, and the *configurative* imperative of games, which requires that players interpret in order to be able to configure and complete the game successfully. This, he asserts, is an operation quite different from the interpretative, hermeneutic processes involved in reading novels or watching films.

Eskelinen makes his most unforgettable—and oft-quoted—point, in the conclusion to his essay. Having argued throughout for game-specific theoretical approaches rather than borrowed collections of narratological generalities applied deleteriously to video games, Eskelinen tells us that in a specialized theoretical scenario, inferable stories would be seen as merely “uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings to games” (7). As he sees it, a prevalent “determination to find or forge a story at any cost [suggests that games can’t be studied as] games because if they were, they apparently couldn’t be studied at all.” More provocatively still, he writes, “laying any emphasis on studying these kinds of [narrative] marketing tools is just a waste of time and energy.” Eskelinen’s blanket statement logic is complemented by a rather loaded vocabulary with which he asserts that it is time to “*annihilate* for good the discussion of games as stories” (10, emphasis added). Thus, he surmises, game studies are “*suffering*” from “lethargy,” and all because of the pernicious effects of applying narrative and cinematic mechanisms to games! Clearly, Eskelinen is marking territory and has chosen to do so by taking to the warpath.¹

This, however, is not to suggest that Eskelinen is simply tilting at windmills. Indeed, at several junctures, his essay specifically reacts to Janet Murray’s *Hamlet on the Holodeck* and other studies that he believes have unproductively blurred the line between literary narratives and video games.² He writes, for example, that the “explanation for this interpretative violence seems to be as horrid” as Murray’s gesture in conflating narrative and game in the first place (8). One, of course, understands the importance of clarity and specificity in scholarly research, yet Eskelinen’s observations throughout the article strike me as at once immanently reasonable and remarkably obstreperous. It is obvious that ignoring difference and importing, wholesale, analytic tools from other disciplines, places too much faith in the idea that narrative theories and games are a perfect fit. Yet while the development of tailor-made theories and models with which to understand games is certainly a desirable goal, ignoring the useful body of work published on literature, games and narrative may prove equally unproductive.³

Likewise, I don't think it's unreasonable to consider what many gamers, MMORPG⁴ enthusiasts in particular, have to say about their experiences in game worlds and their potential to generate stories. For example, R.V. Kelly 2's *Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games* opens with an account of a session played in *EverQuest* between the wee hours of 3:00 a.m. and 6:00 a.m. Interestingly enough, the description of Kelly's session reads a lot like a short story, cliff-hangers and all. In fact, he concludes by telling us that in MMORPGs, he learned "what it was like to *live inside a novel as it was being written* and dwell in a new, better, more satisfying universe as it was being created" (11, emphasis added). Hence, while Kelly's narrative is obviously deeply grounded in wired, haptic experience—the thrills and bodily engagement that Caillois' term *illinx* may be resurrected to describe—Kelly's account of his time on the gamescape is also deeply indebted to literary precedents.⁵

In what follows, I will argue for a more temperate approach to the question of narrative and video games, by taking up the debate from a somewhat different angle. This is to say that I will investigate the relative positions of narratology and ludology through the example of a recent novel that challenges the rigidity of these conceptual categories. *Corpus Simsi* was published in 2003 by Chloé Delaume and, as the title indicates, all of the diegetic action in the text is based on the author's experiences from the moment she enters the gaming world of *The Sims*. As Delaume explains, the novel is intended as a "ludic exploration" of the paths opened up in *The Sims*, which constitute the narrative possibilities of virtual game worlds.⁶ It is here that player and author become one, as "each of the player's choices creates meaning" and impacts what Delaume, on her website, refers to as the "territory of poetic investigation" constituted by the virtual world of *The Sims*. What I am suggesting is that a reading of Delaume's ludico-literary trajectory might provide useful ways of looking at the issues I have raised to this point. More generally, I will try to show that the relationship between video games and literary narrative is more productively seen as one of cooperation and difference rather than as some kind of pugilistic melodrama.

The Novel

At this point, I would like briefly to discuss Delaume's novel and the project from which it arose. As she explains at the close of her narrative, *Corpus Simsi* began as a poetic investigation into the relation between fiction and virtuality, based on the assumption that video games "constitute an artistic base" which continues to be under explored (124, my translations passim). This, she concludes, is probably attributable to games' status as a popular medium rather than a "generator of fiction." For Delaume, however, playing *The Sims* is like a "cascade of dominos—the waterfall [of virtual embodiment] no longer flows without narrative geysers [...] without this comfort we are far from arriving at a sound port" (5). This, she tells us, "is the sadness to which Ulysses offered up travel. I refuse to wander." (5)⁷

over and have read the text that we vaguely begin to recognize all of these “real” objects from their appearance in the novel both as image and text, hence her virtual Siamese cat, Temesta, named for an antidepressant. In other words, this is the point at which the reader is invited to slip back through the tain of the mirror with Delaume.

What Delaume’s move to the other side of mimesis enables is a somewhat more haptic approach to writing than to which we may be accustomed. My meaning here is twofold: for both the writer and the reader, the text is engaging at a more visceral or haptic level, involving the body and the subject as a whole, rather than one or two isolated faculties. Therefore, writes Delaume, “game is another: I still am I think in fragmentary parcels [...] I am binary to my very heart,” suggesting that she has seamlessly merged with the game so that thinking is more like responding to a programme—it is binary, and moves through her body in bursts and starts (10, 45).¹⁶ “Fictional characters” like herself, she writes, are “legible, intelligible right to the dregs,” and “enjoy control which they hope is absolute. It is not a fantasy folded in mimesis that motivates the user of this program [...]. I click, therefore I will be” (15, 26).¹⁷ The *corpus simsi*, then, is fluid and always in the moment of becoming: it is “decomposed in myriads of fragments” (11). “I am bric à brac,” she writes, “I am dispersed.”¹⁸

Moreover, Delaume has done a fair bit of self-conscious soul-searching on her own writing process through which this text emerged. On her website, we read:

Beside from being totally immersed in the generative ludic illusion of [the video game world] only the authentic project of writing can produce the same effect of the recreation-event of virtuality. As the author’s avatar, the book itself is nothing more than the avatar of a writing project in perpetual mutation. It is fiction certainly, of an ur-topia, of anticipation, of the fictionalisation of possibilities [...] of being immersed in the power of web-fiction.

In the novel, Delaume’s narrative voice informs us that this process involved becoming a fictional character, as she “was expelled from the body [she] thought to be [hers] one spongy Friday in 2002,” and it is through the game-body that the narrative will now play itself out (4).¹⁹

Delaume’s meditations on being an avatar, therefore, raise a number of philosophical issues, and the text is not without its references to an impressive list of theoreticians and philosophers, from Wittgenstein and Saussure, to Hegel—“[On] *a les éternels retours qu’on mérite*” (35)—Levi-Strauss and Derrida. As she hints in the text, language, and particularly the strange idiom of the Sims, is always already a language game and therefore, inherently ludic. This, of course, echoes Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*, where he explains that language is a series of “speaking activities” called language games, including giving orders, making up stories, translating from one language into another, as well as asking, thanking, cursing, greeting and praying (23). The language of *The Sims* however, Delaume

tells us, consists of “sonorised words, word images and written language,” which are in no way related to one another either through “an acquaintance of signifier/signified, or by phonographic clusters, or other monemic weaving” (46).²⁰ And while the Sims put no stock in the Saussurian model, their language is “never an event. Just a repetition,” so that Derrida’s notion of writing as event also has no currency here (58). The language game the Sims play is one of “combo tossed recurrent concatenations, country cooking, aleatory cat cancans” (43), and the Sims don’t care if “Lévi-Strauss would have found their tropical dialect sad” (46).²¹

Likewise, subjectivity for a Sim is all about being part of a game, indeed being the game itself. We are the point of the game, Delaume writes repeatedly, and therefore “ontologically egocentric” (36).²² As the game and the point of the game, “the Sims are virtual and like to remember it,” because their “bodies and their environment may be suspended, [may be] fluid or accelerated [...]” and for Delaume, this remodeled subjectivity is in many ways superior (38, 28).²³ In her other life, she was “coiled on the other side of the mirror. Behind, lost without the tain, I observed your lies, cute arrangements with truth. Little arrangements with death” (115).²⁴ The Sims, on the other side, “have no need for evil. We ignore the death drive and even more, murder. We are atrociously well-mannered” (41).²⁵ Therefore, she asserts, as simulations of virtual life, “we live more, much more than you” (28). And just as the book has to be flipped over to be read, she closes the novel by reversing all of our standard notions of being:

In the beginning was the Word, Fiction will be the end. [...] It is you who are the sons of Fiction. Look at yourself and accept: you will see that you don’t exist. Look at us and understand: we are the solution. We are the Sims. And you are our stakes (28, 116).²⁶

Moreover, because the game becomes both Delaume and her story, she attempts to render the bodily experience of narrative on the virtual landscape in number of ways. As we have seen, she experiments with language to produce a sensation of Jakobsonian *ostranenie*, or strangeness, thereby textually reproducing at least some aspects of the game world of *The Sims*. Furthermore, the text is intermingled with images, which not only makes inroads into the subversion of the word/image divide, but creates readerly difficulty that requires non-trivial effort to traverse. This is to say that while the text is not digital, it is thoroughly ergodic, and I think that Chloé Delaume’s novel effectively remediates at least some of the game experience on which it is based. Whether or not her entire body was actually engaged in writing *Corpus Simsi*, readers are asked to believe. Her bizarre use of the French language, the intercalated images, and awkward yet sensual binding, impose a degree of difficulty and produce, in the reader, the sensation of kinaesthesia of which Andrew Darley wrote.²⁷

If this novel does all of these things, then it also answers to Eskelinen’s notion of the *configurative* imperative, since readers have to configure the text in order to

grasp what Delaume, on her website, calls, “the fictionalisation of possibilities [...] of being immersed in the power of web-fiction” (sic). In any event, I think it’s abundantly clear that the text makes more demands on the reader than just the interpretative imperative, and that the nature of this activity is something other than simply hermeneutic. To return to the question I raise in my title—can a body tell a story?—I would say, yes, and I would hasten to add that bodies can also be engaged in reading a story.

To conclude more generally on the narratology/ludology debate, I believe that negating the long history of work on the relationship of literature and play, game and narrative, could prove every bit as stultifying to the study of games as ludologists have claimed that narratology has been. Studies of games and literature such as Peter Hutchinson’s *Games Authors Play*, Robert Detweiler’s work on games in American literature, or David Bell’s *Circumstances: Chance In the Literary Text*, could form the basis for new and important research in the expanding field of game studies. After all, as Nabokov demonstrated so brilliantly in *Pale Fire*, hermeneutics itself is really a kind of interactive cat-and-mouse game, at least in his hands. This is not to say that the differences between narrative and game should be blithely ignored, but rather, that analyzing their shared characteristics and the extent to which these are shared is a useful exercise. To those who insist that video game narratives will always, per definition, be slight and lacking in depth, and to those who argue that the goal and nature of game-play guarantees that the experience of games and narratives will always remain radically distinct, I would counter that the fat Sim hasn’t yet sung.

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NOTES

- 1 In his article on the narratology vs. ludology debate, Gonzalo Frasca explains that the initial group of ludologists consisted of himself, Eskelinen and Jesper Juul. Since their origin in 2001, the group has had to tone down their polemic considerably, hence when Frasca asked Eskelinen “what he had meant” by the passages cited above, Eskelinen replied that “he was referring to what the focus of game scholarship should be” (Frasca, 5). Although I fail to understand how this indicates a more moderate position on the part of the Finnish ludologist (as Frasca is keen to argue), it does point to the fact that ludologists like Juul and Julian Kücklich are currently seeking more common ground with narratology.
- 2 See, for example, Marie-Laure Ryan’s essay, “Beyond Myth and Metaphor: The Case of Narrative in Digital Media.”
- 3 Here, I am referring to the huge body of work on literature as a form of play or game, published from the 1970s through the 1990s. Authors include Hutchinson, Detweiler, Suits, Bell, Kavanagh and myself, all of whom trace their arguments back to Huizinga, Caillois and Wittgenstein, as well as Derrida. So far, this work seems to have been totally overlooked by people working on game studies.
- 4 MMORPG stands for Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game.
- 5 In his *Man, Play and Games* (1957, 1961), Roger Caillois divided all games into four categories, namely *agon* (contest), *illinx* (dizziness), *mimicry* (imitation), and *alea* (chance). These categories are subtended by two basic attitudes or modes of being: *paideia* (rational), and *ludus* (irrational).
- 6 See Arnaud Jacob’s article, “Chloé in Wonderland.”
- 7 “Cascade en dominos la chute sans pont d’eau ne coule plus sans geysers narratifs [...] sans ce réconfort nous nous vîmes bien loin d’arriver à bon port. Malheur à qui Ulysse proposa le voyage. Je me refuse à toute errance.”
- 8 “Le corps que j’habtais en sage réciténia jouait souvent à des jeux aux multiples supports. De la fiction crémeuse servie sur un plateau. Les fils du Verbe aime ça, plus qu’un divertissement ça leur permet surtout de s’asperger d’histoires sans caindre de s’y dissoudre. Tapie au cristallin j’ai observé des mois les rituels et manèges le dé dit un deux trois prison [...] *la tour prends garde dragons sans maîtres de te laisser abattre* Mademoiselle Rose dans la cuisine avec la clef anglais.”
- 9 According to Aarseth, ergodic literature requires that the reader expend non-trivial effort in order to traverse the text and successfully extract or produce meaning. This can be said of experimental fiction like Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, which forces readers to flip back and forth through the text, as well as hypertext and narrative video games.
- 10 “Des héros littéraires ou no, à l’essence galvaudée à force de lectures épuisantes en pierre ponce.”
- 11 “J’assiste à l’éclosion de ma pensée.”
- 12 “Je suis interminablement un personnage de fiction.”
- 13 “Avant de m’établir à Sim City, j’ai résidé un certain temps dans un corps particulièrement insalubre, mal exposé, très inconfortable et surtout dénué de tout touché esthétique.”
- 14 “Je redoute un instant de rester bloquée là. Dans l’entre-deux. Alice a-t-elle eu peur de demeurer coincée, imprimée à jamais fine, très fine pellicule, sur la vitre de mercure.”
- 15 “Me voir là, noyauter l’antre du didacticiel, overclocker la chance *et le tout sent un goût* ma seconde chance *horrible*, les personnages fictifs y ont droit, toujours, *étrangement* à une seconde chance.”
- 16 “Je suis encore je pense faite parcelles fragmentaires [...] Je suis binaire jusqu’en mon sein” (10, 45). See Martti Lahti’s article, “As We Become Machines: Corporealized Pleasures in Video Games,” particularly 165-169.
- 17 “Les personnages de fiction [...] sont] lisible[s] jusqu’à la lie” (15). “Ce n’est pas un fantasme plié en mimésis qui motive l’utilisateur du logiciel [...] je clique donc je sera” (26).
- 18 “Je suis décomposée en myriades d’écrouelles je suis de bric et vrac je suis éparpillée” (11).
- 19 “J’ai été expulsée du corps que j’avais cru faire mien un Vendredi spongieux de 2002.”
- 20 “Notre langage se compose de trois types de données [...]. Ces trois systèmes sont distincts, nullement reliés. Ni par des accointances signifiant/signifié, ni par des noeuds phonographiques et aurtres tressages de monèmes.”
- 21 “Combo lancé enchaînements récurrents campagne gastronomie chats cancans aléatoires” (43). “J’ignore si Lévi-Strauss aurait pu trouver triste ce dialect tropical” (46).
- 22 “Nous sommes ontologiquement égocentriques.”
- 23 “Les Sims sont virtuels et aiment à le rappeler” (38). “Notre organisme et son environnement

peuvent être suspendus, fluides ou accélérés [...]” (28).

24 “Jadis j’étais lovée de l’autre côté du miroir. Derrière, perdue sans tain, je guettais vos mensonges, mignons accommodements avec la vérité. Petits arrangements avec la mise à mort.”

25 “Nous n’avons pas besoin du mal [...] Nous ignorons la pulsion de mort et davantage encourir la meurtrière. Nous sommes atrocement bien élevés.”

26 “Le Verbe au commencement, la Fiction pour finir” (28). “Vous êtes les fils de la Fiction. Regardez-vous et acceptez : vous verrez, vous n’existez pas. Regardez-nous et comprenez : nous sommes la solution. Nous sommes les Sims. Et vous êtes notre enjeu” (116).

27 See especially pages 145-167.