

This is a book about quests. A quest is a journey across a symbolic, fantastic landscape in which a protagonist or player collects objects and talks to characters in order to overcome challenges and achieve a meaningful goal. This definition draws upon the work of both new media theorists like Espen Aarseth and Susana Tosca and literary critics like Joseph Campbell and Northrop Frye. However, my definition is unique because it seeks to bring together literary and new media theorizations of the quest in a way that can allow designers to create better games. A quest is a middle term, a conceptual bridge that can help to join together many two-part or “binary” pairs that are often considered separately in new media and literary studies. These include:

- game and narrative
- gaming and literature
- technology and mythology
- and meaning and action.

In terms of games and narratives, quests are one way of resolving the debate between “narratologists,” who see games as stories, and “ludologists,” who see games as rule-based simulations. But this debate is starting to wind down, with some factions suggesting that the argument never actually took place because it was always the product of misunderstanding and vague terminology.¹ This book joins the growing consensus that games and narratives are not fundamentally in conflict and can complement each other.

When we view games and narratives as complementary, we will find three related terms in the discussion of quests:

- quests
- quest games
- and quest narratives.

Quests take place in between games and narratives, as well as within games and narratives. Stories about quests, known as quest narratives, constitute an ancient and well-known literary genre. In these narratives, a quest is a structure in which a hero embarks on a journey to attain a meaningful goal. Quest narratives include heroic epics like *The Odyssey*, medieval romances like *Parzival* or *The Quest for the Holy Grail*, and Renaissance allegories like *The Faerie Queene*. Well-known critics of myth and literature have theorized quest narratives as a universal or “archetypal” structure, such as Joseph Campbell’s “monomyth” of the hero’s journey or Northrop Frye’s idea of the quest as the defining structure of romance. More recent narratologists and literary critics, such as Wayne Erickson in *Mapping the Faerie Queen: Quest Structures and the World of the Poem* and Piotr Sadowski in *The Knight on His*

Quest, have extended understandings of the spatial and temporal patterns of the quest through sophisticated readings of particular narratives.

There is also a shorter but heavily influential history of games that feature quests, or “quest games,” extending from early adventure games like the *King’s Quest* series up until role-playing games like *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* and *World of Warcraft*. In these games, a quest is an activity in which players must overcome challenges in order to reach a goal. When players successfully surmount the challenges of a quest and achieve its goal, the players’ actions bring about a series of events that may comprise a narrative in the process. But quest games and quest narratives are not entirely separate. Because readers of literature have to work to actively interpret a story, there are game-like elements to quest narratives.

Because game designers sometimes draw upon the conventions of quest narratives, elements of quest narratives have also influenced quest games. For example, the early history of tabletop role-playing games and computer role-playing games drew substantially on the work of J. R. R. Tolkien, a professor of medieval literature and languages who modeled his own quest narratives on the medieval literature that he studied. Game designers often cite Joseph Campbell’s “hero’s journey” as a pattern for their games. The relationship between quests, quest games, and quest narratives can be visualized as the Venn diagram below, with “quest games” and “quest narratives” forming two circles with one overlapping portion in the middle that stands for “quests.”

In addition to the usefulness of these three terms in connecting games and narratives, quests have even more theoretical and practical potential to help reconcile meaning and action. So far, the theoretical literature on quests has revolved around a supposed conflict between meaning and action, but I argue this conflict is illusory. In my theory, quests can be used to unify both

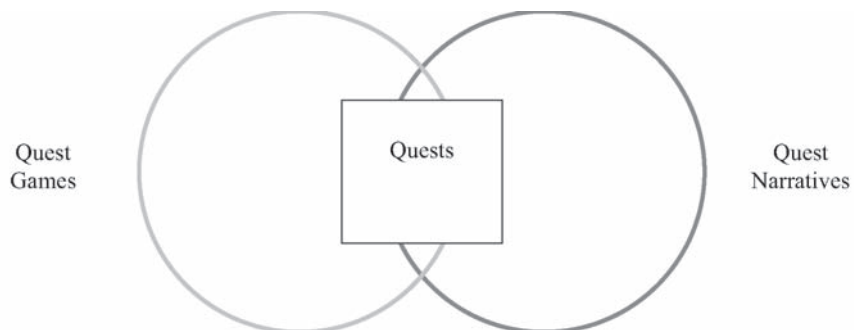


Figure 1. The overlapping relationship of quests, quest games, and quest narratives.

meaning and action. Meaning is at the heart of quest games, and it is a form of meaning that is much closer to literary traditions than other game genres. Quests are about action that is meaningful to a player on the level of ideas, personal ambitions, benefit to society, spiritual authenticity. This is what sets them apart as an especially rich and important gaming activity. Gamers and theorists do not talk about a “quest” to gobble all the white dots in *Pac-Man* or to take out the trash in *The Sims*, just as literary critic W. H. Auden insists that the search for a lost button is not a quest. Instead, designers and players discuss quests to save Princess Zelda, achieve all the virtues of the Avatar in the *Ultima* games, or close the gates to the hellish plane of Oblivion in *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*.

The meanings of quest games emerge from strategic actions, but these actions have thematic, narrative, and personal implications. Salen and Zimmerman have eloquently called for “meaningful play” as the primary goal of game design, but their definition of meaning involves receiving feedback from a system that makes the outcome of one’s choices strategically intelligible (37). In addition to this discernible feedback, I argue that designers can produce meaningful action, as well as helping to bridge the gap between games and narratives, by drawing upon strategies derived from quest narratives, such as medieval romance and Renaissance allegory. In particular, designers can benefit from the tradition of symbolic correspondences that operates in these narratives, in which every space, character, object, and action stands for another idea in a complex array of interrelationships. To function in games, these correspondences should emerge from fun gameplay, discovered through the player’s strategic actions undertaken to overcome challenges and achieve goals.

These principles have educational implications, both for how we teach literature through games and how we teach aspiring game designers to design quests. As an exercise, I advocate transforming quest narratives into quest games through the construction of design documents and the use of construction sets, such as the *Aurora Toolset* and *The Neverwinter Nights 2 Toolset*. Many of the exercises in this book challenge readers to do precisely this. While such exercises are useful in pedagogical terms, this does not mean that all quest games must or should be based on works of literature. Literary quest narratives primarily offer a set of strategies for making more meaningful quest games, and quest games present an array of tools for making literary interpretation both interactive and goal-oriented.

Transforming narratives into quest games allows students to see that meaning is produced by cognitive and imaginative activity rather than passively consumed. In other words, readers shape the meaning of a text in the

way that both designers and players shape the outcome of a game. This goes slightly against the position of many game theorists and game designers such as Zimmerman, who argues that the interactivity of readers who interpret a book differently is distinct from the interactivity that allows a player to change a game (158). This book seeks to bridge the gap between these two types of interactivity, or what Espen Aarseth calls the “interpretative” and “configurative” functions (64–65). At the same time, I want to allow individual players and readers the right to choose the interpretative goals that they pursue according to their own sense of belief and value, rather than suggesting that a book can mean anything or that a game has to be pure simulation without meaning.

In terms of bridging interpretative and game-like interactivity, the closest ancestor to my own project in literary theory is Jerome McGann’s “Ivanhoe Game,” as theorized in *Radiant Textuality*. McGann is an accomplished Romanticist and textual studies scholar who invented this exercise, dedicated to showing students how they can “transform” or “deform” the interpretation of a literary work within the rules provided by the author. McGann’s work is brilliant, but he does not talk much about the actual historical tradition of video games, which means that he has to reinvent the wheel of game scholarship. He also is not interested primarily in having students design games and has instead designed a predominantly text-based game for them. Without working video games and game design theory as models, the Ivanhoe Game does not have particularly goal-oriented gameplay. It is primarily a metaphor—a highly intelligent application of the concept of games that has little relationship to any particular genre of existing digital games. Somewhere in the middle of Salen and Zimmerman’s meaningful play and Jerome McGann’s creative “transformation,” there is a gap between game design and literary history that remains to be filled. Quests are one way of filling it.

Who Is This Book For?

This book is intended for a broad range of audiences, all of whom can take something useful from each of its sections.

- As a bridge-building text, it belongs in the toolkits of both humanities scholars and independent designers.
- New media researchers can benefit from the analysis and modification of the theories of quest narratives.
- Humanities scholars and professors, such as literature teachers wanting to bring computer-assisted instruction into their classroom in an innovative way, can benefit from the book’s combi-

nation of literature, games, and practical classroom exercises. Such professors might consider using this book in a class on the relationship between narratives and games, where it would work well as a practical and accessible textbook. This book includes many tutorials and exercises for use with the Aurora Toolset, which can be purchased with the role-playing game *Neverwinter Nights* for fifteen dollars or less.

- Independent designers seeking to create new, innovative quest games can benefit from the theoretical arguments and tutorials, which present useful skills in the accessible, user-friendly Aurora toolset.

Because the audiences for the book are varied, I have tried to keep overly obscure theory to a minimum, relegating postmodern ideas about language and interpretation primarily to footnotes. Similarly, I have provided historical background on both quest games and quest narratives, assuming that a reader who knows the acronyms for role-playing terminology may not know the plot of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and vice versa. When designers, scholars, and students share knowledge of their respective disciplines and collaborate on focused, unified projects, the results are likely to help everyone involved.

This Book's Structure

After a general introduction to the theory and history of quests, this book contains four chapters about four aspects of quests, each consisting of two subsections. The chapters discuss four theoretical components of quests:

- spaces;
- objects;
- actors;
- challenges.

For each theoretical subsection, there is a corresponding section describing a practical skill associated with this aspect of the quest, with accompanying exercises and suggestions for the use of particular technologies for designing aspects of quests. These four practical sections are:

- level design;
- quest-item creation;
- NPC and dialogue construction;
- event-based programming, or “scripting.”

Understanding the theory of the spaces of the quest can improve the practice of level design, and understanding the role of objects in quest narratives and games can help one to craft interesting treasures as goals or rewards of one's quests. Studying NPCs leads to better quest dialogue, and knowing the central challenges of quests leads to better gameplay in the form of scripting.

These correspondences are deliberate, since a key purpose of the book is to build bridges between the theory of literature and games and the practice of game design, both independently and commercially. There is a tendency on the part of many game designers to view theory skeptically because they consider it to be divorced from practice, like Chris Crawford's diagram of a fractured pyramid in which a base of "Interactive Storytelling" is separated from a broken-off tip contemptuously labeled "AARseth [sic] et al [sic]" (74). Crawford's argument is that game designers often do not think that theory can help them to make a better product—an accusation that is frequently leveled against theorists of the ludology/narratology debate. Yet I would respond that designers do not benefit from ignoring the theory or history of quest games or quest narratives, and they may even lose out significantly by being forced to reinvent the wheel of quest design, struggling with a design problem that has already been solved in the history of quest games or quest narratives.

Some game designers might suggest that understanding the "meaning" of quests is not important to design, but this objection overlooks a fundamental aspect of quest design: the audience of role-playing games and adventure games. A player who goes to a game store and selects a role-playing game or an adventure game over a shooter or a simulation is likely to already have an investment in an epic experience. Supporting this idea, Chris Bateman in *21st Century Game Design* offers an audience-centered approach to game design that draws upon extensive quantitative research of audience preferences to classify marketable games, including three overall genres categories of "quest," "strategy," and "simulation." "Quest" games include the genres of adventure and role-playing games, suggesting that these two genres are linked by a shared central activity. As Bateman argues,

the term quest accurately describes the core value of the games grouped here. All tell stories, and, due to the nature of the medium, these stories tend towards the epic (with more intimate stories better suiting action games). Players expect their quest games to last many hours of play, so stories are often wide in scope. (264)

From Bateman's perspective as a successful designer who has done substantial research into self-reported audience preferences, many gamers prefer a

sweeping, epic experience that can best be described as a “quest game,” which includes a variety of more commonly used genre labels such as “adventure game” or “RPG.” One example of a quest-based RPG that has benefited from its designers’ consideration of the meaning of quests is *Neverwinter Nights 2*. The tagline “everything you do has a meaning” points toward the relevance of meaningful action in a commercially successful RPG. This is a deliberate marketing strategy geared toward the idea that players of quest games buy their games on the basis of meaningful quests.² Such players want a game to give them a sense that their play is part of an epic storyline with consequences that will affect a simulated world positively or adversely. These players will continue to appreciate their favorite quest forms, whether kill quests or fetch quests, but they will also gravitate toward games that use these forms or others in new and interesting ways.

Notes

¹ Gonzalo Frasca makes this argument in “Ludologists Love Stories, Too: Notes from a Debate That Never Took Place” (Frasca, 2003).

² Moreover, reviews of *Neverwinter Nights 2* have suggested that the variety and ingenuity of quests as well as their integration into an engaging storyline is a selling point of the game. For example, the Gamespot review argues that “The quest design is interesting and usually fits well within the context of the story. There are some quests that just require you to find or deliver a certain item, but the required quests are usually much more involved than that. You’ll be asked to do everything from saving damsels in distress to answering riddles and even acting as a trial attorney.”