



Learning (Better) From Stories: Wargames, Narratives, and Rhetoric in Military Education

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ABSTRACT

Wargames have a long history as a military training method. A typical explanatory framework for their efficacy is their narrative aspect. There remain, however, questions concerning the ways narrative functions in context, and how it can be analysed to assess the educational value of wargaming in Professional Military Education programmes (PME). The article offers a case study of how officer cadets employed narrative elements during a matrix game which aims to test their knowledge of peacekeeping operations and to develop their critical thinking and argumentation skills, focusing on how these narrative elements functioned rhetorically. Using positioning analysis buttressed by insights from argumentation studies and expanded with approaches from literary narratology, this study uncovers the extensive and subtle ways players employed narrative persuasion to further their goals, and the extent to which argumentation in matrix games relies on narrative. The study suggests that this aspect of matrix game argumentation has been understudied, and that attention to narrative can have a range of benefits: it helps shed light on how players shift between participatory frameworks or narrative levels in the game, how meaning is negotiated, and how professional reflection and identities are initiated. Demonstrating how subjectivity and experience can be employed as data in military sciences, the study also offers educators an interpretive framework for analysing game interaction. It further suggests that the matrix game's educational value in PME can be extended by incorporating awareness of the rhetorical functions of narrative into the post-game reflection; knowledge of how stories are told could enhance student learning.

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Wargames have a long history as a military training method (for an overview, see, for example, [Smith, 2010](#); [Curry, 2020b](#)) and are currently experiencing a resurgence in popularity as a military pedagogical tool ([Curry, 2020a](#); [Hirst, 2020](#)).¹ The distillation of the dynamics of conflict into a simplified and playable yet realistic model make wargames convenient for bridging the difficult gap between experiential knowledge and theory ([Sabin, 2015](#); [Bartels, 2016](#); [Fjællingsdal & Klöckner, 2020](#); [Curry, 2020b](#); [Sabin, 2015](#)). Their efficacy as a learning tool is also frequently linked to the human predisposition for narrative as a sense-making paradigm (see, for example, [Perla & McGrady, 2011](#); [Curry, 2020a](#)). The centrality of narrative in our lives gives stories and storytelling their explanatory and persuasive force (see, for example, [MacIntyre, 1981](#); [Polkinghorne, 1988](#); [Bruner, 1991](#)). Identifying such general links between narrative elements of games and their effects is not adequate, however, in assessing the educational value of wargaming in professional military education (PME). The overall aim of this article is to add to our understanding of how narrative intersects with rhetoric and persuasion, and thereby how wargames can contribute to military education. It does so by outlining an approach where both the structural elements of narrative and narrative regarded as action function together, using this to analyse the gameplay of a matrix game at the Norwegian Military Academy (NMA).

As research taking a social approach to learning has persuasively demonstrated, it is advisable not to separate the game from how it is played, because meaning-making and learning occur in the use context ([Frank, 2012](#); see also, for example, [Schott & Kambouri, 2006](#); [Piirainen-Marsh, 2012](#)). To appreciate more fully the complexity of connections between narrative and wargaming, and to extrapolate from there to learning, we need to delve into the relationship between the intended learning outcomes of specific educational games and how players employ narrative during gameplay – and for which purposes. Consequently, the article presents a case study of how officer cadets use narrative while playing a matrix game which aims to test their knowledge of peacekeeping operations and to develop their critical thinking and argumentation skills. A matrix game is an argument-based multiplayer roleplaying game based on a written scenario, where players propose actions and present arguments and counterarguments for their success. It is therefore an ideal case for examining the functions of narrative.

I begin by discussing matrix games in the context of research on narrative interaction and rhetoric to outline the theoretical foundation behind my approach, explaining how a set of analytical questions has been distilled from the theoretical approach to form the basis for my analysis of the gameplay. Using positioning analysis expanded with perspectives from literary narratology, this study uncovers the extensive and subtle ways players employed narrative, and the extent to which argumentation and reflection in matrix games rely on narrative. I then describe the case study. The section following that uses selected excerpts of gameplay to discuss the three patterns of narrative usage identified. Finally, I highlight some implications of these findings for military education. I argue that attention to how narrative functions could help explain how players shift between participatory frameworks or narrative levels, how meaning is negotiated, and how professional reflection and identities are initiated. Narrative could offer educators an interpretive framework for analyzing game interaction; however, the key suggestion is that the matrix game's educational value in PME can be extended by incorporating a component on the rhetorical functions of narrative into the post-game reflection. This would provide cadets with meta-awareness of how stories are told and the argumentative functions they have.

2. THEORETICAL APPROACH TO NARRATIVE USAGE IN MATRIX GAMES

Typically, a matrix game narrative is defined as consisting of two parts: the initial or “presented narrative” ([Perla & McGrady, 2011](#)), which is the game scenario as created by the game designers to instruct and orientate the players, and the emergent or co-constructed narrative that is dynamically “developed through the actions, statements, and decisions of the game's participants” during gameplay ([Perla & McGrady, 2011, p. 117](#)). This article focuses on the

¹ This article uses the words “wargame” and “game” interchangeably to refer to wargames with scenarios relevant for the military profession, and both “wargaming” and “gaming” to refer to the action of playing these games. “Gameplay” refers to the unfolding of a game in space and time, an instantiation of a game.

latter; however, rather than examining the overarching, unfolding narrative arc, this is a study of those “actions, statements, and decisions” the players make within the game. Specifically, it examines how players employ narrative elements – when they speak and when they employ visual, textual, and digital resources as part of their representation of their assigned character – to achieve their objectives.

Narrative is a complex concept, and there is no one established method of narrative analysis that fits all purposes; researchers customize methodology, combining insights and conceptualizations from different disciplines (DeFina & Georgakopolou, 2011). A cross-disciplinary approach is particularly relevant for this study, as a matrix game is at its core both a narrative and an argumentative activity. This study repurposes a combination of approaches to narrative from rhetorical narratology and discourse analysis. In the rest of this section, I will elaborate on these theories, what they signify in the context of matrix games, and how they inform my analytical approach; this section culminates in a set of questions that guided the observation and analysis.

As matrix games pivot on the dual points of players manoeuvring to obtain the objectives of their characters through the presentation of plausible arguments and subsequent reflection as professionals with other players, the starting point for this article’s analytical framework is positioning theory as used in discourse analysis. Developed by Harré and others, positioning theory sees meaning as jointly produced in social interaction: we assume and are assigned (deliberately or unconsciously) positions and identities to give meaning to actions and behaviour and make them intelligible within the context of the communicative setting (Davies & Harré, 1990; van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Narratives frequently occur in ordinary discourse as a way of positioning both the teller and the recipient or audience (Herman, 2009, pp. 313–314). Positioning theory is thus a framework for analysing the narratives we tell about ourselves and others. In the context of matrix games, it can aid in the analysis of the narratives players tell when they embody a role and when they relate to each other as cadets playing a professional wargame.

Building on Harré, Bamberg’s (1997) framework of narrative positioning is one of the most influential frameworks for analysing social interaction (Georgakopolou, 2013), and forms the basis of the analytical approach in this article. Bamberg’s positioning model distinguishes between three levels:

Level 1 (L1) – the story (what is told).

Level 2 (L2) – the immediate interactional context in which the story is told (how it is told).

Level 3 (L3) – the wider social context which frames the interaction (identity, social norms, and roles).

As Bamberg (2020) elaborates, positioning takes place on all three levels. Extrapolating his elaboration to a matrix game, positioning theory can thus be used to examine: How players when playing their role position themselves in relation to the other roles within the game narrative (L1); how the players position themselves in relation to their interlocutors (other players and game facilitators) in the gaming situation (L2); and in the next instance it concerns the position of the player in a wider social context, signalling identity, roles or norms on a societal level (L3). In the analysis that follows in section 4, Bamberg’s L1–3 distinctions are used to identify the positions the players take during gameplay. Bamberg’s levels one and two distinguish between the character and the player; level three gestures towards the players’ professional identity.

Positioning theory is frequently employed to study professional identity-formation in a range of professions (see, for example, Christensen et al., 2017). Narrative positioning as outlined above may also offer a response to a recognized challenge in gaming studies, namely, distinguishing between different speaking selves. Is a player voicing their own thoughts or their character’s? And whose objective is in focus when playing – the player’s or the character’s? Frank (2012) considers that one of the main challenges of wargaming as a learning activity is the players’ tendency to adopt “gamer mode” and become absorbed in playing the game and winning it rather than maintaining a professional, critical distance. Similar concerns are frequently raised: the immersive character of narrative may diminish the distance required for professional

reflection and thereby detract from the educational value of wargames, even as narrative is seen as desirable for giving the learning scenario its aura of authenticity (Curry, 2020b; Perla & McGrady, 2011). A narrative analysis approach attuned to language use in interaction can help distinguish between play and reflection modes and how and when players shift between participatory frameworks, i.e. between storyworld and real contexts. Research on situated language use has revealed the complexity of the social interactions and negotiations involved in gaming, including how players orient themselves alternately to the game and to the social gaming context and how they signal these transitions (see, for example, Piirainen-Marsh, 2012; Mondada, 2012). Employing an approach sensitive to language and narrative, then, could extend our understanding of play-reflection challenges such as “gamer mode” or the “warrior trap” (Frank, 2012). It could also expand our notion of what constitutes professional reflection; narrative and reflection may not be in opposition as Curry (2020b), Frank (2012), and Perla & McGrady’s (2011) conclusions seem to imply, as will be discussed below.

Discourse analysis has consistently shown that in locally organized practices – from book club discussions to video and board gaming sessions – participants employ a range of verbal and nonverbal resources to simultaneously engage with and orient themselves to the narrative (textual, visual, material) of the book or game, and to the others in the group (see, for example, Allington & Benwell, 2012; Peplow, 2016; Piirainen-Marsh, 2012; Mondada, 2012). By analysing the verbal interaction in the game – in other words, the players’ utterances (what they say and how they say it) – this analysis will identify how the players signal stance, evaluation, and position. Typical techniques that speakers in locally organized practices use to do this are animation of character voices and reported speech (Piirainen-Marsh, 2012; Peplow, 2016; Allington & Benwell, 2012). Reported speech, which involves a representation of what someone else or we ourselves have said on some other occasion, is one of the most widespread interactional speech patterns (Peplow, 2016; Holt & Clift, 2007). As will also be discussed more fully in the analysis in the fourth section, reported speech can have several functions within the discourse of the group, such as persuasive, evidential, evaluative, or related to animation and dramatization (Peplow, 2016; Holt & Clift, 2007; Allington & Benwell, 2012). The links between reported speech, affect, and veracity or authenticity are also well established (Allington & Benwell, 2012). These techniques index the players’ positioning and thus add nuance to Bamberg’s model.

The distinction Bamberg’s model makes between *what* is told and *how* it is told furthermore corresponds to a basic narratological distinction between story and discourse which is useful for researching the purposes of storytelling in social interaction (see Björninen et al., 2020). The story is the sequence of events (real or fictional) that the characters or agents experience, and the discourse denotes a particular representation of these events by an author in a specific medium (textual, conversational or other) (see Abbott, 2011). In the context of a matrix game, this means that when players relate their moves, they are essentially giving a representation of events that the characters have experienced or are projected to experience, shaping this representation in a way that they believe will resonate with their audience and give their argument force. As formulated by Phelan, rhetorical narratology sees narrative as a communicative act occurring in the “author-audience-purpose nexus,” where the narrative is told with a specific rhetorical objective (Phelan, 2020; Phelan, 2007). Authors (or speakers) use the narrative resources at their disposal (character, events, or temporality, for example) to guide the audience to specific interpretive responses in order to achieve a specific rhetorical objective with this audience (Phelan, 2020). The persuasive force and credibility of the argument is inextricably linked to the narrative’s believability to the audience (Phelan, 2017; see also Olmos, 2015; Tindale, 2017). Supplementing Bamberg’s model with insights from rhetorical narratology allows a more nuanced analysis of *how* the players represent themselves and events; this enables an analysis of narrative positioning as argumentation.

As matrix games are essentially role-playing games (Curry, 2020a), characters and the events they experience (i.e. the story) have been singled out as the indicators of narrative representation and positioning this study focuses on. This further resonates with different models of narrative persuasion processes in games, which agree that character is key to explaining narrative’s persuasive effect on real audiences (Green & Brock, 2000, 2005; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Hoeken & Fikkers, 2014; Bowman, 2018; Bilandzic & Buselle, 2013). Identification with a character can

have persuasive effects by evoking emotional responses in the audience (Hoeken & Sinkeldam, 2014; Hoeken & Fikkers, 2014; Hoeken, Koltzoff & Sanders, 2016; see also Phelan, 2005, 2017). Character has also been shown to influence the audience's causal attribution and effectively bolster scientific argumentation (Walter, Murphy & Gillig, 2017; Phelan, 2017). Adding character to the analytical framework can contribute to our understanding of how narrative argumentation works in matrix games.

Phelan's rhetorical narratology makes a useful complement to positioning theory in this respect, as he provides a model for discussing how characters are represented and used by authors and reacted to by audiences. This model posits that the audience responds to different components of the narrative – mimetic, thematic or synthetic (Phelan, 2007, pp. 19–20). The mimetic component describes techniques that make a story or character realistic to the audience, and the synthetic denotes to the audience that a character or story is an artificial construct. Similarly, viewing a character mimetically is associated with immersion or character identification and activation of sympathy and empathy in the audience whereas the synthetic component is conversely associated with a greater degree of detachment from the narrative and with cognitive responses in the audience (Phelan, 2005, 2007, 2017, 2020; see also Polvinen & Sklar, 2019). The third, thematic, aspect are the ideas, beliefs, or values the character represents. In the context of matrix games, then, Phelan's model can be used to analyse how the players relate to the characters they play and how they signal this in interaction verbally and by employing “dramaturgical effects” such as props (Perla & McGrady, 2011). Analysis of the various strategies for character representation adds further nuance to Bamberg's framework of three levels of narrative positioning.

From this theoretical background, a set of analytical questions was formulated (see also Bubikova-Moan, 2020, p. 6). These questions functioned as indicators for observation of gameplay and focused the analysis of the data material, which consisted of the gameplay interaction: primarily verbal discourse but also the players' use of visual, textual, and digital resources:

1. What linguistic devices are employed to represent characters and events? For example, does the player use reported speech or any visual, textual, or digital resources?
2. How is a player's utterance embedded in the discursive context? Is it, for example, a formal move, a counterargument, or an out-of-turn response?
3. Is the player or character presenting an argument or attempting persuasion through this narrative element? Does it, for example, employ ethos, pathos, or a logos argument in an attempt to influence the audience's ethical, cognitive, or emotional registers?
4. How does the narrative element function as positioning? How does it correspond to Bamberg's L1-3 levels? And how does it correspond to Phelan's mimetic-thematic-synthetic model?

3. CASE STUDY

3.1. BACKGROUND: GAME MONUSCO LEARNING GOALS AND MATRIX GAME FORMAT

The matrix game studied, “Game MONUSCO,” is a standard component in the second-year module “Complex Operations” at the Norwegian Military Academy (NMA) branch of the Norwegian Defence University College (NDUC). Played at the midway point in a three-year PME Bachelor programme and towards the end of “Complex Operations,” Game MONUSCO challenges cadets to a practical application of theories of peacekeeping as a military concept. The motivation behind the game is for cadets to experience decision-making in a complex operations scenario; to develop critical thinking skills; and to develop the ability to make a convincing argument (Rønnfeldt, 2020; see also the article by Roennfeldt, Helgesen & Hoffstad Reutz in this special issue). To increase the learning potential of the game, the cadets are asked to apply two models when formulating their arguments during the game and when they explain or analyse their moves in the “Hot Washup” discussion that follows. Requiring the articulation of parts of arguments, the first model draws attention to the structure of arguments (premise and conclusion); the second model highlights fallacies in reasoning that often underlie tactical decisions (Rønnfeldt, 2020). These models are not standard in matrix games but introduced

with the pedagogical objective of increasing the cadets' meta-awareness of implicit biases and assumptions in decision-making processes (Rønnfeldt, 2020). Overall, the learning goals align with typical arguments currently being put forward for the relevance of wargames for military education: critical thinking, reflection, and decision-making skills are seen as a way of training for and managing the complexity and uncertainties of 21st century security environments (Hirst, 2020; Curry, 2020b; Harrigan & Kirschenbaum, 2016).

This matrix game is an argument-based game in which players, or groups of players, embody a character/role in the game scenario, and in each round propose an action with arguments for why this will succeed. The other players then consider the argument and inject counterarguments before the umpire (a subject-matter expert) assigns the action a number representing the proposed action's relative probability of success in light of the counterarguments presented and the umpire's own experience from similar conflicts. The player then rolls a pair of dice to obtain this number as a minimum to succeed; in this way, the dice add an element of uncertainty or friction to the game.

In Game MONUSCO's contemporary scenario, a fragile peace treaty is in place in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The UN peace operation MONUSCO (Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en République démocratique du Congo) watches over a precarious balance of power between government forces, represented here by the national army, Forces armées de la république démocratique du Congo (FARDC), armed rebel groups (represented here by the Mai-Mai), and local authorities (Rønnfeldt, 2020). In addition to the Mai-Mai, FARDC, and the "village chief" in Tumbula, the roles in the game include the media (represented by the BBC) and the Norwegian mechanized company commander in charge of the MONUSCO Company Operating Base (COB) near Tumbula. Each of these five characters has their own motivations and objectives regarding influence, resources, and security in the local area.

3.2. PARTICIPANTS AND DATA COLLECTION

The 31 participants in the study constituted one half of the second-year NMA class. Due to the Covid-19 restrictions in the Norwegian higher education sector in 2021, this half played the game digitally via an online meeting in Microsoft Teams. Observation also took place via Teams: having introduced myself, I switched my computer's camera and microphone off and became a non-participatory observer.

The cadets were divided into three gaming sessions: Day 1 (five cadets); Day 2 (eight cadets); Day 3 (18 cadets). The disparities in group sizes were caused by ordinary reasons for non-attendance such as illness. Cadets sharing a role (Days 2 and 3) were in the same physical location but interacted with cadets playing other roles and with the game moderators via Teams. The gaming sessions also varied somewhat in duration, as per the game moderators' management decisions: I observed Day 1 for four hours, Day 2 for four hours and Day 3 for six-and-a-half hours of gameplay.

Where there were more players than roles, several cadets collaborated on playing one role. In these cases, the transcript and analysis do not differentiate between players, as the players acted out a previously agreed-upon strategy (the game allows for deliberation before presenting the round's move). In the analysis below, the players are anonymized, referred to only by their character, e.g. "BBC reporter."

3.3. CASE STUDY SET-UP

A small-scale case study format was adopted for this study to examine a complex phenomenon in its natural context (Yin, 2009; George & Bennett, 2005). By analysing how the players employed elements of narrative in the situated context of the game, the study yielded a fine-grained, complex data set that sheds light on the rhetorical functions the players' narrative strategies served. Aggregated over the three gaming sessions studied, the data and analysis gesture towards some characteristics of rhetorical narrative usage with implications for the learning potential of matrix games.

The data collected was a) non-participatory observational data of gameplay and b) multimodal data from the chat. The observational data consisted of my notes of the interaction between

players: verbal utterances such as arguments, counterarguments, reactions, and discussion were recorded verbatim. Supplementary notes recorded non-verbal utterances, the immediate context of interaction (what it was in reaction to), and visual elements such as the use of props (clothing, background images, etc.). The multimodal data from the chat logs (one for each game/Teams meeting) consisted of emojis, images, and so on, in addition to text. The digital medium entailed challenges and opportunities for the players as well as for the researcher. While its affordances represent a unique communication opportunity, significant aspects of social interaction that we rely on to interpret meaning, such as body language, become less prominent, different in character, and more difficult to read. I will return to this issue in the discussion of findings below.

The set of questions formulated from the theoretical approach adopted for this study guided my observation of gameplay and formed the framework for analysis of this data material. These questions are elaborated in section two above. To summarize, these questions concern, first, how the cadets rhetorically positioned themselves on three levels by using elements of narrative: within the game scenario, in relation to their peers in the gaming context, and as military professionals. Second, the questions concern the argumentative rhetorical functions of the narrative elements used. Based on patterns and themes that arose from this analysis, I suggest possible underlying principles of connections between narrative and rhetoric in matrix games and implications for learning.

4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The analysis yielded three patterns of interaction that illuminate both the connections between narrative and rhetorical functions and the players' transitions between narrative levels. The two predominant patterns are implicit argumentation on the L2 level (immediate discursive context; gaming context) through telling a narrative on the L1 level (game scenario), and L1 character positioning employed as both L2 counter-argumentation and L3 reflection (L3 is operationalized as relating to professional identity). The third pattern concerns the players' engagement with the affordances of the digital platform used to play Game MONUSCO. This revealed a complex set of interactions which partly overlapped with the two other patterns, which were predominantly verbal; however, it also complicated those patterns. In what follows, I will discuss these findings in turn via selected excerpts of gameplay.

4.1. PATTERN 1: NARRATIVE AS IMPLICIT ARGUMENTATION

Excerpt 1 (Day 1):

Mai-Mai: "As I experienced some problems doing money collection from the FADRC, I will personally go to the village chief. My childhood friend. Here I would say to him that the FADRC make my life difficult and that we don't need them in Tunbutu, [...] if FADRC attacks one of my soldigers, my whole army will go to war against them [*sic*]."²

Extract from chat log; the posted move was also read aloud as part of the player's elaboration of the move.

In this first excerpt, the Mai-Mai player describes a planned meeting between their faction and the "village chief" from the perspective of the Mai-Mai, using direct reported discourse to give examples of how the conversation would transpire. Reporting imagined conversations is a variant of this common feature of conversation, as previously outlined, and research on conversations in task-based groups such as book clubs or gaming has found that participants frequently draw on this amongst a range of discursive resources to adopt and assign positions (Peplow, 2016; Piirainen-Marsh, 2012). As can be seen in this excerpt, the Mai-Mai player quotes their own speech on an imagined occasion that is temporally and spatially removed from the quoting speech situation (Bamberg's L2) and located in the game world (Bamberg's L1). Significantly, this utterance is not only descriptive but argumentative, too, as the narrative was employed as implicit premise in the player's move to diminish the power of the FARDC. The

² Complex Operations, including Game MONUSCO, is an internationalization module, taught in English. The player quotes are exact and any deviations from standard English reflect both the cadets' English as a second language backgrounds and the unrehearsed and hectic linguistic context of Game MONUSCO.

narrative fragment functioned as the player's explanation of the *reason why* the village chief would aid the Mai-Mai in ousting FARDC from the village, which is the outcome the Mai-Mai sought to achieve with this move. It contains the implicit suggestion or premise that the village chief is willing and able to help his friend, and perhaps has an obligation to do so due to their long personal history ("my childhood friend"). That this move ultimately failed was due to the friction introduced by the dice, not the argument being rejected by the audience of umpire and players.

In accordance with rhetorical narratology's emphasis on the purposive communicative interaction (Phelan, 1996, 2005), this statement also entailed a presentation of character and story intended to be believable to the audience. The player (L2) presented a narrative ending that harmonized with common ideas about bonds of friendship, which arguably contributed to the mimetic and thematic believability of these two narrative elements in the eyes of the audience (L2). In this case, then, the Mai-Mai player drew on evidence of the mutual history between the Mai-Mai and the village chief, established via the presented narrative in the preparation material, and wove this information into a complex narrative scenario of a meeting (L1). The audience is invited to accept the friendship as plausible reason for the successful outcome of the move; in narrative terms, it was plausible that a story centring on the bonds of friendship would end in this way. Put another way, character backstory (L1, thematic, mimetic) is used to suggest a certain narrative outcome (L1 and L2), leaving the audience to "fill in the blanks".

Rhetorical narratology further emphasizes that the purposive narrative communication in the author-audience-purpose-nexus involves techniques for shaping the narrative so that it affects the audience on several levels: emotionally, cognitively, and ethically (Phelan, 2005, p. 19). In this extract, as in the game interactions generally, all three rhetorical forms of appeal – ethos, pathos, and logos – are at work. Logos argumentation is found in the implicit functioning of the narrative, as described above. Presented from the point of view of the character, the imagined scenario invites the audience of players to envision how the village chief would perceive the Mai-Mai commander's request as a reminder of social or moral obligation ("my old friend"). This appeal to mutual history and common cause, strengthened by the repetition of "we" to indicate mutual goals and interests, would function as ethos and pathos appeal in the L1 context the player delineates. On the L2 level, asking the audience to believe in the character's credibility in the conversational context of the imagined scenario, the narrative elements also shape an ethos argument. Together with the promise of armed support in return for help, the player presents a picture of the persuasive impact of a shared history, social obligations, and ties of acquaintanceship in a local community, tacitly asking the L2 audience to accept this line of reasoning. At the same time, even as the move is presented from the character's perspective, there is evidence that the player is not fully immersed in the role: the conditional modal verb "would" signals distance and professional reflection (L2). I will return to the implications of this below.

Excerpt 2 (Day 1):

FARDC: "I slowly but surely extend my reach, controlling more of the city by more patrols and outpost creeps, in an attempt to both show the UN forces that I am a legitimate actor for the support of the civilians, as well as make it more obvious to the traders that I am the dominant power for protecting goods." [sic]

A similar argumentative function can be observed in this second excerpt, which illustrates the rhetorical effect of plot construction and the mutually supportive relationship between verbal narratives and schematic written arguments in this matrix game. The use of phrases compressing narrative time ("slowly but surely") sketched a narrative where FARDC expanded their legitimate control in the local area. This proleptic effect both supported the L1 ethos of the FARDC through their mimetic characterisation as strategic operators with authority and influence, and it created a sense of a plausible – and persuasive – outcome or narrative ending. In this way, the narrative techniques in the player's verbal statement supported the rhetorical strategy of the argument proper, which was posted as bullet points in the chat. Procataleptically pre-empting objections through phrases such as "The chief may of course denounce us, but...", these bullet points in turn buttressed the persuasive force of the narrative presented verbally (Excerpt 2) by reducing the number of possible futures and making the narrative outcome appear logical and inevitable. It is interesting to note that this move was presented entirely from the perspective of the character on the L1 level, without signalling L2 reflection.

As Excerpt 1 has already indicated, pathos was a key feature of narrative usage in this matrix game, and it is important to stress that such appeals are not just a sign of dramatization or player engagement with the narrative framework of the game. They can, however, have persuasive functions: people invoke emotions strategically in everyday conversations. Discourse analytical approaches to rhetoric in social discussions have demonstrated the argumentative functions of emotions. In group discussions about books, for example, emotion is employed as a “warrant” to support the position taken by the speaker (Allington & Benwell, 2012); in this way, the authenticity of the speaker’s response guarantees the validity of the argument. This resonates with how the Game MONUSCO players typically employed pathos. For example, the BBC journalist (Day 2) started one of their turns with the phrase “I am deeply offended by what I perceive as attempts to influence the role of the free press” to respond to a move made by the Norwegian commander which effectively restricted the journalist’s access to information. The L1 characterisation and framing of events employed by the BBC player in this instance was an appeal to appear reasonable to the L2 audience. Thus, this brief introduction of their move functioned as storied justification of the move itself, which was to publish an article heavily criticizing the Norwegian commander’s handling of the security situation in Tumbula: the players used character narration as implicit argumentation.

Pathos argumentation was also employed jointly at the L1 and L2 levels, as described in the excerpt below, which is a further example of the concerted effort of the Day 1 village chief and Mai-Mai players to diminish FARDC’s influence.

Excerpt 3 (Day 1):

Village chief: “I go to the Norwegian commander and explain my concerns regarding the current unrest and possible outcomes of our situation. I fear that the FARDC commander is slowly seizing power of Tumbula and seeks to overthrow the local powerbroker (me) [*sic*]”.

[Extract from chat log; it was also read aloud as part of the player’s elaboration of the move.]

This excerpt describes an attempt at intimating a negative futures narrative, inviting the L1 and L2 audiences to believe that the narrative the village chief presents through this scenario was convincing. The implied argumentation at L2 level nevertheless partly rested on persuasively conveying that the emotional appeal to the L1 audience (“concerns,” “fear”) would signify the seriousness of the situation to the L1 audience, and that the character’s objective would be accomplished as a result. Following Phelan’s model for narrative engagement, we can say that, mimetically, the player sketches the village chief as concerned at observing what he perceives to be an escalating situation, and thematically, the player adheres to the character’s representation in the orientation material as “the local powerbroker.” In both cases, the rhetorical objective is to convey that this particular character would interpret the situation in a specific way and react accordingly.

4.2. PATTERN 2: CHARACTER POSITIONING AS COUNTERARGUMENT AND REFLECTION

Some moves being simultaneously orientated towards both Level 1 and Level 2, like in the above examples, are in line with the findings of other gaming research and show the multilevel communication at work in gameplay (Piirainen-Marsh, 2012). Similarly, L2 player responses to moves made by other players could be orientated towards several narrative levels at once. One such example was when the Day 2 Mai-Mai player attempted – not for the first time that day – to create a similar narrative scenario to the one described in Excerpt 1, where a narrative scene about friendship and obligation created a persuasive argument. However, on Day 2, the FARDC player made a counterargument which centred on the objection “I feel you cannot legitimate every action by saying you saved the village twenty years ago” [*sic*]. Narrative persuasive power or not, overuse of a single resource diminished its rhetorical value with the L2 audience. This comment was addressed equally to the L2 player and the L1 character (both were addressed as “you”), illustrating that communication in this matrix play moved fluidly between the L1 game framework and the L2 gaming setting; between playing the game and reflecting upon it.

As illustrated by the following example, addressing concurrent narrative levels also at times included level 3, which indicates professional identity. Immediately following the village chief's alliance-building move described in Excerpt 2 above, the FARDC player interrupted gameplay with the following interjection:

Excerpt 4 (Day 1):

FARDC [faux-innocently]:³ “We’re not in any way causing problems. It’s as if you’re saying that we’re conducting a local coup.”

Village chief [dryly]: “That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

((General laughter from other players))

Despite not being part of the formal reflection or pattern of moves in the game, but a casual aside, this comment offers insight into how the interaction on the L1 (power struggle between two factions) and L2 levels (alliance building by the players) intersected with reflection. It was presented from the speaker's L2 and L3 positions as a military professional using L1 and L2 character narration and positioning to communicate this analysis. The FARDC player correctly interpreted the village chief's move as being an attempt to impede the FARDC bid for increased political influence at the expense of the village chief and called attention to this. While this comment was presented from the perspective of the L1 character, the tone signalled the player's L2 position, as did the interpretation of the FARDC action as a “coup”. The exchange itself moreover points to a certain level of awareness concerning the challenges of a complex operations scenario like Game MONUSCO represent which signals a professional attitude beyond the immediate gaming scenario (L3), as does the narrative of FARDC as an element of friction which is constructed through this exchange. This brief conversation, then, is an example of “a narrative of self and other(s) being jointly elaborated (or disputed) by participants, via self-positioning and other-positioning speech acts” (Herman, 2009, p. 314). Using the narrative features of the game, the players signalled their affective and analytical stance to the concept being simulated through the game. Moreover, players collaborated (either cooperatively or antagonistically) in the production of a shared professional understanding, in this case of FARDC and their ambitions.

While Excerpt 4 shows only a brief exchange, the fact that there were multiple such instances in the gaming sessions creates a cumulative pattern that could indicate a spontaneously occurring element of professional reflection during gameplay. And while these are the findings of a single case study, it suggests that attention to narrative elements of language in interaction can help shed light on how players shift between participatory frameworks (see e.g. Piirainen-Marsh, 2012) or narrative levels (Phelan, 2005; Bamberg, 1997) and how meaning is negotiated. In turn, this could provide a method for understanding how professional reflection and identities are formed.

4.3. PATTERN 3: RHETORICAL NARRATIVE IN DIGITAL GAMEPLAY

Storytelling practices are shaped by the affordances of the medium through which the story is told. In Game MONUSCO, that medium was a Microsoft Teams video meeting with meeting chat, and the narrative usage was in some respects affected by the multimodality that characterizes digital media: the interplay of different representational modes (of sign systems) such as images, text, and speech within the same medium (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). The Game MONUSCO players used a combination of words (the actions and their elaboration, presented verbally and textually) and visual aids (photographs, props, emojis) to cue inferences about the characters they embodied in the game world, to convey information, signal characterization and affective stance to comments, moves and outcomes of dice throws, and to tell stories that augmented their moves.

Primarily, props appear to have functioned as necessary character representation to identify players as a specific character. While players could equally well have worn a UN badge in a

3 Transcription key:

_ underlining: speaker places emphasis on a word or a phrase

(()): nonverbal communication feature

[]: observer's interpretation of speaker's tone

physical game, the digital medium made using background images of journalists or militias essential for easy identification. In other cases, the props would likely not have had the same effects without the digital medium, such as the effect of the Day 3 player using a child's toy (a fashion doll representing a black man) to portray the village chief character. Only the figure was visible in the frame; the player never appeared on screen. In combination with this player consistently animating the game character's voice and L1 perspective, this appeared to diminish L2 and L3 interaction. In terms of argumentation, shortened discussions may have benefitted the village chief player. For example, when the village chief presented their narrative elaboration of how they would persuade the Mai-Mai to allow UN aid to the village, following Pattern 1 "Narration as implicit argumentation," their argument was not contested by other players.

While it was not possible to determine a specific reason for the relatively brief verbal interactions between this player and the others by observation, it is possible that the village chief player's animation of the character perspective on the L1 level was interpreted negatively as what Frank (2012) terms "gamer mode" and lack of L2 professional attitude. It is equally possible that the prop usage made it more difficult to address comments at the correct narrative level or position. This conclusion is substantiated by how some cadets on Day 3 perceived the limited opportunity to read body language as a drawback because there was "more fiction in the digital format."⁴ [In the] physical [we] could look at faces etcetera." While this was a particularly elaborate case of prop usage, it corresponds to the overall pattern of gameplay: On Days 1 and 2, verbal narrative elements dominated. On Day 3, however, presentation of character via multimodal affordances was more prominent. The fact that two different playing styles could be identified suggests that the digital medium could have significant effects on narrative usage and consequently on argumentation, reflection and learning in matrix games.

The players also took advantage of affordances that were particular to the semiotic environment of the game medium (Teams). First, emojis were posted in the chat on all three days, though mainly on Day 3, to signal stance and reactions to moves, arguments and outcomes: approval, amusement, and anger/frustration. The pattern of application could indicate that emojis were used to signal affective reactions from the perspective of the character (L1) and, sometimes, from the player behind the character (L2). This would suggest that such affordances potentially adhere to the rhetorical narrative patterns elaborated above. However, these are uncertain conclusions due to the lack of contextual evidence (verbal or physical interaction), which made it difficult to identify narrative level with any degree of certainty.

Second, players used graphic elements that increased mimesis and illustrated and/or expanded on the move made. This was limited to fake newspaper articles by BBC journalist players, which, as evidenced by the articles posted on Day 3, could form part of a complex game strategy. Their articles were elaborate, with headline, image, caption, and even included the start of the actual text of the article, thus clearly narratively reinforcing the moves made and constituting a potentially significant rhetorical factor in the game. However, their effect as narrative arguments was diminished by the rapid pace of the digital game.⁵ By the time an article had been created and posted in the chat, gameplay had moved on and the article consequently had little immediate rhetorical effect as support for the BBC's move. It could still, of course, affect the other players' perception of the situation, but this was difficult to gauge. For digital affordances to have optimal rhetorical effect, the pace of the game needs to be slower.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR MATRIX GAMES IN PME

A primary finding of this case study is the extensive and varied persuasive work done by narrative elements in matrix games. This work remains under-communicated in discussions of the educational utility of matrix games. It is not unexpected to find evidence of narration in what is essentially a role-playing game (Curry, 2020a). However, what this study points to is the extent and manner in which narrative is entwined with argumentation and that much of

⁴ This player had also participated in a physical instantiation of the game earlier in the week.

⁵ On average, a digital game was noticeably shorter than a physical game (Hoffstad Reutz, personal communication, 28 May, 2021).

the persuasive power of narrative is unacknowledged because the argumentation takes place implicitly: it stems from the elaboration of formal arguments by players playing characters who contextualize the actual moves with a range of narrative techniques. Consequently, it is possible that the formal models of argumentation inherent in the game format and those additional heuristic models intended to enhance Game MONUSCO learning goals only capture part of the argumentative action taking place during gameplay. There is arguably unrealized learning potential in matrix games.

While the current reflection and argumentation models in Game MONUSCO are designed to raise the cadets' awareness about making unwarranted assumptions in decision-making, there is no similar model aimed at helping cadets unpack the persuasion carried out through narrative positioning. Yet one of the major recognized educational advantages of matrix games is this human interaction element, which is seen to contribute to the realism required of a military wargame (Perla, 1990; Perla, 2016). A reflection model aimed at highlighting how that interaction functions in terms of argumentation could therefore strengthen the game's educational utility.

Curry (2020b) argues that "game play in matrix games requires a balance between analysis and narrative" (p. 48); in other words, between reflection and play, a conclusion supported by other studies of military gaming (Frank, 2012). What this study has uncovered is that micro-reflections occur during gameplay and that narrative and analysis therefore may not necessarily be opposites. In conjunction with this study's findings regarding the undisclosed argumentative power of narrative elements in matrix games, it is possible that introducing further measures that increase player awareness of processes of argumentation can enrich the learning potential in matrix games. One method could be to add a component to the debrief which included the following questions: What was the story being told? What was the strategic value for the speaker? How was it told to give this effect? How was it interpreted by others? Answering such questions could provide cadets with additional training in how to operate and orient themselves in complex operations, in line with the learning objectives of the module which stress critical thinking and adaptivity.

This study of wargaming has also demonstrated one way of how subjectivity and experience can be employed as data to aim for insights that have real-life implications, as Bamberg (2020) has put it. Keeping in mind the distinction between different types of player engagement made in gaming research (Frank, 2012; Mondada, 2012; Piirainen-Marsh, 2012), I suggest that studies of wargaming would benefit from a broader investigation of character and immersion. Positioning analysis and rhetorical narratology allow us to go beyond the local conversational situation examined and explore what Bamberg (2020, p. 252) concedes is "the arguably trickier problem" of how, through repeated narrative positioning practices, "narrators position a sense of who they are to themselves." This study has suggested that there were tentative signs of professional reflection taking place throughout gameplay. Methods that identify distinct levels of narrative and focus on the interactional context offer an approach to differentiate between the various participatory frameworks in which the players operate. For educators, such methods can be potentially useful as further ways of assessing the development of professional reflection and whether a particular matrix game has been constructive and helped cadets achieve the set learning goals. However, this study has also revealed the complexity of the interactions in a digital medium, and further refinement of methods for capturing and analysing these interactions and the simultaneous and fragmented narration taking place online is required (see Mäkelä, 2019; Georgakopolou, 2007, 2013).

To improve the educational value of wargames we must "tell better stories", as Perla & McGrady (2011) argue. My agreement with this conclusion stems from a slightly different focus than Perla & McGrady's (2011) position, which centres on the realism of the narrative being the source of self-transformation for the players. Accuracy and realism are undeniably important in games that aim to convey realities of the military profession. However, if narrative is regarded as an action, as it is in rhetorical narratology, the mimesis of the presented narrative is important not simply as an end goal but for what it represents in terms of the storylines it can enable or disable: in other words, what it allows the players to do (see Georgakopolou, 2003). As suggested by Georgakopolou (2013), an underrepresented area of positioning analysis is what kinds of stories are available or not in what kinds of contexts. This is relevant for wargames

as well. Perla & McGrady (2011, p. 127) continue their recommendation: “We need to help our audiences learn better how to learn from those stories”. This study indicates that to learn better from matrix games, players would benefit from understanding how stories are told.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article has examined the rhetorical functions of narrative elements in matrix games through analysing the interactions in Game MONUSCO. It has sought to extend positioning analysis models by integrating tools and terminology from discourse analysis and narratology centring on the notion of narrative as discursive rhetorical exchange. Differentiating between narrative levels, it has shown how narrative performed several persuasive functions enhancing the players' moves and was central in reflective discursive moments during gameplay.

Returning to the case study's implications for PME, the article has suggested that raising awareness of how players use elements of narrative to tell strategic stories to position themselves in the game could enhance the learning objectives of this specific module and of matrix games in general. In extension, it suggests that cultivating this awareness of rhetorical narrative positioning has value for officers in the field, where understanding positioning is crucial.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

The study complies with standards of research involving humans as subjects. Written informed consent has been obtained from the participants in the study, and written permission to carry out the study has been obtained from the NDUC research approval board.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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