Hello everyone, and thanks for coming! My name is Cody Mejeur, I'm currently Visiting Assistant Professor of Game Studies at University at Buffalo and my work is primarily with queer and feminist narrative in video games. My talk today is titled "Neuroqueer: Contextualizing Narrative Through Embodied Experience."
As Sue Kim noted at the Narrative 2018 conference, the field of narrative theory is long overdue for a reckoning with its lack of diversity and its frequent silence on issues of race, gender, and sexuality in favor of supposedly neutral, universal qualities of narrative (Hogan 2010). To be sure, the recent works by scholars such as Warhol, Lanser, Donahue, Ho, and Morgan that structure the questions of this panel have provided rich sites for that reckoning to begin. However the various narratologies present in such work, such as queer, feminist, and cognitive narrative theories, rarely speak to one another, and when they do they do so on the level of cultural narratives or affective stances, such as Kim’s work with narrative and anger (2013).
A Potential Answer: Embodied Experience

- Focusing on narrative as embodied experience demands attention to how bodies are different
- Cognition is embodied, so is narrative.
  - Why when talking about embodied cognition do we rarely (if ever) discuss identity and power?
  - How is how we think affected by our positionalities and experiences, even on a neurological level?
  - Danger in naturalizing or essentializing difference here. But none of this is natural, essential, or determined.
- Challenges supposed “cognitive universals,” centers difference
- Makes narrative theory directly attendant to lived experiences and realities

This paper contributes to efforts to bridge and contextualize narrative theories by proposing that focusing on narrative as an embodied experience can reveal new ways of accounting for difference in narrative—ways to bring different narratives theories together, and to understand how we all use and understand narrative differently based on our embodied positions within systems of power.

Focusing on the body means focusing on how bodies are different, and this has been a major shortcoming in a lot of cognitive work. But neuroqueerness and embodiment together are a starting place for challenging universal, normative, dominant views of narrative and cognition.
Specifically, Neuroqueer

- “Broad range of interrelated practices”; “social identity” (Walker 2015) at intersection of queerness and neurodiversity
  - Intersectional
  - Intentional
- Sean Yeager: what does it mean to theorize/narrate from a neuroqueer position of gender-fluidity?
- Embodiment
  - Characters and Narrators
  - Readers, Viewers, Players, etc.
  - Neurodiversity, plasticity, fluidity

Credit: Melanie Yergeau, Ibby Grace’s NeuroQueer Blog

Sean Yeager’s question: what does it mean to theorize/narrate from a neuroqueer position of gender-fluidity?
3. My answer: focus on embodiment. And not just of characters and narrative representations, of the readers, viewers, players, etc. who are actively participating in the narrative.
   1. Focusing on the body means focusing on how bodies are different, and this has been a major shortcoming in a lot of cognitive work. But neuroqueerness and embodiment together are a starting place for challenging universal, normative, dominant views of narrative and cognition.
Novels construct minds for their readers, and games similarly construct minds for their players, though with notably different tools. As examples of this, I’m going to show screenshots from SOMA (2015). This uses a first-person camera in order to present the illusion that the player is the player character in the game, and what I’d like to explore today is how this illusion constructs a mind for the player, and, complicatedly, the player character. The first-person camera is the primary vehicle for this process, as it establishes what Alexander Galloway has described as a subjective shot used to create “mental affect” (46), convincing the player in this case that they *are* the player character, Simon Jarrett, trapped in an underwater research base in the future. Where the player directs the camera using the controller is where Simon looks and moves, and the audio that the camera picks up is what both the player and presumably Simon hear. In other cases the first-person camera can be used to create drunk and hallucinatory scenes, detachment or distancing (47), or to focalize a scene through a particular character’s perspective. In each case, the first-person perspective encourages an identification with the player character, and leads the player to think and act like the player character in the game, or vice versa, or a mixture of the two. The player is virtually embodied as the player character and interacts with the environment through them. One can see this mingled, constructed mind in how the player perceives, solves, and overcomes obstacles in the game using their experiences as the player character.
What interests me is the possibility of queering these processes, of queering the minds that games construct by disrupting, warping, or differing the player’s interface with the game. Some games do this already, though admittedly in limited ways. In SOMA, a first-person narrative survival horror game, the player plays as Simon Jarrett, a man who undergoes an experimental brain scan after a car crash and wakes up almost 100 years later in an underwater research facility that is the last bastion of humanity after a catastrophic event destroyed most life on the planet. SPOILER: As he explores the facility, he gradually learns that his consciousness has been transferred to a mechanical body, and comes to terms with the fact that humanity remains only in the form of these consciousness files. The player regains health in the game by having Simon interact with health pods, but when they do they lose control of the player character and their screen is filled with spindly black lines that distort their vision and disrupt their interaction with the gameworld. These moments queer the interface, and in so doing the relationship between player and player character and their virtual embodied cognition in several senses. First, they break the connection between player and player character, disrupting the player’s agency and forcibly separating their mind from the player character’s. The player is still playing the game, but cannot interact with the game as they normally would. Second, the interface becomes blurred and distorted, and the normally workable or transparent interface becomes an unworkable or apparent one. This effectively breaks the illusion of immersion and identification between player and player character, making them aware of the fact it was an illusion in the first place. Finally, these moments are queer in the sense that they defy and deviate from the expectations created throughout the rest of the game—they are moments of breakage, where
something is clearly not usual or operating normally. All of this is incredibly limiting, even harmful, in a couple of senses. First, the embodied cognition of games is extremely reliant on visual senses, though there are a couple examples of games such as Blindscape that challenge that trend. More importantly, these moments of queer cognition in games are almost always presented as moments of breakage that inspire fear and frustration—things aren’t working as they should normally, so the player has to set them “right”. To put it another way, these moments of potential neuroqueerness are also moments of monstrosity, and it is therefore no surprise that we see them most commonly in survival horror games like SOMA and Amnesia.
Where does SOMA leave us?

- Continues problematic representations of embodiment and minds.
  - Non-normative=monstrous, fearful, dangerous
- But also a potential: cognition is constructed.
  - It’s an interface that can operate differently. And it can lead to queer forms of embodiment and engagement with the world around us.
- Neuroplasticity, neurofluidity
Beyond providing a site for bridging different narratologies and highlighting the critical power of difference, neuroqueer can further contextualize narrative theories and the values that have structured their development. For example, while neuroqueer narratives like SOMA highlight neurodiversity, gender, and sexuality, they are often noticeably silent on other intersecting identities such as race. This mirrors a similar silence in fields like cognitive narrative studies, queer studies, and disability studies, all of which emerged in the last few decades of the 20th century and predominantly focused on the experiences of white men. Yet by contextualizing narrative as embodied experience, we can better prioritize and account for difference and the effects that systems of power have on how we make and engage with narrative texts. And focusing on the body helps ensure this isn’t just a scholarly, theoretical pursuit, but rather that we are attendant to the lived realities and experiences of both queer and/or neurodivergent peoples.

https://theaspergian.com/2019/07/30/an-introduction-to-neuroqueer-theory/
Conclusions: A Neuroqueer Narratology

- Embodied Cognition, Embodied Contexts
- Any interpretation of narrative must ask:
  - Whose bodies, knowledges, thoughts, and feelings?
  - Who is doing the interpreting and constructing of the narrative?
  - How might the narrative be shifted, changed, reconfigured differently based on different lived, embodied experiences?
- Any meaning created and interpreted in narrative is in relation to particular positionalities and experiences
- Not relativism or essentialism. Radical relationality that resists:
  - Enforcing sameness
  - Essentializing difference
  - Erasing inequalities/unjust systems of power

A neuroqueer theory of narrative would demand context of bodies in particular positions in systems of power: any interpretation of a narrative must ask, whose bodies, knowledges, and feelings? Who is doing the interpreting and constructing, and how might the narrative be shifted, changed, reconfigured differently based on different lived, embodied experience? No reading of course can speak to all of these possibilities, but the point is that any meaning created and interpreted must be understood not as universal but in relation to particular positionalities and experiences.

2. This is not radical relativism or essentialism. Rather, it’s radical relationality. One that resists attempts to enforce sameness, essentalize difference, or erase unequal and unjust systems of power.
Thanks! Let’s Talk!

Cody Mejeur
Visiting Assistant Professor of Game Studies
University at Buffalo
@cmejeur
codymeje@buffalo.edu