Forbidden Story: Narratological Analysis of *Forbidden Siren* for the PlayStation 2 Console.

Six generations of game systems have come and gone since the first home consoles appeared in the 1970s, and the games themselves have advanced in tandem. As this media has evolved into a worldwide industry, the need to study it academically has arisen; but a conflict has emerged between those who try to apply classical narrative theory, and those who believe that narrative is fundamentally unimportant to such study. It is my intention to argue in favor of a narratological approach by way of NJ Lowe's model of plot as a game. Lowe uses the analogy of a board game to present a vocabulary of concepts for use in discussing the narrative worlds of Classical texts; I apply this theory to the PlayStation 2 game *Forbidden Siren*, a survival-horror game which has some intriguing traits that set it apart from many simpler games, such as multiple endings, multiple characters, and the ability to see through the eyes of enemies and allies at will. Episodes of the game are played out in a non-linear fashion, such that episodes played sequentially may occur simultaneously or in reverse order within the game world, and actions undertaken by the player in one episode can have consequences (both positive and negative) in subsequent episodes. The intent of my paper is not to demonstrate the superiority of narratology to ludology, but to demonstrate that a theory of narrative designed for literature can be successfully applied to a video game text.

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Since the first home consoles appeared in the 1970s, video games have entertained and fascinated young and old alike; six generations of hardware (McDougall and O'Brien 49) have come and gone from the early knob-based controls of Pong to the Nintendo Wii's motion sensitive control system, and the games themselves have advanced in tandem, moving from simple cartridges to CD's, and finally to DVD's. Even the once-simple sports simulator has evolved into a complex, 3-D environment where players carefully weigh statistics and strategies before playing out their fantasies on the field, complete with artificial intelligence commentary. Millions of people explore fantasy worlds or live out second lives online, and every new release cycle brings adaptations, sequels, updates and new worlds to explore. No longer content to simply represent events or slap a story onto a series of mini-game tasks, video games now seek to put the player within the game, an active participant in the story being told. As this media has evolved into a worldwide industry, the need to study it academically has arisen; but how do we begin to study and discuss such a widely varied collection of texts? A conflict has arise between those who try to apply or adapt classical narrative theory to video games, and those who, like Espen Aarseth, believe that while "the narrative elements of games are certainly there for us to identify . . . but they aren't very important," (McDougall and O'Brien 23) and that players may not even notice them. The alternate viewpoint, often called 'Ludology,' is to study play as an act; as Julian McDougall and Wayne O'Brien summarize:

> Ludologists argue . . . that the game player is doing something fundamentally different to the film viewer or novel reader. She is playing, not just watching or reading, so our

> analysis must begin with this distinction. Moreover, she is controlling the flow of time, whereas a TV viewer . . . is constrained by pre-ordained editorial decisions. (23)

As a video game player, I have seen this split in myself; I have played many games that told a story, but I am often forced to ignore or at least temporarily disregard the story in favor of mastering a series of controls and actions in order to progress. I don't believe that all games are narratives any more than I believe that all actions are narratives, but I believe that some are, and it is my intention to show this using N.J. Lowe's model of plot as a game. Lowe used the analogy of a board game to present a vocabulary of concepts, divided into three broad categories, for use in discussing narrative worlds. These categories are Shape, Population and Rules. Shape means the structure of the world, in terms of time and space. Population refers to the characters and their actions within that space. The Rules are the external regulations and guidelines of the narrative world, and especially the conditions under which the conclusion is reached.

As an example video game text, I have chosen the *Siren*, released for the PlayStation 2 in 2004. *Siren* is part of the Survival Horror genre of games, in which a user[1] "leads an individual character through an uncanny narrative and hostile environment where the odds are weighed decidedly against the avatar." (Hand 117) The story revolves around the fictional Hanuda Village, isolated in the mountains of Japan. An ocean of red water has surrounded the town, trapping locals and visitors alike, and a strange siren-like sound has compelled most of the villagers to immerse themselves in it, becoming zombie-like creatures called Shibito who attack

[1] Because N.J. Lowe uses the term 'Player' as part of his narrative structure, I will instead use the Ludological term 'User' to signify the real-life human playing the game.

the handful of survivors on sight. Shibito cannot be killed, only knocked down for a period of time; combined with the weapons and supernatural abilities some wield, they can quickly become dangerous foes. Fortunately, the user has an edge – an ability called Sightjacking. By holding down a specific button on the controller, the character being controlled will "close their eyes;" this is depicted on-screen as static. By moving the control stick around in a circle, the user can see through the eyes of the Shibito, or most other characters in the level (generally limited to computer-controlled allies who must be lead and protected). When Sightjacking, on-screen indicators show where the user's character and any allies are relative to the Shibito, and track the Shibito as it goes about its business; some act as stationary sentries or snipers, some patrol a set path, and some perform routine tasks such as gardening until they are disturbed. By watching through their eyes, the user can create a mental map of their movement, using this information to time their progression through the level for minimum visibility and maximum stealth. This ability is not without its price; as the character's senses are elsewhere, they are completely vulnerable, unable to move or defend themselves.

The goal of the game is to lead the ten playable characters through a series of episodes as they seek to survive and escape. Each of these episodes has a primary objective and a secondary objective. These secondary objectives often serve to unlock objectives or provide easier solutions for other characters later. In addition, there are 100 "archive items" scattered throughout the game, which provide a more in-depth view of the game world. Like many survival horror games, *Siren* has more than one ending, and the user's actions and solutions dictate which one will be displayed. I have chosen to use this particular game not because it is an easy to read text, but because it displays several traits which set it apart from many simpler

games, such as multiple endings, multiple characters, and the ability to see through another's eyes. Lowe developed his model to accommodate "classical" narratives, and although I do not believe that *Siren* can be said to fall into this category, I believe that Lowe's model can still reveal the narrative energy present in the game world.

The beginning of the primary narrative is marked by the narrative clock, which likewise ends when the primary narrative does. Anything falling outside of this span is considered Secondary narrative. When Frodo needs to know what happened to Gollum in Mordor, Gandalf simply reports what he knows; the narration doesn't abruptly shift in time and location. Secondary narrative can be used to present relevant information at almost any time within a primary narrative without making it a part of the primary narrative itself. When primary narrative ends, so does the narrative clock; although the story may continue on to the Grey Havens, the central tale of the narrative has already closed. Endings present a unique complication in how they are handled; although they can simply stop short when they are done, more commonly they are hinted at within the narrative itself, foreshadowed to heighten the drama. Lowe offers two ways in which a satisfactory ending can be achieved. First, a story can have an absolute deadline; once a certain amount of time passes, the narrative ends, ready or not. In this case, the uncertainty of the narrative focuses on HOW it will end. As we run out of pages or minutes, we don't doubt that the narrative will end, only the way in which it will. More common is the Conditional ending; the narrative ends when a certain set of conditions are satisfied. These are discussed in more depth later, as endgames. In addition to the overall start/stop of the narrative, these same techniques can be used to segment primary narrative

into episodes, appropriately likened to computer game levels by Lowe (39). Here, they represent more a change of position than an actual beginning or ending.

Lowe (36-41) refers to something called the narrative clock, which "registers the difference between what we might call 'story time' and 'text time'." (36) Story time is the internal chronology of the narrative, what Monika Fludernik (who uses the same term) describes as "the time represented on the story level (in days, months and years)." (157) Text time is used by Lowe to refer to the amount of time spent in narrating, specifically measured in the "yardage of physical signs from which the text is constructed, irrespective of the pace or sequence of their processing by a reader." (36) Simply put, no matter how long a viewer spends on watching the first hour of a film, one hour of film time has elapsed. The same holds true for pages of a book, scenes of a play, or levels of a video game. Both the story and text times generally act as time does in the real world – they are fixed, and move in one direction. By contrast, the narrative clock is highly mutable, able to move at varying speeds, jump around in chronology, or even go in reverse. Most importantly is that the narrative clock measures the passing of the primary narrative, the "part or parts of the story which the reader is invited to experience analogically in time." (Lowe 37) The narrative clock serves six functions within a story: marking the beginning and ending of the primary narrative, marking off episodes of narrative, tracking elapsed time and rate of passage, and ordering sequences within the larger timeline.

Siren's primary narrative takes place over a span of three days, which makes identifying the story time simple. Outside of this time span, and thus outside of the primary narrative, are

historical video sequences (secondary narratives) related to the previous earthquake and the original coming of the god Datatsushi, as well as post-ending videos featuring the fates of various characters within the game world. The text time in *Siren*, and indeed many games of the survival horror genre, is variable; there are varying levels of completion that can be attained, most notably with defeating Datatsushi, who can either be simply defeated or, with a little extra time and effort (and use of the Sightjack ability), be ritually beheaded, invoking a more complete ending for the narrative. The user can navigate between episodes from the "Link Navigator," a visual representation of their progress through the game, that displays episodes unlocked, episodes in which one objective has been completed, and episodes in which both objectives have been completed; this makes it a relatively simple task to keep track of one's place in the narrative when the episodes are not played chronologically[2].

The narrative clock begins running when Kyoya Suda, the main character and "game ender," stumbles across Miyako Kajiro and her dog in the woods; later, he interrupts an occult ceremony, runs, and encounters a crazed police officer, and it is during his flight that the user is given control. Although we are treated to several videos before this time, and later cut scenes will flash back in time from this point, it is the beginning of the primary narrative; this is made explicit by the game's internal clock, which labels this episode as "Kyoy Suda – Upper Arata / Mana Stone - Yesterday – 23:04" The narrative clock ends, three days later at "Kyoya Suda – Inferno - Day 3 - 23:03", with Kyoda's defeat of Datatsushi. Although there is a set span of story time, the text time is not fixed – leaving a character standing in a safe place for days on end will

[2] User Egomaniac's gallery of screen shots and video walkthroughs is very helpful for visualizing the game's structure; his videos are listed both chronologically, and in the order they are played.

not result in a win or loss[3]; the ending is conditional, based on the user meeting certain condition within the endgame period (which will be discussed in detail below).

Siren is structured as a series of episodic levels, each with its own internal beginning and ending, based on specific conditions being fulfilled. These episodes are indicated first by a change of character, second by a change of scene, and third by a change in time; this information is displayed on-screen at the beginning of an episode, along with the primary mission objectives and their status. Completing these objectives is the signal for "users to move to their starting positions for the next phase of the game;" (39) at which time the game takes the user to the next dictated level. While passing from one level to another, the game changes the environment to match the time at which each episode takes place, adjusting the lighting and sound to create a sense of *when*. The only real 'routines' in the game are the menial, repetitive paths and tasks followed by the Shibito, which are only narratively relevant as constraints on the user's progress through the level. As the game progresses, a grid is established, with the help of the Link Navigator, which allows us to form connections between episodes.

As well as marking the beginning and ending of narration, the narrative clock helps to mark the passage of story time, using several different techniques to position the reader within the story. Lowe (39-40) identifies three techniques of particular note, the first being to place us in terms of *when* we are in the story; day or night, ambient lighting, and so on, arguing that

[3] This contrasts with games such as *Dead Rising*, in which the full narrative time can pass regardless of user action – if Frank West, the main character, is left standing on the roof for six real-time hours (time passes at a rate of 12 hours of game-time for every hour of real-time), his ride will return to pick him up whether or not any missions have been completed.

these details help the story to seem more true. A second usage of the clock is to make use of character routines, allowing the reader to anticipate what is to come based on where we are in the timeline. Lowe offers the example of the clock reading noon while a character works a nine-to-five job; the reader can assume that any narration taking place in the next five hours will be work-related. The last technique Lowe identifies using narrative time as a grid to organize the story; if we know approximately how long the story lasts, we will seek formal patterns, relationships and parallels within that span (beginning-middle-end, e.g.). Lowe also discusses rates of flow, in terms of Bal's five tempi of narrative: ellipses (skipping over events), summary (outline report of events), scene (attempts to relate actual occurrence), slowdown (description taking longer than the event would), and pause (an image frozen in time). Lowe notes that all five may not be available (or may be handled differently) in all media, for example film cannot summarize without using specialized techniques such as montage.

The final purpose of the narrative clock is to "allow the reader to construct an orderly and consistent model of the story in time from what may be a radically *dislocated* narrative sequence." (Lowe 41) Lowe uses the image of a jigsaw puzzle, into which we place individual narrative segments to create an overall picture of the story. Some events are simultaneous, or reported out of chronological order, or connected through causality in unexpected ways, but when properly told we can still make sense of them. A well-crafted narrative clock could theoretically allow us to relate segments of narrative in any order we wish while remaining intelligible.

The rate of time flow is relatively constant in *Siren*. We have some Summary in the form of soliloquies from various characters, and as the episodes themselves do not unfold in real time but rather allow real time to advance, it seems that we have Scene as well. Beyond that, time is only screwy in terms of the play-order of episodes. It is here that the game shines, using two techniques to keep us from getting lost. First, there are the day and time signifiers reported at the start of each episode – these allow us to keep track of approximately where we are in relation to events that have already occurred, or are about to occur. Helping even more in this regard is the Link Navigator, a massive visual organization device which uses color-coded boxes to show completion for each character at each time slot, as well as connecting lines of causality. It is here that we watch the jigsaw puzzle come together, spot the areas where we lack knowledge and the episodes that occur simultaneously in time.

In addition to constraints of time, narratives are subject to constraints of space, likened by Lowe to a game board; he identifies three tasks these constraints fulfill. To begin, by establishing a limited space in which a story takes place, certain options and plot twists are eliminated; the primary narrative is largely limited to the area which is established by the narrative, whether it be a ranch, apartment building, or space ship; story events occurring outside of this space will be somehow recounted rather than performed. The smaller the space available, the tighter, and the more classical, the plot will be. Space is also used to define the interior structure of the narrative, partitioning “particular sections of the story to specific locations.” (Lowe 44) Movement between spaces is often used to establish transition between episodes of a narrative. In addition, the interaction of characters can be controlled by the use of space, as characters can only readily communicate and notice characters in a relatively small

section of the larger game board (Lowe uses the term ‘Location’ for a space small enough that all characters within it can freely speak to each other). Interactions between characters in specific locations often reveal power relationships; a priest has authority in the church, a pilot within an airplane, and so on. Lowe points out that a common plot device is the transplanting of a character from a location in which they have authority (or at least comfort) to a location in which they are at the mercy of those with authority, and the subsequent struggle of that character against an antagonistic force. Finally, space is used to make a story feel more real, to present as vivid an image as possible of the narrative world in the hopes that the reader will become more fully immersed in it. This last becomes especially important to the aspect of narrative Lowe terms “transparency,” which we will discuss later.

In terms of Space, *Siren* uses a very common video game mechanism to limit our range. The town of Hanuda is surrounded on three sides by high mountains, and during the primary narrative all escape is blocked by the red water**.** The setting, a rural Japanese village, gives us hints as to what activities might take place (and thus be represented by shibito actions) there; farmers and gardeners seem to abound, and cab drivers are notably absent. The narrative is shaped around ten areas of the town, both indoors and out, as detailed in the Map in Appendix 1**.** Although some of these areas are quite large, in Lowe’s terminology they are classifiable as Locations, as others in them are able to communicate freely – instructing a “sidekick” character to ‘Come Here’ will bring them from any point within that map to your side (barring incident). In addition, the ability to Sightjack means that the user’s character can instantly be aware of their allies’ location, status, and so on. Each of these episodes also comprises a Scene, as they go on uninterrupted until the user completes, or fails, the episode. The individual locations

often hint at power relationships, although given the state of chaos within the game world, these relationships are all but irrelevant to the narrative[4]. Finally, the locations of the town, and their interconnectedness, serve to create a sense of reality. The locations are highly specific, and correspond to what we might expect of a remote rural village (school, clinic, etc). As Lowe points out, "few narratives have direct access to the reader's senses of taste, touch or smell," (45) and like the novel, a video game can access none of these. By creating a realistic-feeling setting for the sense of sight, the game pushes the user towards immersion.

Most theories of narrative involve characters of some kind, and Lowe's is no exception; he identifies two categories of them: Players and extras. If a reader is "[tempted] to make an affective investment in modeling those characters' motivation and narrative goals," (Lowe 46) they can be considered a player. Classically, this investment can be invited by giving a character both a name and dialogue, and more importantly by making them a focal character; giving the reader even a fleeting a glimpse of their inner life and thoughts allows the reader to form a bond with that character, and more readily access their model of the game world. This model is compared to other models as presented by the narrative and characters, and this comparison is used to build the reader's model, which may be more or less complete than an individual characters', as well as including what a character thinks another character's model is. But players are not mere observers within the game world; they are the ones who move forward the events of the narrative. players can be purely narrating characters reporting on actions around them, or they may act as a sidekick or a villain whose point of view is rarely revealed in

[4] Two notable exceptions are the teacher-student relationships between Reiko Takato, Tamon Takeuchi, and their respective pupils.

order to preserve the narrative – Lowe offers examples from the literature of Sherlock Holmes, in which "Dr. Watson only occasionally helps with the solution [and] Professor Moriarty is never allowed to speak his case." (47)

Siren makes use of a surprisingly large cast for a video game; rather than a single character controlled by the user; ten different characters are controlled over the course of the game (Lowe puts the cap for a classical narrative at roughly twelve Players). Some are more frequently controlled than others, and some (like hunter Akira Shimura) die before the endgame, however each has their part to play and their actions to resolve as the narrative clock winds towards closure. In addition to these playable characters, the story world is populated by a select few extras, often called non-playable characters (NPCs) when speaking of games, which have their own part to play as sidekicks, instructors, antagonists, or simply to make the world feel more real. All of these characters are given names, and all of them speak at one point or another; this satisfies two of Lowe's criteria to establish whether a character is a Player or an Extra. Lowe's criteria of point of view, or of "being allowed, even momentarily, inside the head of a character" (47) is satisfied by the cut-scenes that occur before an episode begins, for example when the character Naoko Mihama announces to the darkness "if you're out there, filming me running round and round in circles, I'm going to kill all of you!" These scenes are generally short, but serve to show us the emotional state and relationships of characters. During each playable episode, the character being controlled reveals information to the user which is used in constructing the user's model of the story; this model is far more complete than any individual character's is. Interestingly, the information the user learns is as often about the characters themselves as about the events of the game world.

The actions of players are dictated by three key factors, the first being their motive or goals. Every character in a narrative has some goal or goals, even if they are as simple as survival of the events of the narrative. The goal may be obvious to both player and reader, or hidden from one or the other. Some goals may be antagonistic in the eyes of the reader, and they may wish to see these goals go unrealized – this generally reveals which character or characters the reader has formed a deeper investment with. Player actions are also dictated by their knowledge state; their goals may not be apparent or attainable until they have gathered enough information to move towards them, as is common in mystery stories. Lowe changes gears here briefly to introduce the concept of information within the narrative as a thermodynamic system in which no knowledge is created or lost, but instead moves between the various components, tending towards an increase of entropy, which Lowe defines in this case as a "more even distribution of information amongst players in the game." (50) An imbalance of knowledge is unstable, and over time and action will tend to move towards a state of equilibrium. The final factor determining player actions is, again, power. In this case, the power to move towards their goals, whether that power be in being in the right place, waiting for the right time, obtaining the right tool, being free of another's power, or any combination of the four.

In *Siren,* most of the characters share a common goal: survival. Kei Makino, the leader of the local cult, seeks to awaken his god. Over time, the survival goal adjusts into the goal of killing that god, but first the characters must learn enough to understand that as a win condition. This knowledge is not mystically arrived at, but pieced together over time as characters with knowledge o the situation share it out, and archival items are obtained. Power

becomes a major component of the survival goal, as Kyoya Suda must obtain not only knowledge, but weapons, items, and skill to take one the final battle, which (especially for the decapitation ending) requires the use of Sightjack, a rifle, a mystic flame, and a katana. All of these props and abilities must be obtained before the final moves can be made.

Lowe notes that the first of these factors, motivation, is an internal force, while the other two are more or less external; when these external forces cause a goal to be modified, a player has made a Move. (51) Lowe defines a move as "a [measurable] change in the game state produced by a finite and legal monoevure on the part of a single player;" (51) In a narrative, Lowe identifies two types of moves: those that change the distribution of knowledge and those that change the distribution of power. Whenever two players are not equal in either information of power, a potential energy exists between the higher and lower "pressure;" this energy can be discharged by making a move. Discharges that do not measurably change the game state are not considered to be moves, although they may serve another narrative purpose. A move which changes the distribution of knowledge is called a "move of communication," (Lowe 51) or a "C-Move" (ibid.) The potential energy here stems from individual character's models of the game world; for example, an informant that knows who committed a crime can give that information to the police detective (or give false information instead). This alters the detective's model of the game world, bringing the narrative closer to the endgame. A power move, called by Lowe a P-Move, is one in which the ability of characters to act is adjusted, either between characters themselves or between characters and their goals; Lowe cites the use of a gun as weapon or bargaining chip, and Cinderella receiving the clothes and transportation she needs, as examples of P-Moves, in each case altering access to character

goals. (52) Lowe digresses briefly to remind us that we are in a thermodynamic model, a closed system in which narrative power is neither created nor destroyed, it is only altered:

> When characters seem to acquire power, we understand them to be in fact actualizing a narrative potential they have been carrying in a different form: informational, positional, instrumental, social, intellectual, moral, even supernatural. When characters seem to surrender power, they are simply translating it back from a kinetic to a potential form. (52)

This narrative energy is conserved even when a character is eliminated from the board, remaining behind as either a neutral potential power (items, weapons, access, etc.) or an actively antagonistic one (in the form of plans already set in motion). Lowe details several kinds of narrative power which are important. Intellectual power gives a character an advantage in modeling the game world; positional power varies based on the distance (in moves) to a character's goal. Instrumental power comes from weapons, equipment, and other such props; social power gives players an advantage in recruiting assistance from other characters. Finally, moral power is that which gives metaphysical advantage to players, often in terms of the supernatural. Critical to this model is the fact that the endgame is predestined by the starting narrative potential of the game as represented by the knowledge and power of the players. Players approach this point via transfer of narrative energy as governed by the rules of the game world.

C-Moves appear constantly in *Siren*; playing through the game reveals a great deal of information via cut-scenes. Thorough investigation of the locations featured reveals so-called

"archive items;" although many of these are objects fleshing out the characters themselves, as the game goes on the collection swells in both size and scope, providing not only explicit detail about the events of the game but numerous connections amongst the items themselves. Not all information is completely true or complete, but it is doled out consistently to the various characters. The users themselves will also benefit from this, as information learned in one episode can often be relevant to completing a later one. P-Moves occur as well; many puzzles hinge on using the right item in the right way. What we see readily is the storing of power as knowledge; for example, in an early episode the character Kei Makino can acquire a towel, then find a sink, and a freezer. By plugging in the freezer, wetting the towel, and placing it inside the freezer, we give up the power potential of the item, storing its narrative potential as knowledge of the slowly freezing towel. In a later episode controlling Shiro Miyata the user can harness that potential by obtaining the now-frozen towel and using it to solve a specific puzzle that would otherwise be far more dangerous to the character. The most visible form of power within *Siren* is thus Instrumental power, with characters that are either armed or carrying inventory items having a distinct combat or puzzle-solving advantage over other characters and enemies. Positional power is almost always present, as most missions revolve around escaping the location a character is in to proceed to an adjacent one. Social power is rarely seen, except in the case of sidekick missions where one character must guide and assist another; an excellent example is Miyako Kajiro, a blind girl who can only proceed by using the Sightjack feature – as her survival is a condition of the episode's endgame, the user's character must transfer power to her by letting her see through his eyes (recall that using this ability stops the character from moving, acting, defending etc.).

The final two keys to the game model are the kinds of moves that are allowed, and the conditions under which the game will end. Both of these are handled by implementing rules which define causality for the narrative world, especially as they differ from the workings of reality. Fortunately, much of the work can be done for us by sticking to a particular genre, as genres provide rules that are assumed to be common across texts; here again, the key is to define the EXCEPTIONS to these normal rules. Exceptions can arise from two different places; at the level of the story, supernatural/magical systems can be used to modify what Lowe calls "natural causality." (55) These systems must be carefully laid out so that it is clear to a reader who has what abilities that are outside the norm, and what rules there are for their use. At the narrative level, various patterns can simply be declared illegal, regardless of their regularity in reality; Lowe cites as an example the fact that although an impact hard enough to knock someone unconscious would in reality be likely to cause brain damage, in much of literature it is simply a tool to advance narrative, with no apparent ill effect. After all, we can't have our hero removed from the game too early by such a minor effect – in a thermodynamic system, his narrative potential would then transfer into other, less useful forms. Another possibility for imposing rules is to grant narrative potential to certain ideologies. Lowe notes, however, that overuse of these techniques risks pushing the limits of a reader's willingness to suspend disbelief, removing the illusion of reality the author has worked to create. Although there are workarounds for this, such as using or suggesting a supernatural force imposing these rules upon players, Lowe cautions that this tends to remove free will from the characters, and suggests that the easiest way to avoid this quagmire is to limit these interferences wherever possible. (58)

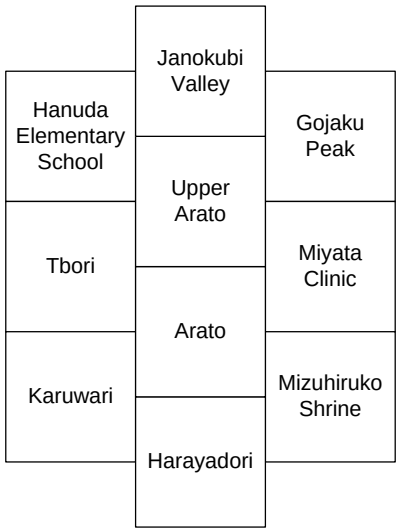
As Lowe points out, the final device of the primary narrative is to end, returning the unbalanced system to a state of equilibrium, frequently via a primary player achieving a goal or goals. (59) In order to do this, certain conditions have to be met. As we have seen, time plays a factor here, as the game clock ends when the primary narratives does, but recall that we measure time in moves; it is the winding down of moves that signals the endgame. Classically speaking, the "win conditions" of a narrative will be clearly established early on, and consist of both explicit and implicit goals. According to Lowe, the endgame typically involves a series of final, generally confrontational moves undertaken by the remaining players (at least, the most important ones) in close proximity to one another; these final moves generally occur quickly, releasing the last of the potential narrative energy into the system. Many narratives try to have a "twist" ending; however Lowe indicates that this represents not an un-signaled endgame, but an "unexpected but legitimate application of the rules." (60) Once this energy is released, the primary narrative can end – the "happily ever after" can continue in an external, secondary narrative.

Lowe closes out his discussion by identifying three aspects of a classical plot: Economy, Amplitude, and Transparency. Here we begin to see that while Lowe's system can accommodate a game like *Siren*, we cannot treat the game as a classical plot. Economy refers to the "tightness" of the narrative; specifically, that wherever possible the components of the story should play a role. Not all components will be of equal utility or value, but ideally there should be nearly 100% functionality: all objects should serve a purpose, all characters should play a part, and all actions should be moves. It could be argued that *Siren* possesses this trait, but I believe it only does so when played through perfectly in a single attempt; otherwise, a

scattering of missed items, hidden videos and unnecessary actions litter the game world. Amplitude refers to the amount of moves or action that take place in a narrative, ideally in a balance that does not overwhelm the reader. Different kinds of classical narratives have different restrictions on how much action they can incorporate, but in general the difficulty is one of keeping it balanced and varied without growing too long. Again *Siren* might have the potential to match this, but again this is dependent on the success of the user; to sit and watch a more or less perfect run of the game will take nine to ten hours, and most users will add hours if not days to this with trial and error. The action that occurs in cut scenes displays variety, but in between lie hours of the user repeating the same small set of actions over and over again. Finally, there is Transparency, the idea that "the final duty of a classical plot is to erase all palpable trace of its own existence." (Lowe 73) Here, any video game is doomed to fail. No matter how visually arresting or lifelike, the user remains a viewer, interfacing with the narrative via a game console. The Link Navigator, for all its aid in keeping the narrative straight, breaks this rule every time it appears. In short, while *Siren* certainly does conform to Lowe's model of plot, it cannot be considered a classical one. It seems to me, however, that that's just fine; trying to claim that *Siren* falls into the same category as *The Odyssey* is as inappropriate as trying to claim it is the same thing as a puzzle game like Tetris. Scholarly approach and terminology aside, the Ludologists are right – video games deserve to be encountered and studied on their own merits, not compared unfavorably to a pre-existing media.

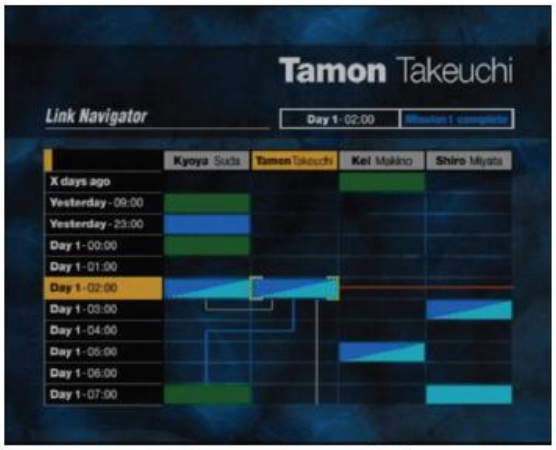
Appendix: Images

Map of Hanuda Village.



Source: *Siren* Game Manual

Siren Link Navigator



Source: Michael Nitsche

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