POSTMODERN DETECTIVE FICTION IN VIDEO GAMES

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1. INTRODUCTION

In his essay *The Detective Story: A Case Study of Games in Literature*, Bernard Suits (1985) discusses how the writer of a mystery poses a challenge for the reader, while writing the detective story is already a challenge in itself. He discusses five-minute mysteries—short mystery stories where the reader has to figure out the solution of a mystery, which is provided separately—as if they were games. He breaks down the relationship between the author and reader as players—the author plays with the story as well as the reader, while the reader plays to figure out the mystery. The playful elements of mystery fiction are one of the examples of how narrative and games can go hand in hand, rather than at odds.

The five-minute mystery, as well as the works of Agatha Christie, all correspond to a specific subset of mystery stories—what Tzvetan Todorov (1977) calls the *whodunit* and Knight (2010) identi-fies as *clue-puzzle* stories—where the core structure of the story consists of a two-layered narrative, the story of the crime, which has already happened, and the story of the detective, which develops as one reads the story. The *whodunit* focuses on reconstructing the story of the crime as if it were a puzzle. In contrast, the thriller intertwines the story of the detective with the mystery, so that both unfold at the same time, and the detective becomes entangled in the action. *Noir* novels, for instance, follow this structure.

If we look at the videogame counterparts of mystery fiction, it turns out that detective and mystery games are one of the most literary genres in digital games. Firstly, because many games have adapted literary works and characters from mystery stories into games—specialized site MobyGames lists fifty-six titles that include Sherlock Holmes as a fictional character, and eleven inspired by Agatha Christie, for example. The litera-riness of mystery and detective games also deri-

ves from its strong textual roots—players need to interpret the texts of the game in order to solve the mystery; these texts are multimodal, from cross-questioning someone to finding footprints, or contrasting documents. Gameplay thus becomes exegetic work, where the texts need to be interpreted to arrive at the solution. In this article, we invoke the term *exegesis* to emphasize critical interpretation as a core activity, where reading and decoding the information presented is essential to the challenge of the game. Reconstructing the story requires an effort on the part of the player.

We can find many mystery games in the adventure game genre, such as Roberta Williams' *Mystery House* (On-Line Systems, 1980), *Deadline* (Infocom, 1982), the Sherlock Homes games released by Frogwares since 2002 or, more recently, *Lamplight City* (Grundislav Games, 2018). We can also find examples of games that can be read as thrillers, where the player as detective becomes entangled in the unfolding of the mystery itself, such as *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream, 2010) or *L.A. Noire* (Rockstar Games, 2011).

Mystery and detective fiction, however, have many more subgenres than those listed by Todorov. In his overview of two centuries of crime fiction, Knight discusses genres such as the psychothriller, police procedurals, as well as a variety of subgenres that include feminist, gay and lesbian, and black stories of detection. He also discusses postmodern crime fiction, which encompasses a variety of subgenres in crime fiction. One of the results of postmodern crime fiction, according to Knight, is to question rationality and humanism: "Writers like Borges, Butor and Eco showed how crime fiction can, by being less determinate in its puzzles and less simply resolved in its processes and outcomes, become a medium to question certainties about the self, the mind, and the ambient world" (Knight, 2010: 205).

The playful nature of the *whodunit* seems to facilitate the bridge between games and narrati-

ve, while the action elements of the thriller also seem to have a relatively easy translation into games actions as well. The questions that this article is going to address are: what form do postmodern detective stories take in videogames? How can games refuse to engage with the conventions of the detective genre? What games can be considered part of a tradition of anti-detective work and a comment on genre conventions? This article examines how videogames have tackled postmodern detective stories, using their literary counterparts as reference. By carrying out a comparative analysis across media, we will be able to understand how a postmodernist approach to the detective genre can take an interactive, participatory form.

2. POSTMODERN DETECTIVES IN LITERATURE

Although Todorov's terms are useful to understand the two-layered nature of detective stories, and Knight gives us a succinct summary of what distinguishes postmodern detective stories, we need a more nuanced breakdown of the specific features that set these stories apart. In his book-long description of the processes involved in creative writing, Peter Turchi distinguishes between a *puzzle*, which is the type of writing that entices the reader to find a solution, and the *mystery*, which remains unresolved, challenging, and uncertain (Turchi, 2014: 52-53). The creation of this dichotomy from the point of view of the writer explains how they expect the reader to tackle their texts—one invites them to anticipate what the solution may be and leads to resolution, while the other aims at creating a suspense that may or may not be resolved. This distinction also seems to be more relevant in this context, because it explains that the puzzle expects the reader to find a correct unique solution, while the mystery is open and invites the reader to come up with their own interpretation without sanctioning any specific reading.

Knight provides a similar dichotomy in the context of crime fiction: on the one hand, we have the already mentioned *clue-puzzle* genre (Knight, 2010: 30-61), which tease the reader to figure out the solution before reaching the end of the story. In contrast, postmodern detective fiction sheds the obligation of having to solve the mystery, which often goes unresolved, and comment on the conventions and expectations of the clue-puzzle genre (Knight, 2010: 195). This distinction also shows how detective fiction, although it may involve a mystery, does not make its resolution compulsory. Knight explains how some American thrillers opened the way for other types of detective stories by refusing to follow the template of the British clue-puzzle, thus pushing back against cultural colonization and creating new literary forms (Knight, 2010: 100-113).

In order to identify the features of postmodern detective fiction, we will analyze two novels that have been hailed as distinctive examples of the genre, which also incorporate elements that connect them to games: Paul Auster's *City of Glass* (1985) and Robert Coover's *Noir: A Novel* (2010).

In Auster's *City of Glass*, which Knight calls it an "anti-detective" story (Knight, 2010: 205), crime novelist Daniel Quinn becomes a detective by accident. He receives a phone call from someone looking for a detective called Paul Auster. After a few more calls and some careless thought, Daniel embarks into a quixotic detective adventure. His mission is to follow the father of his client, Peter Stillman, who was just released from jail; his wife fears he will hurt his son. The father is also called Peter Stillman; rather than looking for his son, he walks around New York City. Quinn draws a map of where Stillman goes; when he looks at the trace of his daily walk, he realizes it has the shape of a

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letter. The different maps together seem to spell the phrase "tower of babel," although the reader cannot be completely sure. Incidentally, this cryptic phrase and the way it is revealed is a puzzle that would not be completely out of place in an adventure game. In the end, even though Quinn ends up losing track of his quarry and his clients disappear, he persists in his quest, doggedly playing the role of a detective and abandoning his previous life.

While Auster's anti-detective story thrives on blending detectives and novelists and turning linguistic challenges into detective work, Robert Coover's *Noir: A Novel* is a commentary on the genre it takes its title from. The novel is written in the second person; the text appeals to the reader as if they are the protagonist, similar to how interactive fiction interpellates the reader to encourage their interaction. The protagonist is Philip N. Noir, a wannabe detective who constantly fumbles his role. He forgets to ask his client for her name and drinks away the allowance that she gives him to do his investigation. His tribulations are a collage of stock situations drawn from noir film and novels, tackled out of order in such a way the reader protagonist is as confused as the point of view character. The gaps and ambiguities are as important, if not more, than the events of the story itself.

These two novels provide us with a series of features that can help us identify postmodern elements that can also be found in games: the city as an explorable space for multicursal navigation, unstable identities, and metafictional references.

The first element is the emphasis on the city as a character, which the protagonist both loves and loathes. The city is a challenge that the detective needs to master by learning its secrets—the

streets, the back alleys, the shortcuts. This is a distinguishing feature of both noir novels and cinema, where L.A. becomes the quintessential noir city (Silver and Ursini, 2005: 12). The two novels analyzed here rehearse its importance of the urban space. Apart from devoting its title to it, *City of Glass* turns navigating New York City into the core of the detective work; the narration mentions specific and detailed locations as well as maps of the paths traversed by the characters. Coover's *Noir*, on the other hand, fragments the space and makes it as confusing as the plot, and then devotes a whole section to the city (Coover 2011: 162-64), which the reader must suppose is L.A. if we assume the film cliché. This section is an ode to the city as the inescapable seducer of the detective; the narration changes to the first person, and the narrator talks about "her" (the city) as the entity that traps the narrator and will not let him go.

Unstable identities are another recurring topic of postmodern detective stories. Detectives can literally lose themselves while solving the case, to the point that what they are looking for is not to solve the case but to sort out who they are. This is clear in *City of Glass*, where the main character wants to become a detective and appropriates the identity of Paul Auster, whom he initially believes is a detective. Quinn already has lost his identity as a writer, since he writes crime novels under a pseudonym. Quinn as detective/writer eventually loses his own identity as his case takes over his life and he forgets about everything else. He spends all his money, his home is rented out to someone else, and finally he disappears after squatting at his client's deserted apartment. *Noir*'s Phil M. Noir is a similarly disastrous detective—he spends his advance money on drinks instead of

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the investigation, which he keeps forgetting to carry out. He ends up in situations where he seems to have killed someone but does not remember doing the deed. Throughout the novel, he seems to be looking for himself; the second person voice seems to invite the player to figure out who "you" may be. In both novels, unstable identities are paired with cases that end up being unresolved, or where the solution ends up being completely different from the initial assignment.

Doubles and double lives are another motif that postmodern detective novels use to create unstable identities. In Coover's *Noir*, the protagonist fails to realize that his secretary is tricking him and disguises herself as a recent rich widow to become his client. He does not seem to be particularly observant and gets easily distracted by the charms of a lady. *City of Glass* also features elements that are constantly doubled: the protagonist works for Peter Stillman and is looking for his father, who is also his namesake; Daniel Quinn is compared to Don Quijote (Auster, 1994: 150-155)—they even share the same initials (DQ).

A last feature, shared with postmodern fiction in general, are the metafictional references and intertextual qualities of the text. These postmodern detective novels hold a mirror up to their own nature to comment on themselves, from parody to somber meditation. Metafiction is the core motif of Coover's *Noir*, which compiles clichés from noir novels and film to create its plot. The novel pokes fun at its own plot holes and inconsistencies by pointing out that Noir had missed out on the conspiracy around him because he was simply filling the gaps with the fictional tropes borrowed from stories he has read or seen on the screen. When the mystery is revealed, the villainess con-

fesses she has taken advantage of his love for clichés in order to trap him. In contrast, *City of Glass* introduces different metafictional levels. Paul Auster, the author himself, and his family appear as characters in the story, while Daniel Quinn is a writer of detective novels who decides to become the protagonist of his own story by taking on the identity of Paul Auster.

3. POSTMODERN DETECTIVE VIDEOGAMES

The features drawn from these two novels, as well as Knight's analysis of the subgenre, become our compass in the discussion of their videogame counterparts. I have chosen three games from three different countries and continents (United Kingdom, United States and Japan), in order to illustrate different approaches from different cultures, and show the variety of ways in which detective videogames can also be postmodern. The games are *Her Story* (Sam Barlow, 2015), *Blade Runner* (Westwood Studios, 1997) and *Deadly Premonition: Director's Cut* (Access Games: 2010).
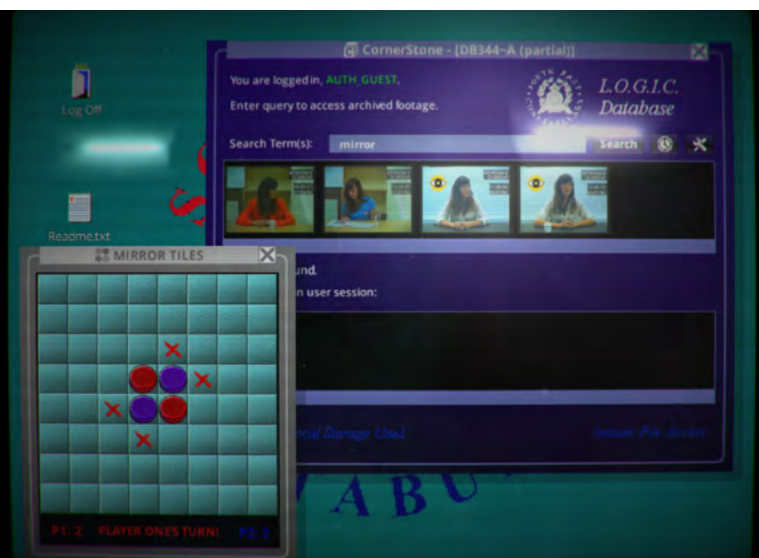
3.1. *Her Story*

Let us start with the shortest and most recent game. *Her Story*, by Sam Barlow, is a videogame that functionally also works as video hypertext, where players have to piece together the story of a murder by watching a series of video clips, which are fragments of several interviews over time. The clips cannot be watched in order—the player must type specific keywords, which retrieve specific video segments, and only five segments appear at a time, in chronological order. The segments are therefore connected through keywords, turning each video into a separate passage that is linked to others through a word, similar to how hypertext connects its passages (or *lexias*) through links (Hayles, 2002: 28). The videos feature a woman being interrogated by the police after her husband disappeared and then turned up dead. The player cannot watch the complete story from beginning to end, similar to how the reader has to jump from one part to another of the text in a hypertext novel.

The presentation of the game already betrays a metafictional approach. The screen remediates the computer—we see the desktop of a 90s computer and the reflection of a face on the curved glass of the monitor and hear its buzz. As we type, we hear the loud keys of a mechanical keyboard. Our computer has travelled back in time and put on the mask of an older technology. The game invites the player to find the answers to several questions. Who is the player character whose face flashes on the screen? What is the role of the player? What were the events that led to the murder? The more information the player reveals, the more questions crop up. The goal is to fill the gaps in the text by interpreting the information, turning literary reading into a game.

Double identities are another trope inherited from postmodern detective stories, which is then made unstable through a postmodern filter. As the player reveals more segments of the story, we see that the woman in the video seems to be two people, Hannah and Eve, two sides of the mirror that are also reflected in their palindromic names. This double identity also creates an unstable textuality, since there can be at least two interpretations on how the murder happened depending on how the player fills the gaps generated by the segmented clips. In one possible reading, the woman in the videos has multiple personalities; in another, it is the story of two twins and their fraught relationship. Both seem plausible, both have evidence that will confirm and disprove them. The solution to the murder is all up to the player's interpretation. The player decides whose story *Her Story* is.

Many of the questions the game poses have an answer, but there is no ultimate solution that the computer evaluates or rewards. There is no "winning" the game. The story is open to interpretation, and there is no way to enforce the player to get it right; this is not a clue-puzzle narrative.

Her Story begins by showing us a recreation of a computer desktop from the nineties

This is not new for literature, but it is still relatively uncommon in games.

Although *Her Story* thrives on uncertainty and interpretation, it also provides the player with tools to get a sense of how much content they have discovered. One of the computer applications shows how many videos there are in the database and which ones the player has already seen, piquing the player's curiosity even when they may have a sense of the events of the story. I will come back to solvability as well as the instrumental use of feedback in the final section.

3.2. *Blade Runner*

The other two games covered in this article draw many of their postmodern traits from the texts they adapt or are inspired by. That is the case of the 1997 video game *Blade Runner*, which takes the world from the 1982 Ridley Scott film of the same title as the space for a new adventure. The film has been classified as a postmodern detective story, and referred both as part of "neo noir" or "future noir" (Silver and Ursini, 2005: 125; Sammon, 1996). The game, however, is not an adaptation of the movie; rather, the story runs parallel to the events of the film. The crime at hand is a

series of murders; evidence points at replicants (synthetic beings) being the culprits, which calls for the intervention of a special division of the police department, the *blade runners*, who identify and *retire* (an euphemism for *execute*) replicants. Only specially trained police forces can become blade runners; since replicants are indistinguishable from humans, the only way to tell if someone is synthetic or not is to pass a test called Voight-Kampff. The character the player controls is blade runner Ray McCoy, a name that points out at one of the core themes of the game, as well as the film it is based on—the impossibility to figure out who is human and who is a replicant.

Blade Runner exemplifies how the city becomes the protagonist, a feature the game inherits from its source text, which in turn takes it from the noir films it is retrofitting into a science fiction story (Sammon, 1996: 73-4). Urban space is already essential in many detective stories, such as the London of Sherlock Holmes, or the L.A. of Philip Marlowe; Here the attraction of the game is to navigate the spaces and inhabit the version of L.A. in 2019 that the original film made iconic. The cinematic space becomes virtual and navigable, and new locations open up as the player advances in their investigations. Thus the world of *Blade Runner* becomes more complex and invites the player to master it through navigation in order to reveal new information.

One of *Blade Runner*'s core themes is unstable identities, as mentioned above; this instability is extended to the reconfiguration of the text through its digital, programmatic nature. To begin with, the world of the game is alive—the non-player characters, controlled by the computer, have their own agenda and roam around the world pursuing their own goals as stated in the manual of the game. They can pick up evidence that the player may have overlooked, making them miss part of the story. Thus different play-throughs may vary because players may have access to different information in each traversal of the story. Additionally,

Part of the charm of *Blade Runner* lies in being able to visit the spaces in Ridley Scott's film

most of the non-player characters can be either human or replicants, something that is determined by the system at the beginning of each game. Therefore, each character will have different agendas and goals, which will change every time the player starts a new game. The world is a living, unstable text that the player has to keep up with.

Player interaction also affects the text—depending on who the player interrogates or attacks, the game system interprets their actions as being like a human or a replicant. For example, deploying a Voight-Kampff test on a character indicates that the player suspects the character may be a replicant, thus making Ray McCoy more human; on the other hand, letting a replicant go or attacking a human character is identified as replicant behavior. The story of the game changes depending on how these decisions define the player character—the player's interaction with the world eventually transforms the text. The changes are more noticeable further into the game, where the different branches become more and more evident. There are twelve different endings (Myers, 2009) depending on what the player decides to do at different key points.

One of the most interesting contradictions of *Blade Runner* is how exegesis seems to be key to the game but, in reality, it does not factor into the textual reconfiguration. The game provides tools to process the clues and information that the player comes across as they meet characters and explore spaces. The tools are integrated in a database navigation system called KIA (Knowledge Integration Assistant), which allows keeping track of evidence, suspects and events. As was the case with *Her Story*, however, this tool helps navigate the text but it is not meant to provide a "right version" or "win" the case, as Pajares Tosca notes (2005: 118). The KIA provides a map of the information, rather than being essential to gameplay. This is another example of how postmodern detective videogames de-emphasize exegesis, and yet they provide a sophisticated tool to examine and organize the evidence. In the end, the goal of *Blade Runner* is not to solve the case, since the KIA serves as a red herring. The key to understand the game is that the player's decisions define the identity of the detective, just as in the literary examples analyzed earlier.

3.3. *Deadly Premonition*
The last example of how a detective videogame incorporates postmodernist traits is *Deadly Premonition: Director's Cut,* a Japanese game directed by Hidetaka Suehiro—a.k.a. Swery—a longer and more complex game than the previous ones.

The player controls Francis York Morgan, an FBI agent that arrives to the town of Greenvale to solve a mysterious ritual killing, which becomes the first in a series of murders by the so-called Raincoat Killer. York becomes fascinated by the people in the town, and demonstrates an amused curiosity about its inhabitants. If this premise sounds familiar, it is because it is an open and acknowledged homage to the TV show *Twin Peaks* (David Lynch and Mark Frost, ABC: 1990-1991). As in the case of *Blade Runner*, a good deal of the postmodern qualities of the game are inherited from the text it is inspired by. *Twin Peaks* was already a postmodern story, by intertwining the semiotic conventions of *film noir*, soap operas, and horror film (Hirschman, 1992: 188). The trigger of the events of the TV show was the murder of teenager Laura Palmer; in the process of trying to find the culprit, the show unraveled the double lives of the inhabitants of a supposed ideal American small town. In *Deadly Premonition*, York's attitude imitates Agent Cooper's disposition in the TV show, blended with stereotypes of how FBI agents behave in movies—he's the quirky, gun-toting version of Philip M. Noir in Coover's novel. The game manages to capture the unconventional spirit of David Lynch and Mark Frost's show by means of Japanese culture.

The intertextual references of the game are not limited to *Twin Peaks*, but also include other Lynch's works. The most notable is the player character's love interest, Emily, who very much looks like Naomi Watts in *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001). Some moments in the game also echo other American movies, such as a cross-dressing wannabe killer almost lifted from *Dressed to Kill* (Brian DePalma, 1980), a long winding staircase that the player needs to climb during the climax of the game that looks like the bell tower at the end of *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958), and a killer who keeps the corpse of his mother in the cellar just like Norman Bates in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960).

Movie references are a recurring motif during the game. The player spends a long time driving from place to place; whenever the car starts to move, a prompt that says "Talk" appears. If the player presses the button, York talks to his invisible friend Zach about Hollywood movies from the 1980s. The titles usually belong to the action-adventure genre, such as *The Goonies* (Richard Donner, 1985) or *Ladyhawke* (Richard Donner, 1985); York covers a variety of trivia about them. York also reminisces about the time he saw each movie with Zach, which hints at the fact that they have known each other for many years. The conversations with Zach not only help pass the time while driving, but also serve as a metafictional reference. Based on interviews with him, these diatribes are really the game director's, Swery, who is talking about his favorite American movies through York (Kumar, 2011); it is another game element that reflects his love for American culture, as revealed in the paragraphs below.

The most significant feature, however, is the relationship between York and Zach, which brings doubles and unstable identities to the relationship between the player character and the player. Apart from the car conversations, York is constantly consulting with Zach whenever there is a conundrum that needs player input. At first, he seems to be talking to the player—the player is Zach, they are the one making the decisions and helping York be brave and fight zombies, as I will explain below. The character seems aware of the player who controls him, pointing at the metafictional level.

The story is more complicated than that—as the game advances, the car conversations make it clear that Zach and York have been very close for many, many years. It turns out that our detective has a split personality—York is the character Zach created after a traumatic childhood event. York is cool, in a movie detective kind of way, but he is also naïve and not particularly good at dealing with people; he needs Zach to act and become
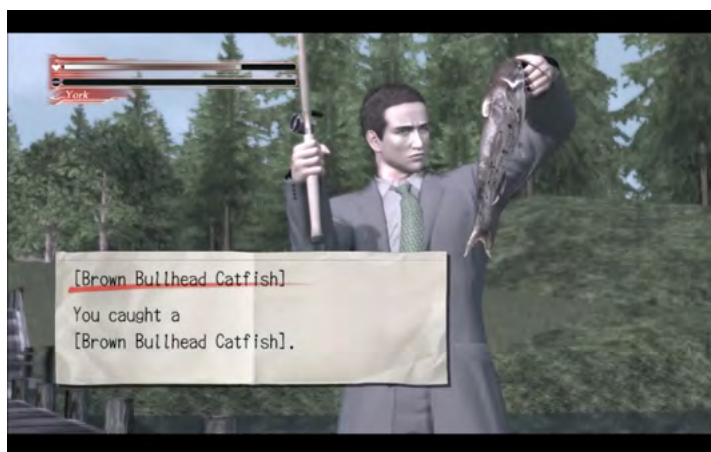
a detective. His split personality bestows York / Zach with special insight about the world, special powers—he can read his fortune for the day in his morning coffee—as well as give access to an alternate, dark world.

Both York and the world of *Deadly Premonition* are split up, in the same way that the town of *Twin Peaks* had two sides. The daytime world is where the player can explore the town, meet its inhabitants and get to know them, while the dark world appears at night, or whenever York gets close to the killer or to key information to solve the case. This dark world is decaying and full of zombies who wail in pain and attack York. The dark version of Greenvale is where the player helps York pick up evidence for the case. The game calls this process *profiling*, where once the player has gathered all the evidence, York visualizes what happened in the crime scene as a hazy, fragmented flashback. York is the one carrying out the exegesis, although the final result is not overtly clear; the player just provides the ingredients. The player picks up the evidence while the game does the detective work once more, but the resulting flashback is fragmented enough and overlaid with audiovisual static that it invites the player to interpret the events even if the ambiguity is relatively shallow.

The city—in this case, the town of Greenvale—is also protagonist. The game belongs to the so-called open-world genre; it means that the player is mostly free to roam around the town, which operates within its own rules and schedules. The player can traverse the city from corner to corner,

In addition to investigating a serial murder case, in *Deadly Premonition*, the open-world quality of the game allows the player to look for different activities to do in Greenvale, such as fishing in the river

driving one of the police cars or on foot; the space is continuous and mostly open, as opposed to spaces fragmented by levels of progression which tend to be more common in videogames (Juul, 2005: 71-73), as was the case of the different locations in *Blade Runner*. The player needs to trace the different routes from one place to another, as well as learn where everyone lives. At times, the player is driving a passenger, so the "talk" button initiates a bit of chit-chat that helps us learn more about the other person in the car.

The vividness of Greenvale has yet another level—the game developers scouted the American Pacific Northeast for locations and objects, from props to food, which then they later included in the game (Kumar, 2011). Once the player finishes the game, a picture gallery unlocks featuring reference photos the developers took during their location scouting. Many of the locations, the plants, the items are inspired on an actual place or object—yet another piece of evidence of the love and admiration of American culture the game professes, even if it is through its different media representations.

As a final notable aspect, the role of detective work in *Deadly Premonition* also incorporates clear postmodern traits. The supposed drive of the story is to figure out who the Raincoat Killer is, just like finding out who killed Laura Palmer was the goal of Agent Cooper in *Twin Peaks*. There is a core set of events that organize the story of the game, called *critical path* in videogame jargon, which is a series of milestones that the player needs to hit in order to advance. Since the game

also features an open world, the player can quit the investigation at any time and go explore the town. York can meet the townspeople, figure out their daily routine and who their friends are, peek into their houses, help them do their chores. Other activities available are going fishing at one of the many locations along the river or playing darts at the bar. By doing these activities, the player can interact in a world that is alive, similar to what we saw in *Blade Runner*, but in a larger scale and including more characters with more complex behaviors. Exploration is how the player figures out the relationships between characters, and gains insight on who they are. By getting to know the townspeople better, the tragedies that unfold become all the more poignant, because the player has the chance to care for them. The player can thus carry out actual exegetic work by pursuing the peripheral stories of the game, which in turn make the story all the more meaningful.

The case is eventually solved at the end of the game—York figures out who the Raincoat Killer is and confronts him, along with the person who is ultimately guilty of creating him, since he was a superhuman creature resulted from a scientific experiment. Even when the player gets to the end, there are some deliberate gaps. For instance, it is not completely clear how the dark world pops up or why nobody seems to comment on its existence. York is not an effective detective either, like the protagonists of *Noir* and *City of Glass*. Three of the five victims in the story die right in front of him and there is nothing he can do about it. These deaths, however, seem to be part of the moral of the story, which York must come to terms with—learning to let go of those we love after they become something that should not exist, according

to a line that repeats throughout the game. York's failure as a detective is irrelevant, because the key of the game is to learn about the town and destroy the beings that "should not exist," which in turn helps York to know himself and become Zach again. As in the case if other postmodern detectives, the murder case of *Deadly Premonition* is an excuse for the detective to search for their identity.

These three texts (*Her Story*, *Blade Runner*, *Deadly Premonition*) present themselves as detective games, and yet the exegetic work is unrelated to *winning* the game, because none of them really lead to a sense of victory. In all three cases, the player is invited to explore the text, which is a detective-like activity, but this exploration does not result in finding a solution; rather, it reveals ambiguous stories and unstable identities.

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4. POSTMODERNISM VS. INSTRUMENTALITY

Postmodern detectives in videogames still have a long way to go in order to achieve the complexity and ambiguity found in other media – the games discussed here are relatively rare case studies. In two of the examples covered in this article (*Blade Runner* and *Deadly Premonition*), the postmodernism derives from their sources of inspiration.

This may be because the current aesthetics of games seem to be at odds with postmodernism. Players write walk-throughs and guides to tell other players how to complete every game and find all their secrets. They treat the games as a puzzle, as a solvable problem, derived from the tendency to instrumentalize interactions in games and from the misguided belief that games are eminently rule systems that players abide

by, rather than coming up with their own goals and motivations (Taylor 2007: 113). Many game makers and players are still uncomfortable with instability and lack of resolution, so they look for ways to master the text, to fix it, to resolve ambiguity.

The epitome of this type of instrumentalization is exemplified by the so-called "achievements" (also known as trophies or badges), which are featured in the more recent games, *Deadly Premonition* and *Her Story*. These achievements are non-diegetic and mark the progress and specific feats or activities that the player can do. When the player performs a certain action, the game pops in a window telling the player they achieved something, from completing an episode of the story to performing some convoluted action, thus rewarding exploratory play. These achievements give a sense of completion and mastery to players; some players look for the list of achievements in each game and try to reveal all of them, so that the motivation to play lies outside the game and its fictional world—achievements can be listed on the online profile of a player, so having a lot of them can provide social status in the community of expert and dedicated players. Thus some players try to find all the secrets of games not because curiosity on the narrative, but because they can provide a quantifiable, demonstrable proof of their dedication.

Because of their non-diegetic status, on the other hand, achievements also have the potential to serve as a meta-comment on the game itself. *Her Story* does this subtly—one of its achievements is called "Score Draw", which can be obtained by playing a clone of the game Reversi, a.k.a. Othello in its commercial version. It is a game within the game called Mirror, and the achievement is unlocked by getting the two players to draw. The name of the game refers to the theme of doubles and mirror identities, which is a core theme in the story, while getting a draw in the game is rather difficult and requires careful planning. By playing the game to a draw the game is also pointing at the core trope of the game, where the two main interpretations are possible and neither is more predominant. The description of the achievement is "there are no winners or losers," and becomes the ultimate attempt at reminding players that *Her Story* is not about winning. And yet the game needs to state this with a trophy, repurposing the instrumentalization of the interactions to make statement about the ambiguous status of the story.

Deadly Premonition: Director's Cut also uses achievements in a way that can be regarded as undermining instrumentalization. The game rewards the player with trophies for carrying out certain actions, such as completing an episode in the main storyline, or helping someone. Unlike *Her Story*, *Deadly Premonition* does not use the achievement system to comment on the game itself. Most of the achievements are awarded for completing tasks for the secondary characters, rather than the more videogame-like aspects of the game, such as fighting zombies or car racing. Although the achievement system is not taken advantage as a metafiction, it may trick some players into exploring the fictional world and the stories of its inhabitants by appealing to their completionist or instrumentalist impulses. In both cases, *Her Story* and *Deadly Premonition* use achievements as a way to seemingly provide closure, solvability to their stories, to the instability and lack of closure of their worlds.

5. CONCLUSION

Videogames, as a medium, have enough established conventions and expressive devices to give way to postmodern works that undermine, subvert and comment on them. It is game creators that should realize of its potential and shake off the shackles from traditional storytelling, especially the mainstream narratives of Hollywood film and TV shows. The case studies here show

how, even when the source of inspiration comes from film or television, interactive media can thrive in terms of letting the player explore texts that are ambiguous, unstable and transformative in ways very much in consonance with postmodernist sensibilities.

The challenge, however, is to fight the expectations of players, who tackle the traversal of a game text as an activity that rewards mastery, that encourages them to find the ultimate solution to a problem and eliminates ambiguity. Even though clarity and stability are not inherent to the properties of videogames, these expectations also have become part of the philosophy of many game creators, thus undermining the expressive possibilities of digital interactivity. The games discussed here have all been critically acclaimed for their innovation and unusual approach to narrative, but have not been quite discussed in terms of postmodernity.

Even when the content of a game may not be classified within the detective genre, there are narrative games that can be considered detective-like because they challenge the player to decode it as part of their gameplay. Works such as *Kentucky Route Zero* (Cardboard Computer, 2018-2020) or *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012) involve interpreting texts that are unstable or ambiguous; whereas the premise of the recent *Lamplight City* (Grundislav Games, 2018) is that it is a detective game which players can play through without solving any of the cases in it, challenging the conventions of puzzle-driven adventure games. The new frontier of postmodern detective fiction may be inherent to narrative videogames, not as a new strand of the genre, but as the next generation of digital narratives. ∎

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POSTMODERN DETECTIVE FICTION IN VIDEOGAMES

Abstract

The tropes of the detective genre have been challenged, subverted, re-appropriated by authors such as Robert Coover or Paul Auster, which exemplify the foundations of postmodern detective fiction. In these stories, solving the mystery is not central to the story, and the investigation is transformed or derailed by becoming a discovery of something completely different. In some cases, the detective, along with the reader, explores an encyclopedic space of information without quite solving the case. This article examines how videogames open up new territory in the genre of postmodern of detective stories by comparing them with their literary counterparts. Videogames can have the player explore aspects of the narrative that may not be directly relevant to the mystery to be solved, or by create a mystery that may be unstable and dependent on the choices of the player. The novels analyzed are Coover's *Noir* (2008) and Paul Auster's *City of Glass* (1985), which will be compare with the games *Her Story* (Sam Barlow, 2015), *Blade Runner* (Westwood Studios, 1997) and *Deadly Premonition: Director's Cut* (Access Games, 2010). This comparison allows us to identify three basic features of postmodern detective fiction that transfer well to digital games: the city as an explorable and navigable space, unstable identities, and metafictional references.

Key words

Detective fiction; Videogames; Adaptation; Noir; Postmodern.

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LITERATURA DETECTIVESCA POSMODERNA Y VIDEOJUEGOS

Resumen

Los tropos de la literatura detectivesca han sido desafiados, subvertidos y reapropiados por autores tales como Robert Coover o Paul Auster, quienes ejemplifican la esencia de la literatura posmoderna de detectives. En estas historias, resolver el misterio no es central a la historia, y la investigación cambia de rumbo, hasta incluso perderlo, al volverse una peripecia, para descubrir algo completamente distinto. En algunos casos, el detective, junto al lector, explora un espacio enciclopédico de información sin llegar a resolver el caso. Este artículo examina cómo los videojuegos abren camino en el género de historias de detectives posmodernas a través de su comparación con sus homólogos literarios. Los videojuegos pueden hacer que el jugador explore aspectos de la narrativa que no son directamente relevantes con respecto al misterio que se ha de resolver, o crean un misterio que pude ser inestable y que depende de las elecciones del jugador. Las novelas analizadas son *Noir* (2008), de Robert Coover, y *Ciudad de cristal* (City of Glass, 1985), de Paul Auster, que son comparadas con los juegos *Her Story* (Sam Barlow, 2015), *Blade Runner* (Westwood Studios, 1997) y *Deadly Premonition: Director's Cut* (2010). Esta comparación nos permite identificar tres características básicas de la literatura posmoderna de detectives que se traducen en los juegos digitales: la ciudad como espacio navegable, identidades inestables y referencias metaficcionales.

Palabras clave

Literatura policiaca; Detectives; Videojuegos; Adaptación; *Noir*; Posmodernidad.

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