

THE DEVIL OF EMOTIONAL GAMEPLAY IS IN THE DETAILS. MICROANALYSIS OF AFFECTIVELY COMPLEX SCENARIOS IN VIDEO GAMES

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The literary theorist Keith Oatley defines fiction as emotional simulation (Oatley, 1999, 2011: 17). As such, fiction offers us emotional rehearsals that sometimes combine diverse and unique affective dimensions, through relationships of contrast, tension, or complementarity: experiences which, although they may reflect the familiar, everyday world, make us relive these emotions in a different light, giving them a distinct quality or a renewed intensity. In this article, I propose to offer a theoretical outline of the notion of emotionally complex scenarios in video games, combining pre-existing theory related to emotional narratology with an inductive approach based on five micro-case studies (analyses of video game scenes and fragments).

Part of the originality of this study lies in its methodological perspective, which differs from (hegemonic) studies of narrative complexity that focus on the cognitive dimension, the notion of the “puzzle film”, or the structural complexity

of the narration as a whole (Mittell, 2006, 2015; Buckland, 2009), and from the current trend of experiential analysis based on big data and gameplay metrics (Wallner & Kriglstein, 2015, and the projects of the Software Studies Initiative¹). Adopting a perspective similar to that taken by García Catalán, Sorolla Romero & Martín Núñez (2019), I propose to (re-)interpret narrative complexity as a phenomenon that can and should (also) be understood with a focus on the emotional dimension and through micro-qualitative analysis. This analytical approach identifies and evaluates short video game passages with a special affective significance. Without having to be totally isolated from the whole, these passages can be of interest if subjected to a detailed analysis that considers them with a certain degree of autonomy. In other words, paraphrasing the popular expression, I seek to argue that the devil of emotional complexity in video games is in the details.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

One of the seminal concepts in the affective analysis of narrative can be found in the aesthetic of reception of the Constanza School. In the 1970s, Wolfgang Iser (1980) and Hans Robert Jauss (1986) posited an approach to literary textual analysis oriented towards elucidating the reader's "aesthetic experience". Going beyond the cognitive construction of the narrative (inferences, cognitive schemes, etc.), the aesthetic of reception also considered affective aspects, such as the processes of identification with characters. As a theoretical framework for this study, I will adopt a range of concepts from film studies and Game Studies in line with the perspective of the Constanza School, although not necessarily directly associated with it.

Since the 1970s, film studies has developed a strong tradition of textual psychoanalysis, combining psychoanalytical theory with ideological interpretations (Plantinga & Smith, 1999: 10-13; Stam, Burgoyne & Flitterman-Lewis, 1999: 147-211). At the same time, other perspectives related to cognitive or cognitive-emotional psychology, evolutionary psychology, and neuropsychology have also gained currency (Bordwell, 1996; Smith, 1995; Plantinga & Smith, 1999; Grodal, 2009; Plantinga, 2009). As a key reference for this study, I adopt Carl Plantinga's cognitive-emotional theory of the fiction film viewer's experience (2009). Plantinga's model is based on a taxonomy of categories of the film viewer's emotional responses, four of which are highlighted in this study (2009: 69):

Direct emotions: emotions elicited by a particular event in the story (e.g. surprise in response to a plot twist).

Sympathetic/antipathetic emotions: emotions we feel towards characters in the story (admiration, compassion, etc.).

Meta-emotions: emotions based on another emotion felt previously while watching a film. For

example, after wishing for the death of a particular character, we may feel guilty or ashamed for doing so.

Artifact[-related] emotions: emotions related to the construction of the film itself as an object, or its creators. For example, we may feel admiration for the screenwriter's clever narrative construction, or amazement at the spectacular nature of certain special effects, etc.

The main limitation of Plantinga's approach is the lack of attention it accords to the social factor and to sociohistorical change to explain the emotional experience of the film. Instead, it maps out the relatively stable foundations of the emotional experience with fiction films, taking Hollywood cinema as a reference. Cultural studies, on the other hand, place a greater emphasis on the connection between emotions and the social context. For example, Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner (1990) analysed social changes in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s through mainstream cinema, revealing connections like those between social tensions and the emotional dimension of horror films. This type of approach (see also Deleyto, 2003) is associated with the so-called "affective turn" in contemporary cultural studies, when various researchers began turning their attention to emotional questions in cultural analysis (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Berlant, 2011; Ahmed, 2015). These authors argue that the emotions possess a social and political potential that goes beyond the analysis of individual psyches or uniquely personal experiences, and that is intimately linked to culture:

Affect in their work is that which both restricts and makes possible the notions of personal, collective, and emergent identities. For these theorists, affect is a deeply relational force that attaches itself to and is expressed through all kinds of cultural texts (Anable, 2018: 10).

In the case of video Game Studies, the focus on affect gained ground in the field very quickly. Pioneering explorations of video game design (Rollings & Morris, 2003; Hunnicke, Leblanc & Zubeck,

2004; Fullerton, 2008) have viewed video game creation as an experiential art, as the creators design the rules and mechanics of the game (along with images, soundtrack, etc.), which serve as a means to a greater end: to offer players a particular type of experience. However, the emotional spectrum of these studies was somewhat limited, with the biggest emphasis placed on explaining player enjoyment and its constituent pleasures, categorised with particular success in Hunnicke, Leblanc & Zubek's taxonomy: sensation, challenge, discovery, fantasy, etc. More recently, in her book *How Games Move Us*, Katherine Isbister (2016) has explored the emotional design of video games with attention to the features of contemporary indie games, some of which are rarely found in mainstream products (impotence, contemplation, etc.). At the same time, she outlines some basic dimensions of the emotional experience in the medium, such as decision-making processes, empathy and identification with the avatar, and social interaction. A particularly important reference work in this area is Aubrey Anable's *Playing with Feelings* (2018), which transfers the "affective turn" in cultural studies to the field of Video Game Studies. Based on Raymond Williams' concept of "structures of feeling", Anable argues that the emotional experience of video games is intimately linked to the social context and the dynamics of our everyday lives, and invariably contains a political and ideological component.

BASED ON RAYMOND WILLIAMS' CONCEPT OF "STRUCTURES OF FEELING", ANABLE ARGUES THAT THE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE OF VIDEO GAMES IS INTIMATELY LINKED TO THE SOCIAL CONTEXT AND THE DYNAMICS OF OUR EVERYDAY LIVES

FIVE MICROANALYSES OF EMOTIONAL COMPLEXITY IN VIDEO GAMES

Applying the theoretical framework outlined above, I propose to explore five examples of emotional complexity in video games in the form of microanalyses. Methodologically, the analyses are based on a combination of textual analysis of the game, Plantinga's theory of the emotional experience in film viewing (2009) and film microanalysis (Zunzunegui, 2016). From video game textual analysis I will take the analytical instruments and concepts necessary to dissect both the game design itself (game rules and gameplay patterns) and the game's narrative design, as well as the interaction between the two (Fernández-Vara, 2015; Planells, 2015; Navarro, 2016; Pérez-Latorre, 2012). From Plantinga's theory (2009), I will take the typology of the film viewer's emotions outlined above, together with some other concepts that will be discussed at different points in the analyses, such as "working-through scenarios" and "empathy scenarios".

In relation to film microanalysis, in his book *La mirada cercana*, Zunzunegui (2016) proposes a "close-up" film analysis, i.e., focusing on short fragments: a sequence, or a limited series of shots. On the one hand, he argues that in such micro-sequences it is possible to "observe the encapsulation of the main constituent elements of the film from which they are taken" (2016: 19). On the other, as he demonstrates in his analysis, the extraction from the film of the moments chosen makes it easier to make the jump towards more "abstract" considerations, beyond the film in itself. Thus, paradoxically, microanalysis can help us to better understand the essence of the film, while at the same time proving liberating for the analyst on the interpretive level.

The five case studies chosen here are scenes from the video games *The Walking Dead: Season 2* (Telltale Games, 2013-14), *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015), *What Remains of Edith*

Finch (Giant Sparrow, 2017), *Rinse and Repeat* (Robert Yang, 2015), and *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North, 2009). This corpus has been selected mainly with a view to covering various analytical categories in Plantinga's model. In addition, the last case study will also serve to illustrate what I have identified as the main limitation of Plantinga's theory: the sociohistorical background to the viewer's emotional experience. At the same time, I have taken into account my own personal memory as a video game enthusiast, based on the premise that memorable scenes for a gamer are often associated with unique or intense emotional experiences (on the relationship between emotion and memory, see Ruiz-Vargas, 1997).

1. Clementine's gloom: *The Walking Dead* 2, implicit sub-plots, mise-en-scène, and empathy scenarios

The interrelated nature of two scenes in *The Walking Dead: Season 2* offers an example of emotional (micro-)complexity based on feelings of empathy towards characters (Plantinga, 2009). This post-apocalyptic video game follows the difficult coming-of-age of Clementine, a girl who goes from being the co-protagonist in the first season to become the protagonist (now an adolescent) and player's avatar in the second. In the final episode of the second season, "No Going Back", there is a scene where Clementine has to walk for a long time in search of a new place to take refuge, together with an adult (Kenny or Jane, depending on the previous plot options chosen) and the baby Alvin. Clem's pilgrimage through the post-apocalyptic wasteland gives rise to a small cluster of narrative directions, two of which offer some interesting implicit affective connections.

In one of these plotlines, Clementine, Kenny, and the baby reach the town of Wellington only to discover that their promised land is surrounded by a metallic wall. After a brief conversation, the security guard offers to let only Clem and the baby enter. The player must thus decide whether

to keep the group together and return to the wasteland, or to enter Wellington with the baby, leaving Kenny behind. Whatever the player decides, the scene acquires a strong dramatic charge, concluding with an image of the doors into Wellington closing, whether they be separating the group or shutting all three outside to face the dangers of the post-apocalyptic world once again.

A few scenes earlier, Clem could have chosen to take the previous journey with Jane instead of Kenny. In this plotline, Clem, Jane and the baby Alvin do not arrive at Wellington, but instead come to an abandoned store, where they decide to take shelter. Shortly after arriving, a family of two parents with a son who is slightly younger than Clementine come to the gated door of the building. They explain to Clem and Jane that they are hungry, tired, and in need of help. The game then poses a moral dilemma: whether to allow the strangers in (with all the risks or problems that this might entail) or to keep the door closed (on the relationship between morality and video game design, see Sicart, 2013). If the player chooses the second option, the parents chide Clem with a brief but bitter reproach, and as they depart the boy turns back for a moment and offers her a devastated look.

There is a potential affective connection between these two scenes, which emerges between the pity we feel for Clem (and Kenny and the baby) in the first, and a more complex blend of sadness, disappointment and sympathy for her in the second (with the decision to turn away the travellers). Moreover, after following the Wellington plotline (either beforehand or afterwards), the sadness/disappointment we feel over Clem's decision to turn away the travellers acquires an even more intensely bitter sting. In short, the game shows us how a person (Clem/the player) can go (too) easily from being a victim to a perpetrator of discrimination against outsiders.

The subtlety of the design details and the visual composition give these connected scenes as



Fig. 1, fig. 2. *The Walking Dead: Season 2*

a whole the added value of an emotionally complex scenario. While a highlight of the Wellington scene is the view from inside the city of the doors closing, the scene in the store is marked by the presence of the boy, who provides a tragic resonance with the other scene, as we can see Clementine herself reflected in him. The final shot-reverse shot between Clem and the boy (figs. 1 and 2), with Clem unable to hold his gaze the whole time, constitutes an example of what Plantinga calls “empathy scenarios” (2009: 126): key moments in certain scenes where the editing gradually leads to one or more shots that close in on the faces of the character(s), drawing out the pace of the montage, leading to an emotionally climactic moment. In this way, the boy’s devastated gaze and the reverse shot of Clementine’s cold, gloomy expression, as she has never been shown until this moment, constitute a turning point in the emotional evolution of the game.

2. Kate’s suicide in *Life is Strange*: guilt and impotence

In the first episode and during the first part of the second episode of *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015), Max (the player/protagonist) is given hints that Kate Marsh (a friend of hers) is having problems. Apparently, some intimate videos of Kate are being shared among the students

at Blackwell Academy. Max sees Kate looking worried and anxious at different moments, but sometimes Kate tells her to leave her alone.

Kate’s situation is presented as a sub-plot, while the centre of gravity of the narrative turns on the relationship between Max and Chloe, the disappearance of Chloe’s close friend Rachel, and a mysterious supernatural power that Max has discovered in herself, which allows her to turn back time. The game thus confronts the player with the dilemma of how to divide her attention between the mysteries of the main plot and Kate’s predicament. One scene in particular raises this problem explicitly by forcing the player to choose between a conversation with Chloe and a phone call from Kate. In addition, when she goes to Kate’s room to return a book, the player has the opportunity to look over some of her friend’s possessions, like photographs, notes, and underlined passages in books. A caption appears on the screen, showing what Max is thinking: “She is way too emo.” The player may interpret this message either as an invitation to dig a little deeper, or as a sufficient summary of the information to be found there.

Towards the end of the second episode, events take a serious turn: Kate leaps from the rooftop of one of the buildings of Blackwell Academy. Max successfully uses her supernatural power once again, rewinding time to reach Kate on the roof-

top in time to talk to her. It is then that the player discovers that her empathy for Kate's character in the previous scenes will prove crucial to her ability to resolve the situation.

If she does not give Kate much attention, perhaps with the idea of dealing with her situation later, the rooftop conversation will be more complicated, and the most likely outcome (as occurred in my case) is that the player cannot change Kate's mind, and she ends up committing suicide. In this case, Max (the player) will not be able to activate her power to turn back time, as she suffers a kind of blockage or burnout due to the stress of the situation.

The potential emotional effects of this scene in *Life is Strange* cover several of Plantinga's analytical categories (2009), and at the same time suggest

a number of adaptations of the theory for application to the video game medium. First of all, "direct emotions", which in films Plantinga associates with those elicited by the events of the plot, in video games are complementary to the emotions we feel based on our own actions and decisions and their consequences in the game. The player's frustration over having failed would be an example of this variant of "direct emotions" in video games. In any case, in the scene of Kate's suicide this frustration takes on some special nuances.

In a medium typically associated with the reversibility of decisions (the option to play again), Dontnod Entertainment manages to square the circle by imposing an experience of irreversibility, giving the scene a particularly tragic effect. By integrating Max's power to rewind time into the

gameplay, the removal of that power in the scene of Kate's suicide generates an especially intense sense of impotence. On the other hand, the contrast between picking up on small hints at the right moment and the fatal consequences of failing to notice them make the rooftop scene especially effective as a catalyst for regret and guilt in the player.

The mise-en-scène gives the sequence an aura of heightened significance: what at one point seemed to be just another sub-plot suddenly immerses the player in a scene that highlights Kate's importance. Max and her

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Fig. 3. *Life is Strange*



friend are isolated from the other characters on the roof, creating a private bubble of their own in the rain, veiled in a grey mist (fig. 3). Meanwhile, the image progressively moves in on their faces, culminating in an empathy scenario (Plantinga, 2009: 126).

The skilful dramatisation of guilt and impotence in the scene tends to trigger or intensify the player's disappointment at having failed this implicit challenge of empathy posed by the game. And this works in the opposite direction as well: the player's personal disappointment accentuates her feelings of guilt and impotence, generating a kind of affective loop bordering on what Plantinga calls the meta-emotional dimension (emotions based on previous emotions). As Martín-Núñez, García-Catalán & Rodríguez-Serrano (2016: 6) point out in relation to *Life is Strange*, "guilt punctures the *magic circle* (Huizinga), breaking down that space that would protect the player from the effects of the game."

3. Ludification of memory, alleviation of loss: the ending to *What Remains of Edith Finch*

In a reinterpretation of Aristotle's theory of catharsis, Plantinga suggests that one of the key factors behind our love of narrative consists in what he calls "working-through scenarios" (2009: 169-190), affective processes normally located at the end of the story, which combine sadness and pain with an implicit suggestion of their recoding in more positive terms, from an emotionally constructive perspective. Thus, when a story leads

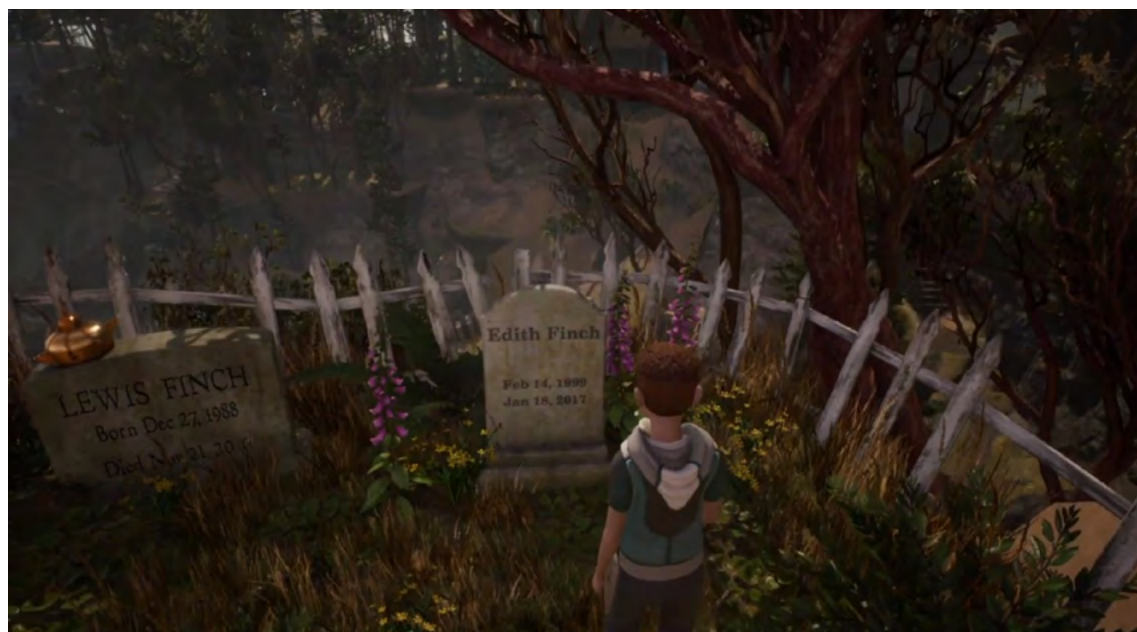


Fig. 4. *What Remains of Edith Finch*

to one of these scenarios of affective resilience, along with a tragedy befalling an important character or a bitter denouement, it often goes hand-in-hand with a kind of implicit cognitive-emotional hook on an interpretative level, which each reader/spectator/player can apply in her own way. At the end of *What Remains of Edith Finch*, Edith's diary becomes a clear example of this kind of emotional/interpretative hook.

Throughout the game, the character/player (whose identity is not revealed until the end) is reading Edith's diary, which serves as a guide to the player's exploration of the Finch family's old mansion. With the diary as a unifying thread, the player uncovers a series of deaths of different family members, ranging from the tragic to the comic, in an atmosphere of magic realism. These deaths turn into playable scenes, elegiac mini-games that use a combination of memory and imagination, grief and affection to reconstruct the last moments of Edith's ancestors, many of whom died young (on video game design as "translation" and "enactment" of the experiences of others, see Muriel & Crawford, 2018: 86-98).

Coming to the end, we read in the diary that Edith has discovered that she is pregnant, and shortly thereafter she reveals a gloomy premonition: she doesn't want her future son or daughter to read the stories in her diary, as she wants to be able to explain them herself. The game then places the player in a highly unusual setting: a kind of long, dark tunnel with bumpy walls that glimmer in violet. Edith's thoughts are expressed in a voice-over and shown dancing over the scene shown on screen with the dynamic calligraphy that characterises the game. Little by little, we realise that we are inside Edith's uterus, viewing it from the point of view of her baby, who is trying to find the way out. Upon reaching the end, a white light bathes the scene, and we see the words: "This is where your story begins." We then realise that we have reached the end of the diary; there are no more written pages. In the role of the son we close the diary, and the next image shows the body of our avatar from behind. Edith's son walks towards a gravestone bearing the name Edith Finch, where the figure lays some flowers. The camera rises through a tree next to the grave, and the game concludes with the image of Finch's mansion in the distance.

As suggested above, Edith's diary symbolises the emotional hook of a working-through scenario, an element for a potential constructive reinterpretation of sad or tragic events through fiction. The diary, with its reenactments of the deaths of Edith's relatives, which turn into (playable) game scenarios for the user, is a kind of hymn to the imagination, responding to the tragedy and absurdity of death in an affectionately playful way. It is a lesson addressed not only to Edith's son, but also to the player herself, going further than mere metaphor.

Through personal resonance, the viewer/player often connects her own personal experiences to fiction –in this case, painful or frustrating experiences (Igartua, 2007: 49-56; Plantinga, 2009: 75-77). In this way, when a story leads to a sce-

nario of affective resilience, in some cases the viewer not only recodes the character's pain or grief constructively, but also to some extent the viewer's own experiences, painful or bitter memories in her own life that resonate (consciously or unconsciously) in her emotional memory. This may give rise to a genuine sense of alleviation, reflecting the notion of catharsis as a means of purging negative feelings. No doubt this is why many players (myself included) feel sad and yet happy at the same time at the end of *What Remains of Edith Finch*, with the sensation of having been comforted in some small way.

4. Sensuality, humour, estrangement: *Rinse and Repeat*

One day, in a gym shower, a muscular, sexy Adonis appears, dressed only in a pair of aviator sunglasses. An erotic melody and the slow-motion visuals recreate the fascination of someone else in the shower on seeing the Adonis: the character/player. This is the beginning of *Rinse and Repeat*, Robert Yang's small-format video game about a homoerotic relationship.

The Adonis ends up taking the spot in the shower beside the character/player, and at one point asks for help to lather up. At first, it is just on the parts of his back that he can't reach on his own; but if the character/player does it well, the ritual of seduction will go on.

The gameplay experience in *Rinse and Repeat* offers a particular blend of sensuality and humour. The sensuality of the game lies in its graphic photorealism, which highlights the Adonis' beauty with its detailed depiction of the shower water running over his body. The design of the interaction is simple but elegant, involving tracing circles or ovals with a soaped-up hand over the part of the body indicated by the Adonis, neither too quickly nor too slowly, in a balanced and gentle manner (on the aesthetic consistency between the mechanics of interaction and the theme/storyline, see Sicart, 2008). However, the erotic

gameplay is abruptly interrupted when the Adonis deems a phase of the lathering over and assesses the player's performance. A yellow neon sign then appears over his face, indicating the player's percentile score. It is impossible to reconcile eroticism with the obsession with quantitative metrics that has become a convention of mainstream video games. But rather than merely pointing this out, Yang makes us experience it through emotional dissonance. Moreover, the clash of aesthetics created by the hyperbolic scoreboard embedded in the Adonis' sunglasses gives the game its comic element with a touch of parody.

A second instance of emotional dissonance in *Rinse and Repeat* is related to what Plantinga (2009) calls "artifact emotions" (in films): in this case, a sensation of estrangement, associated with a subversion of expectations. As noted above, Yang vests this small scene with a gay eroticism based on photorealist graphics and a meticulously detailed design and setting on a par with triple-A video games. As a result, unlike other indie games, this is not a game that distinguishes itself from the mainstream by the crudeness of its gra-

phics (Juul, 2019), as its subversiveness lies in Yang's re-appropriation of photorealism to create characters and relationships outside the norm for popular video games.

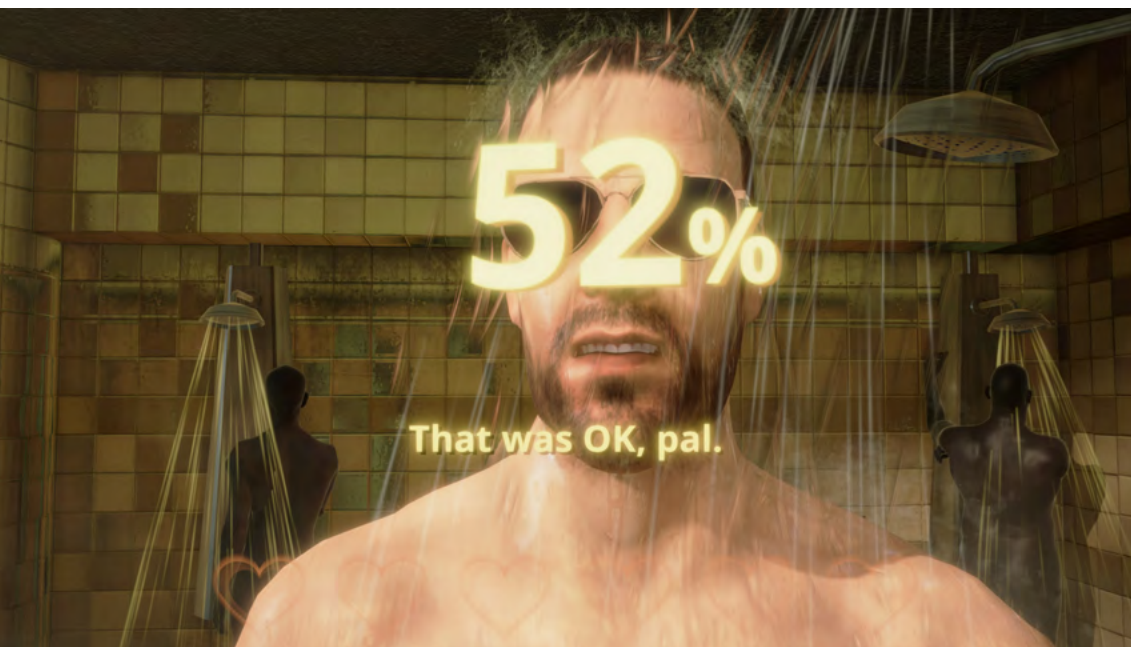
Sensuality, humour, estrangement and an implicit critique of the video game medium itself, are thus all contained in a shower.

5. Ludonarrative irony and labour flexibility: the hearse scene in *Grand Theft Auto IV*

In the "Undertaker" mission in *Grand Theft Auto IV*, the character/player Niko Bellic has to drive a hearse carrying the coffin of a gangster murdered by Niko himself. Accompanying him in the passenger seat is Patrick McReary, the victim's brother, who is unaware that Niko is the killer. The situation quickly turns into an obstacle race through the city, with Niko having to escape a rival group of gangsters with some old scores to settle with the dead man's family, who chase the hearse and open fire on it. At one point, the gunshots blow open the back of the hearse, and the coffin begins sliding backwards towards the door.

The game's difficulty curve steepens now, as the player is faced with the additional challenge of driving with sufficient care to prevent the coffin from falling out. The objective is to reach the graveyard within a set time limit without losing the coffin. The scene contains an ironic ludonarrative dissonance (Hocking, 2007) between the extreme delicacy needed to drive the car (each little bump or curve will push the coffin

Fig. 5. *Rinse and Repeat*



another inch towards the door) and the fact that Niko himself is the killer of the dead man he is trying to deliver.²

In his ignorance, Patrick constantly offers Niko advice and encouragement, in a situation that turns him into a particularly poignant figure. Patrick, familiar to us from previous episodes of the story, is an obnoxious character in many respects. The designers thus add a touch of sadistic pleasure to the gameplay experience, providing players with a pseudo-moral justification to enjoy it (Zillman, 2006).

On the other hand, as Aubrey Anable stresses in *Playing with Feelings* (2018), the social context should not be overlooked in any analysis of the emotional experiences elicited by a video game. In this sense, the *GTA* saga is an especially interesting case. The narrative mechanics that characterise the saga, consisting of alternating jobs for very different mafia families, reflects the labour tensions of the age, which have been worsening in parallel with successive versions of the game since the 1990s. The effects of globalisation in relation to labour market flexibility, short-term contracts, and precarious employment, which especially affect young people (Standing, 2013), are expressed in *GTA*, which constitutes a pop manifestation of the phenomenon in the contemporary social imaginary. The “Undertaker” mission is quintessential in this sense: the story of a hustler who, shortly after killing a man, ends up with the job to drive his own victim’s hearse, with the added irony of the cautious

gameplay required to protect the coffin, all together turns “Undertaker” into an iconic and sarcastic metaphor for the miseries of labour flexibility.

But in addition to reflecting their social context, video games also often have a kind of “recuperative” component (Kirkpatrick, 2013: pos. 2382; Anable, 2018). In different ways, they provide elements that alleviate or purge the very social tensions they reflect (or at least refract on an allegorical level). Thus, beyond the pleasure of the victory itself, the overcoming of certain problems or challenges in the game may (either consciously or unconsciously) represent something more for us, resonating with our own everyday lives. In the case of “Undertaker”, the touch of sadistic pleasure in the poignancy of the character of Patrick also plays a role in this sense, as a kind of vengeful purging. It is important to remember that Patrick is the brother of one of the main leaders of the families that run Liberty City, and Patrick himself is Niko’s boss in some of the game’s missions.

Nevertheless, the recuperative potential of fiction and video games is an ambivalent phenomenon, always open to questioning. In an ideological

Fig. 6. *Grand Theft Auto IV*



critique, Kirkpatrick (2013: pos. 2475) warns of the potential social effect of this kind of comfort food in fiction and entertainment:

Computer games are recuperative for individuals and [...] a perverse consequence of their effectiveness in this is sometimes the extension of aspects of the system that make recuperation necessary.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I have sought to show that narrative complexity and gameplay do not need to be understood solely or essentially as phenomena related to large-scale structural architectures, narrative baroque (N'Dalianis, 2004) or technically sophisticated analysis based on big data. Without underestimating the value of such ideas and approaches, I argue here for a way of understanding complexity that foregrounds the detail, the affective, and the qualitative. This is an analytical approach oriented towards the subtle compositional balance, harmonising of expressive forms, and attention to nuances, which are sometimes encapsulated almost magically in a short scene or stage in a video game. Although such scenes may be simple in appearance, their subtle complexity gives rise to unique emotional experiences that are engraved in the player's memory.

Keith Oatley (1999, 2011) is right when he asserts that fiction should be conceived of as emotional simulation that takes place not in a computer but in our minds. But how do we dissect the operation of video games as emotional simulation in this sense? In this article, I have proposed a combination of textual analysis of video games, the cognitive theory of the emotional experience in film viewing (Plantinga, 2009), and film microanalysis (Zunzunegui, 2016). Plantinga's model has proved useful for a deeper textual analysis of video games that is (more) attentive to the player's affective experience (Navarro, 2016). However, I have also shown that his model suffers from certain limitations or imbalances, notably due to its

lack of attention to the role of socio-historical context as a means of amplifying our emotional experiences. At the same time, the application of film theory to video game analysis obviously requires some nuancing and adaptation: in particular, the analyses in this article highlight the importance of balancing ludonarrative analysis (taking into account the two aspects of interaction and narration that characterise most video games) and the affective dimension. On the other hand, the value of giving (more) attention to visual composition in video game analysis is also worth highlighting. Although it may seem obvious, the vital importance that has been given in Game Studies to the theory of procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2006), notwithstanding the many advantages it has offered, has also had some (self-)limiting effects. The pre-eminence that this theory gives to ludic structures implicitly entails an undervaluing of visual composition in video game analysis. And yet, the role of the image, including specific shots, is essential to the player's emotional experience (Martín-Núñez, 2020).

In this respect, film microanalysis is a particularly interesting approach for the analysis of emotions in video games, with the necessary adjustments. This is not only because the method is adaptable to the liquid or fragmentary nature of the affective dimension of the texts, but also because of its potential as an alternative to video game textual analysis, and for recognising attention to detail and pauses as an intellectual attitude rather than as a particular type of video game/product (Navarro, 2020).

The potential uses or applications of the affective analysis of video games are many, but one essential matter with an ethical dimension is worth highlighting: to think of the video game more empathically, and in so doing, to enrich our understanding of the medium from an analytical and critical distance. To learn to look better from close up, in order to see better from afar. ■

NOTES

- 1 Software Studies Initiative: http://lab.softwarestudies.com/p/research_14.html.
- 2 It is worth reassessing the concept of "ludonarrative dissonance", which Hocking (2007) defines in strictly critical, negative terms in relation to video game design, given the value of such dissonance for irony, comic effect, etc.

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THE DEVIL OF EMOTIONAL GAMEPLAY IS IN THE DETAILS. MICROANALYSIS OF AFFECTIVE COMPLEXITY SCENARIOS IN VIDEO GAMES

Abstract

This article offers an exploration and conceptualisation of emotionally complex scenarios in video games, taking an approach based on the textual analysis of video games, the cognitive theory of the spectator's emotional experience, and film microanalysis. From this theoretical and methodological perspective, emotionally complex scenarios in video games are examined as brief scenes or sequences in a given video game, which tend to elicit an affective experience characterised by unique emotional combinations or tensions. To explain this experience, I propose a micro-analysis of the ludic and narrative design of the scene and the interactions between these two dimensions, without overlooking the importance of the mise-en-scène and visual composition.

Key words

Video games; Complexity; Emotion; Microanalysis; Experience.

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EL DEMONIO DEL GAMEPLAY EMOCIONAL ESTÁ EN LOS DETALLES. MICROANÁLISIS DE ESCENARIOS DE COMPLEJIDAD AFECTIVA EN VIDEOJUEGOS

Resumen

Este artículo propone una exploración y conceptualización de los escenarios de complejidad emocional en videojuegos, desde un enfoque basado en el análisis textual del videojuego, la teoría de la experiencia emocional del espectador y el microanálisis filmico. Desde este prisma teórico-metodológico, los escenarios de complejidad emocional del videojuego se abordan como breves pasajes o conjuntos de pasajes de un videojuego, donde tiende a suscitarse una experiencia afectiva caracterizada por mezclas o tensiones emocionales singulares, y cuya comprensión requiere un análisis *micro* del diseño lúdico y narrativo de la escena y las interacciones entre ambas dimensiones, sin olvidar el relevante papel de la puesta en escena y la composición del plano.

Palabras clave

Videojuegos; Complejidad; Emoción; Microanálisis; Experiencia.

Autor

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