

LUDONARRATIVE COMPLEXITY IN VIDEO GAMES: A DOUBLE BOOMERANG*

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Look, Stanley, I think perhaps we've gotten off on the wrong foot here. I'm not your enemy—really, I'm not! I realize that putting your trust in someone is difficult, but this story has been about nothing but you all this time. There's someone you've been neglecting, Stanley, someone you've forgotten about. Please, stop trying to make every decision by yourself. [...] What, really? I was in the middle of something; do you have zero consideration for others? Are you that convinced that I want something bad to happen to you? Why, I don't know how to convince you of this, but I really do want to help you, to show you something beautiful. Look, let me prove it. Let me prove that I am on your side. Give me a chance. (The Narrator, *The Stanley Parable*, Davey Wreden, Galactic Cafe, 2011).

The Stanley Parable puts the player in the skin of Stanley, an office worker accustomed to following orders, who one fine day is puzzled to find that he hasn't received any and decides to leave his office to find out what's going on. The narrator, in a voice-over, recounts the events that unfold, but he does so in the past tense, inviting the player to follow a fixed story—because things *have already happened* somehow. However, players can also assert their *agency*¹ in the system to challenge events that *have already happened* and override them. As players advance in the game, their actions and decisions will elicit reactions from the narrator, who will change his behaviour accordingly, even making fun of his blind obedience to the system and confessing that he is being contro-

lled by a player, or conversely, begging the player to listen to him and trust him as if he were a jilted lover. *The Stanley Parable*, which runs in a loop (as after each ending the game restarts with slight differences that are subtle at first but become increasingly obvious, especially in relation to the narrator's attitude), constitutes an extremely lucid reflection on player agency and directed freedom in a game system, reflected in the tension between the narrator—and the game's *structured* narratives—and the player character—and his/her freedom to trigger *other* narratives. The game exhibits a complexity that adds a playful layer with the narrative to subvert fundamental components of video game language, like the player's role and function within the structured narrative,



The Stanley Parable

the betrayal of the gameplay loop, the impossible nature of a dichotomous ending (win/lose), or the reliability of the narrator, turning these into part of the ludonarrative design with a metadiscursive objective to reflect on the very nature of video games.

The Stanley Parable is just one example of how video game narratives have become more complex and increasingly interrelated with game design over the last decade. However, video games have always had complex ludonarrative structures. For this reason, to explore this complexity through the analysis of contemporary video games alone would result in an excessive simplification of the complicated relationship between game and narrative since the origins of the medium and would ignore the powerful influences of other cultural and audiovisual forms. The video game, as a remediating digital system that is already complex in itself, incorporates and updates elements taken from sources ranging from board games and sports to narrative forms like literature, performative forms like theatre, music and radio, as well as other visual elements drawn from photography, painting and illustration, and spatial ele-

ments associated with sculpture and architecture. However, for as long as the power of the consoles and rendering technologies have allowed, the film and television industry has been a prominent (albeit not the only) expressive and narrative point of reference, thanks to its hegemony in the construction of contemporary audiovisual narratives and the obvious familiarity of audiences with its expressive languages.

On the other hand, video game language and digital logic has also been identified as one of the sources of certain strategies in contemporary audiovisual media that challenge the classical modes of storytelling in mainstream cinema (Cubitt, 2004; Daly, 2010; Simons, 2014; Mittel, 2017), introducing narrative concepts that flirt with the logic of games and algorithms, such as “database narratives” (Kinder, 2002), “modular narratives” (Cameron, 2008, 2014), “mind-game films” (Elsaesser, 2009, 2013, 2014), “puzzle films” (Buckland, 2009, 2014), “procedural narratives” (Mittel, 2006, 2017), and “mind-tricking narratives” (Klecker, 2013), associated with different forms of narrative complexity. Complex narratives, which could be described as narratives that deliberate-

ly undermine the causal relationships and coherent progression of stories, are sometimes defined as contrary to canonical, linear, or mimetic norms by virtue of their association with systems theory, which links complexity to concepts like emergence, non-linearity, decentralized control, feedback loops, recurrences, self-organization, simulation, and distributed intelligence. All these concepts point to the idea that the whole is more than the sum of its parts or that small events have big consequences, known as the butterfly effect (Ryan, 2019: 29). The new digital technologies are also depicted as one of the causes of the perceptual disorders that prevent characters from differentiating between what is happening in their minds and what is happening in the outside world, in allusion to the influence of digital culture on the construction of personal subjectivity (Sorolla-Romero *et al.*, 2020).

Based on these ideas, the aim of this article is to examine the looping back of complex narrative influences in contemporary video games. These pathways of mutual influence between culture and digital technologies have been explored by Lev Manovich with his concept of “transcoding” (2001: 46). In this article, the focus is on how these influences act like a “double boomerang”, whereby, on the one hand, features that have always been inherent to video games are reclaimed and reintegrated into the ludonarrative layer, while, on the other, features of complexity adopted and re-created by post-classical cinema and other audiovisual media are integrated, once again, into that same videoludic narrative layer.

THE FOCUS OF THIS STUDY IS ON HOW THESE INFLUENCES ACT LIKE A “DOUBLE BOOMERANG”, WHEREBY FEATURES THAT HAVE ALWAYS BEEN INHERENT TO VIDEO GAMES ARE RECLAIMED AND REINTEGRATED INTO THE LUDONARRATIVE LAYER, WHILE FEATURES OF COMPLEXITY ADOPTED AND RE-CREATED BY POST-CLASSICAL CINEMA AND OTHER AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA ARE INTEGRATED, ONCE AGAIN, INTO THAT SAME VIDEOLUDIC NARRATIVE LAYER

This analysis of complexity as a double boomerang involves tracing the features of narrative complexity that have characterized video games historically, and the features of post-classical film narratives, and identifying them in a corpus of contemporary video games in order to analyse narrative design in relation to game design and emergent behaviours in players. The methodology for this study draws on explorations of video game narrative in Game Studies (Fernández-Vara, 2015; Planells, 2015; Navarro Remesal, 2016) from the perspective of semiotics (Pérez Latorre, 2012,

2017), audiovisual narrative and discourse analysis (Gaudreault & Jost, 1995; Gómez Tarín, 2011; Marzal & Gómez Tarín, 2015), and the model proposed by Hartmut Koenitz (2015) for the analysis of interactive narratives, focusing more on the system than on the resulting outcome, which is only one of multiple

possibilities. The combination of these models for video game analysis reflects the fact that narratives in video games call for specific methodologies and approaches, but also that many of these new paradigms are based on concepts from traditional narratology.

Of course, *narrative complexity* is a rather broad and vague term that can be extended to different forms of artistic and cultural expression (both contemporary and otherwise) that involve a multiplicity of elements and modes brought together to elicit wonder and surprise, where what matters is not so much the number of elements as their density and richness in the interaction of unpredictability and indeterminacy (Grishkova & Poulaki, 2019: 2). As Mittel (2006) has

pointed out, an element that seems to be shared by video games, “puzzle films” and complex television series is the player/spectator’s desire to be involved in the story while at the same time being surprised by the manipulations of the narrative processes. The aesthetic operational logic is therefore to enjoy the result while marvelling at its operating mechanisms. However, this complexity cannot be explained solely within the parameters of contemporary film, television, or video games, as these tie in with literary, artistic and experimental film traditions that can be traced back to the stories of Borges and Cortázar and to the films of Fritz Lang and Luis Buñuel, and also relate to a general principle of contemporary post-modern stories while also being associated with these and other contemporary disciplines like photography, comics, video art, performance art, net.art, and new discourses in poetry, the novel, the essay, and improvisational and experimental theatre.

I. THE FIRST BOOMERANG: LUDONARRATIVE COMPLEXITY IN VIDEO GAME HISTORY

The history of video games is usually depicted as an evolution from a challenge-focused “classical model” (Juul, 2011), which owes a lot to the first arcade games, to forms of interactive narration connected to cinema. From this perspective, what matters in a game is its ludic base (rules, objectives, effort, and outcome), to which the story is a cosmetic or in any case didactic addition, in a broad interpretation of Goffman’s “rules of irrelevance” (1967). In the academic context, this interpretation owes much to the initial efforts to establish the discipline of Game Studies on a movement that eschewed any analysis of the medium from the perspective of other disciplines, particularly narratology. Enough has already been written about this war between ludologists and narratologists (Kokonis, 2014; Aarseth, 2019). The industry has also represented the nature of the video game

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problematically as involving two different forces that invariably come into conflict with each other: an example of this is the concept of “ludonarrative dissonance” coined by the designer Clint Hocking in 2007 in his thematic and mechanic analysis of *Bioshock* (2K Games, 2007), which has turned into a (simplified) standard for the industry, critics, players, and even academics. In this sense, the preliminary bias was clear: analysing a game meant looking for the points where these two structures clashed.

Although traces of these ideas persist today, our understanding of the medium has shifted away from reductionism and towards a recognition that the two factors of game and narrative (if they can even be separated so clearly) are intertwined and work together. To analyse a video game is to understand how the two structures create a single discourse, and narrative design does not impose a clear boundary between them.

In 2012, Espen Aarseth proposed a “narrative theory of games” that aims to reconcile the distances and differences between the two levels. Games are not “narrative forms”, he argues, but they do share a close kinship with stories based on four ontic dimensions: world, objects, agents, and events (2012: 130). To further complicate matters, Aarseth argues that video games are not merely *games*, but hybrid *software* that combines aspects of games, narratives, and other forms.

This is far from being a revolutionary position. After all, Goffman’s rules of irrelevance do not refer to meaning or fiction, but to *value* (particularly in economic terms). For example, a coin

used to play “heads or tails” loses its usual function to become a “decision machine” (1967: 151). In his pioneering classification of games into the four categories of *agon*, *alea*, *ilinx* and *mimicry*, Roger Caillois prioritizes competition and fantasy as two dominant forces of games, both equally important and capable of creating their frames of play: “Despite the assertion’s paradoxical character, I will state that in this instance the fiction, the sentiment of *as if*, replaces and performs the same function as do rules. Rules themselves create fictions”² (2001: 8). In games based on *mimicry*, the “awareness of the basic unreality of the assumed behaviour” (2001: 8) creates its own rules of play.

While it is true that *agon* games, built on their abstraction and compression of reality, dominated the early years of video game history, from the Magnavox Odyssey catalogue (1972) or *Pong* (1972) to *Tetris* (1984), it is equally true that the second half of the game, the part based on *mimicry*, representation, and the pleasures of immersion and transformation (Murray, 1997), has been a feature of the medium since the first generation: by 1977, William Crowther had created *Colossal Cave Adventure*. This game, partly inspired by the classic board game *Dungeons and Dragons*, used the nascent text interfaces to present a fantasy adventure that relied on the written word as its only input and output method.

Colossal Cave Adventure used the second person to refer to the player (“you”), and right from its opening instructions it announced the presence of a narrator who at the same time would act as an intermediary: “I will be your eyes and hands. Direct me with commands of one or two words.” In this way, *Colossal Cave Adventure* revealed a basic feature of the medium: we always play in the second person. Instructions like “Press Start” or, even more clearly, “you are dead” in *Dark Souls* (From Software, 2011) or *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996-2020) demonstrate that there is always an “Other” mediating between us and the game. This perceptible authority, which could be theo-

WELCOME TO ADVENTURE!! WOULD YOU LIKE
INSTRUCTIONS? Y

SOMEWHERE NEARBY IS A COLOSSAL CAVE, WHERE
OTHERS HAVE FOUND FORTUNES IN TREASURE AND
GOLD, THOUGH IT IS RUMORED THAT SOME WHO
ENTER ARE NEVER SEEN AGAIN. MAGIC IS SAID TO
WORK IN THE CAVE. I WILL BE YOUR EYES AND
HANDS. DIRECT ME WITH COMMANDS OF 1 OR 2
WORDS.

(ERRORS, SUGGESTIONS, COMPLAINTS TO CROWTHER)
(IF STUCK TYPE HELP FOR SOME HINTS)

YOU ARE STANDING AT THE END OF A ROAD BEFORE
A SMALL BRICK BUILDING. AROUND YOU IS A
FOREST. A SMALL STREAM FLOWS OUT OF THE
BUILDING AND DOWN A GULLY.

Colossal Cave Adventure

retically described as the “Invisible Gamemaster” (IG), combines the rules, the code, and the operations of the machine to act as an organizer and referee of the game (Navarro-Remesal & Bergillos, 2020: 102). Like a *Dungeon Master* or *Game Master* in a role-playing game, this IG is an authority who oversees our movements, establishes the rules and ensures that they are followed, while also evaluating our actions. Put more simply, the game is *someone we play with*. And that someone uses narrative strategies to *narrate* the operations of the systems running during the game.

This is not a *narrativization* of the experience *a posteriori*, but a communication process with the player that remediates and adapts strategies familiar to its creators and addressees. Focalization, knowledge management, and structures of mystery, suspense or surprise, for example, would become common elements in the games that followed *Colossal Cave Adventure*. These text-based games soon came to be known as “interactive fiction” (IF), a new *textual* form that soon caught the attention of academics; thus, the first studies dedicated to video games, such as *Interactive Fiction* (Niesz & Holland, 1984) and the thesis *Interactive*

Fiction: The Computer Storygame Adventure (Buckles, 1985), analysed games from the perspective of literary studies.

It is not hard to see why: in addition to the familiarity of literature to theorists, the written narrative was a carefully designed key factor of these adventure games. The IG, acting as a narrator, goes beyond merely describing the game, often taking poetic licence and employing humour: “The floor acts like a trampoline on an ice rink, or like something they’ve been working on for years at Disneyland,” replies the interactive adaptation of *The Hitch Hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* produced by Infocom and written by the original author, Douglas Adams, in 1984. In an interview for the BBC, Adams described the game this way: “It is the first game to move beyond being ‘user friendly’. It’s actually ‘user insulting’ and because it lies to you as well it’s also ‘user mendacious’” (BBC Archive, 2018). *The Hitch Hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* featured other narrative innovations, such as change of focalization.

At different points in the game the player would control different characters, in some cases with conflicting desires and objectives: “in fact in this particular game you

become several of the characters, so you have to be aware of how you treat other characters in the game when you’re one character” (BBC Archive, 2018). In another production by Adams, *Bureaucracy* (Infocom, 1987), players have to work through a bureaucratic maze to change their mailing address, and the game opens with a metatextual twist by presenting a “software registration form” that requires the player to provide personal information that the game will constantly get mixed up later on.

Metatextuality, metalepsis, unreliable narrators, changes of focalization and self-referential

jokes are some of the features of IF, a hugely successful genre in the 1980s, and also of some related genres like the Japanese visual novel, a kind of illustrated interactive fiction game strongly influenced by manga, which was launched with *Portopia Renzoku Satsujin Jiken* (Enix, 1983), known in English as *The Portopia Serial Murder Case*. This seminal detective game has a non-linear structure, with alternative endings and branching dialogues that end with a plot twist intended to surprise the player. Following this game, the genre grew and branched out into multiple sub-genres ranging from science fiction and fantasy (Loriguillo-López, 2020) to romance (Tosca, 2020).

The ludonarrative complexity of interactive fiction, where the challenge and the story depended on the same elements, was continued in graphic adventure games, a genre popular in the 1990s that dominated the market, with productions by Sierra Entertainment/Sierra Online, LucasFilm Games/LucasArts, and to a lesser extent

by Coktel Vision, Broderbund, and Cyberdreams. This was a period characterized by formal experimentation, thematic diversity and a focus on adult audiences. Examples of the innovations of

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this period include time travel in *Space Quest IV: Roger Wilco and the Time Rippers* (Sierra On-Line, 1991); visual and verbal gags in *The Secret of Monkey Island* (LucasFilm Games, 1990); multiple avatars in *Maniac Mansion* (LucasFilm Games, 1988) and *Day of the Tentacle* (LucasArts, 1993), the first with cutscenes and the second with parallel narratives; erotic humour in *Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards* (Sierra On-Line, 1987); psychological horror in *Dark Seed* (Cyberdreams, 1995), the treatment of social topics like homosexuality and cross-dressing in *Police Quest: Open Season* (Sierra On-Line, 1993), and change of

focalization in the saga *Fables & Fiends* (Westwood Studios, 1992-1994), which in its third instalment, *The Legend of Kyrandia: Malcolm's Revenge* (1993), puts us in the skin of the villain from the previous games.

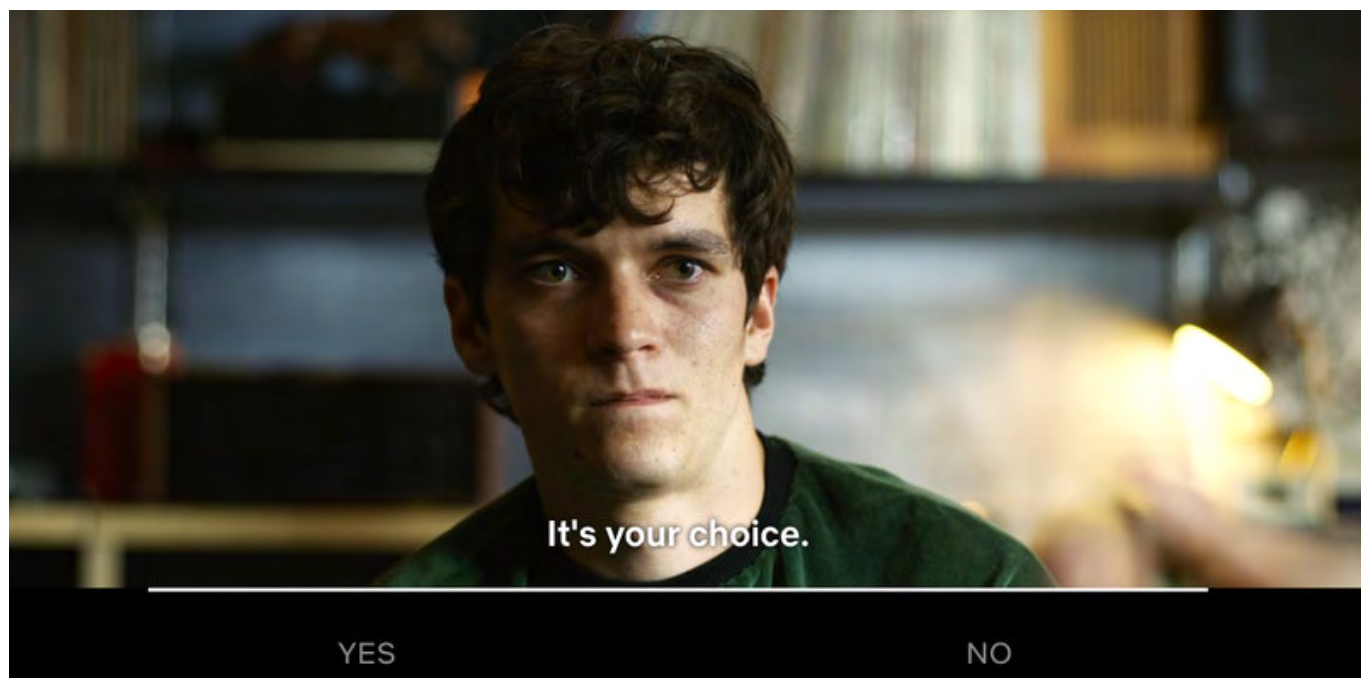
Interactive fiction, visual novels, and graphic adventure games were not the only spaces for experimentation with ludonarrative complexity in the first decades of video game production (for example, it would be unfair to ignore the innovations of RPGs and JRPGs), but they were certainly ground-breaking genres that demonstrated the capacity of the medium to remediate and appropriate narrative strategies from other media, thereby creating their own way of telling a story that did not reject its precursors but operated comfortably with codes of its own. The other side of gameplay—agon and the challenge—would soon benefit from what was learned here, and by the end of the 1990s this ludonarrative complexity would begin to intersect with other structures, such as survival horror, introduced by *Alone in the Dark* (Infogrames, 1992) and consolidated by *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996), film hybrids like *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami, 1998), psychological horror like *Silent Hill* (Konami, 1999), 3D action adventure like *Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver* (Crystal Dynamics, 1999), inspired by *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo, 1998) and featuring theatrical-style dialogues and time travel, or the recreation of everyday interactions and local customs in *Shenmue* (Sega, 1999).

2. THE SECOND BOOMERANG: THE RE-CREATION OF VIDEO GAME COMPLEXITY IN POST-CLASSICAL CINEMA

If post-classical narratives² exhibit the influence of video game and digital system logics, re-created in different ways and integrated into contemporary films (and television), it is because post-classicism is defined by a mastery of the classical codes that is also capable of absorbing, transforming,

and appropriating what was initially a reaction against classicism: other film traditions, such as European art and essay films, Asian cinema, advertising, video installation art, and critical discourses (Elsaesser & Buckland, 2002: 79). Beyond the question of a distinction between narrative and spectacle that has sometimes characterized post-classical cinema based on a preference for showing over telling (Company & Marzal, 1999), other features can be identified that stretch some of the conventions of the IMR associated with causal logic or the construction of space and time. Such alterations change the cinematic mode of enunciation and the way that information is conveyed and ordered, as extensively mapped out by Thanouli (2006, 2009) and conceptualized in terms of rhetorical repertoire by Palao *et al.* (2018).

Apart from film adaptations of certain video game titles, the most obvious expressions of this integration of video games into cinema would be the inclusion of a video game as a central theme—and diegetic space—and the formal hybrids of the two media. Traditional representations of the video game medium in film—from *Tron* (Steven Lisberger, 1982) to *Ready Player One* (Steven Spielberg, 2018)—and on television—for example, in the episode “Playtest” in the series *Black Mirror* (Charlie Brooker, Channel 4 & Netflix, 2011-2019)—have placed special emphasis on dissolving the boundaries between the real world and a virtual world that the protagonists enter but cannot leave, where they commit acts that have consequences on both planes. Traditionally conceived as a hidden, autonomous virtual world in which teenage misfits (generally depicted as nerds) become trapped, the portrayal of video game worlds seems to be evolving, as “after a decades-long moral panic that continues to leave its mark, the video game is now the object of hyperbole in the opposite direction, being celebrated as a miracle” (Navarro Remesal, 2019: 23). Interactive films that hybridize film forms with the possibility of agency also seduce with their promise of winding



Black Mirror: Bandersnatch

and branching storylines, suggesting that spectators can become a co-writer through the choices they make. Recent experiments like *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (David Slade, 2018) explore the hybridizing of film logic and video game logic,³ but fail precisely because they give spectator-players the false impression of freedom, which ends up having an impact on the degree of their involvement because they lack a genuinely active role (Crisóstomo & Valedarrama Carreño, 2020).

However, beyond these obvious strategies to integrate video-game logic into post-classical cinema, its influence has also been evident in the narrative structure of the films themselves. Over the past few decades there have been numerous debates over the terms used, the features and supposed innovations of complexity in narrative systems, especially in film. The nature of these debates has been explored in detail by Simons (2014). However, the features associated with narrative complexity can be summed up with reference to a series of common characteristics related to spectator confusion and disorientation, associated with spatio-temporal fragmentation, time loops,

blurred boundaries between different levels of reality, unstable characters with split identities or amnesia, multiple or tangled plotlines, unreliable narrators, and explicit coincidences in causal logic (Buckland, 2014). Poulaki (2014) also stresses meta-reflexivity as one of the main features of complex narratives, playing an important role in the textual organization of films.

Two prominent concepts that overlap in the structure of complex narratives in films also bear a close connection with video games: puzzle films and mind-game films. As Buckland points out, the complexity of puzzle films operates on the levels of both narrative and narration, and he emphasizes the complexity of the storytelling (narration) of a simple or complex story (narrative) (2009: 6). This emerges mainly from the ontological pluralism derived from the entanglement of two incompatible worlds, the ambiguous borders between them and the cognitive dissonance they generate. The complex structure encourages repeated viewings, giving rise to a cult following of fans who interpret and examine the ambiguities, improbabilities, and inconsistencies of the

plot in online forums (2014: 6-7). In this regard, Sorolla-Romero suggests that the proliferation of non-linear narratives are a “symptom of the obsessions and malaises of an era [...] which gives rise to the formal fracture and/or twist as a sign of the problem” (2018: 525).

On the other hand, the classification of mind-game film not only refers to the narratological perspective, but also encompasses psychological and psycho-pathological, historical, and political perspectives to include films that revel in the spectator’s disorientation or confusion by withholding information, with unexpected twists or trick endings. These are films⁴ for which the concept of play is essential, either because a character is being played

with unwittingly or because the audience is being played with by withholding certain information or presenting it ambiguously. Mental disorders are a common element of such films, featuring unstable or pathological characters who seem normal and thus play

with the perception of reality of both the audience and the characters themselves, forcing them to choose between incompatible realities or multiverses, exploring questions about consciousness and memory, the reality of other minds, or the possible existence of parallel worlds (Elsaesser, 2009: 13-15). Along the same lines, García Saha-gún, in her research on the identity crisis as a theme in contemporary film, highlights how stories that play with mental instability and memories, presented through the appearance of the double and the transgression of memory, “intensify the interpretation through the repetition of the character’s life—like two superimposed temporal

planes” and in the case of amnesia “the possibility of erasing, of selecting what to forget is added. Participation [and, we would add, interaction] is inscribed as a characteristic value of the current era” (2017: 416).

In this way, while the puzzle film directly suggests a game that invites the spectator to (re-)order and (re-)arrange the (narrative) pieces that have been dislocated from their natural place in the story, the mind-game film alludes to the suspension of the contract between the film—with its true and internally consistent diegetic worlds—and the spectators, so that the latter may feel tricked, *played* by the film because “in addition to its chaotic arrangement, the story posi-

tions us from points of view disturbed by madness or trauma” (García Catalán, 2019: 29). Although these features appear in various filmographies and diverse genres, for this study we are especially interested in the mechanisms used in films that integrate video-game logic in order to create a complex

narrative structure based on a world with certain established rules, such as in the different planes of reality in *Inception* (Nolan, 2010) (Cameron & Misek, 2014), the loop in *Source Code* (Duncan Jones, 2011) (Buckland, 2014: 185; Navarro Remesal & García Catalán, 2015b), or the recurring resurrection of the protagonist in *Edge of Tomorrow* (D. Liman, 2014) (Loriguillo-López & Sorolla-Romero, 2015).

In addition to the strategies used to construct the story, the logic of narrative complexity in film is underpinned by the control of information. In this sense, the categories that Bordwell takes from Meir Sternberg to classify narrative strategies

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(1996: 57-61) seem quite fitting for conceiving of the complexity of narratives. The causes of complexity can thus be explained according to: (1) the degree of *knowledgeability*, i.e., the knowledge of the story articulated in the narration by means of point of view and focalization—expressed as *restriction and depth*—and modulated constantly to offer hints for the formulation of hypotheses; (2) the degree of *self-consciousness*, meaning the features that reveal the principles of narrative construction; and (3) the degree of *communicativeness*, or how readily the narration shares the information that its degree of knowledge entitles it to. In this sense, Thanouli (2009: 137) has identified the complex features of post-classical cinema based on a low degree of *restrictiveness* of knowledge, and a high degree of depth, self-consciousness and communicativeness, while Loriguillo-López defines complex television in terms of a high degree of *restrictiveness* of knowledge, but also of depth and self-consciousness, and a low or moderate level of communicativeness (2019).

The narrative complexity in mainstream post-classical cinema, however, despite creating confusing stories that aim to disorient the spectator through plot twists and ludic logic, requires an intellectual effort—“brain candy”, as Elsaesser calls it (2009: 38)—yet these cannot be described as a kind of subversion of the classical codes of film language. As Bordwell points out, “if we want to capture the nuances of historical continuity, we don’t want every wrinkle to be a sea change” (2006: 9) because these innovations are “a kind of carnivalesque disguise that clearly favours the celebration and subversion of what has been identified as film language itself in order to reinforce it rather than to redefine or challenge it” (Sorolla-Romero *et al.*, 2013: 108). On the other hand, although the logic of digital systems is the source of these mutations, post-classical cinema should be viewed not as a mere integration of that logic but as an answer to it, because a film is always offered as a space of meaning when it serves as

the host screen of inputs from *other* screens: “cinema, as the host screen, is posited as an interface of meaning, in contrast to other screens that it hosts but that are considered purely informative, denotative, and incapable of generating meaning in their own right” (Palao *et al.*, 2018). Disruptions of linearity and of different planes of reality, and the deceptions and games of the enunciation are thus pyrotechnic mechanisms that leave codes and clues to be deciphered, revealing constructed stories that are always read in a linear way. For this reason, as Simons suggests, “the models of narratology and game theory may be atemporal and reversible, but the processes they describe are not. This is exactly the point where narratology, game theory, and complexity theory converge” (Simons, 2014: 27).

3. FEATURES OF LUDONARRATIVE COMPLEXITY

3.1. The transgression of spatio-temporal disruption and the loop

While spatio-temporal fragmentation is a characteristic feature of the video game system, which is usually organized in a game world divided into levels and with a progression that is never linear, the focus of this study is to explore how such fragmentation is transferred to the narrative layer in the form of the kind of linear disruptions that characterize puzzle films and their relationship with the game system. These include the spatio-temporal disruptions resulting from the use of flashbacks to reinforce the construction of characters and to give clues about mechanics or items—as found in *Uncharted 4: A Thief’s End* (Naughty Dog, 2016)—or to facilitate the exploration of the same space in the past—such as in the gameplay with the VHS tapes in *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard* (Capcom, 2017). However, Sam Barlow’s video games *Her Story* (2015) and *Telling Lies* (2019) take the idea of *disruption* to the extreme. In

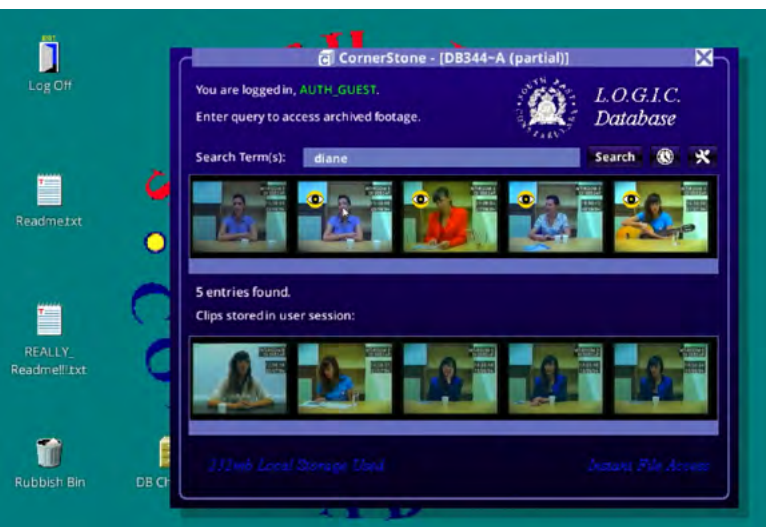
these games, the story is broken into pieces, and the gameplay consists precisely of reconstructing it, turning the narration into a game mechanic. Barlow's games are presented as investigations in which the player, by entering key words into a database, recovers video fragments in which that word appears. The protostory—the system containing the full story—is decomposed in hundreds of video clips, and can be reconstructed in as many ways as there are ways to play the game, adopting a different narrative design each time. This mechanic is an explicit example of the concept of database narratives because the player not only reconstructs the narrative puzzle, but also recovers and reassembles its pieces. The case of *Telling Lies* could even be described as a triple puzzle, as it combines three intersecting variables: the key word, the character, and the moment in the video when the video is played, which render the narrative construction even more difficult.

The game *Dear Esther* (Thechineseroom, 2012), a poetic reflection on grief and loss, offers a similar idea, only in this case the main mechanic is the exploration through the space itself. While the player wanders aimlessly around a deserted island, short audio stories unfold that will turn that wandering into the articulation of the narrative. These video games begin with fragmentation

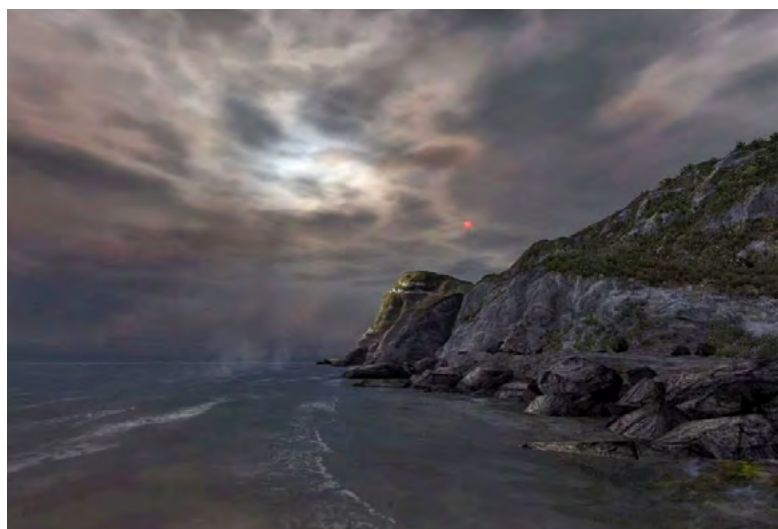
and leave the linear reconstruction in the hands of the players, who are able to find a horizon of meaning in the information they discover as they go. The game system loses control over the order in which the information is obtained (although in Sam Barlow's games there are some rules to limit it), and thus the ending is not so much a *solution* to the mystery as an *expansion* of the information and a *deeper understanding* of the acts, motives, and psychologies of the different characters that make it possible to connect and give meaning to the information discovered.

The spatio-temporal fragmentation that characterizes the video game means that the player is used to interacting on different planes of reality. From the outset there is a functional plane—the game menu, loading screens, etc.—and a fictional plane—where the game unfolds—and all their intermediate hybridizations, indicated with different visual effects. On the other hand, *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017) offers *fluidity* between levels of reality as a narrative experience through different characters, times, spaces and narrators to delve into the tragedy of a family in which nearly all the members have died unexpectedly in bizarre accidents. The exploration around the different rooms of the family home facilitates a journey back and forth throu-

Her Story

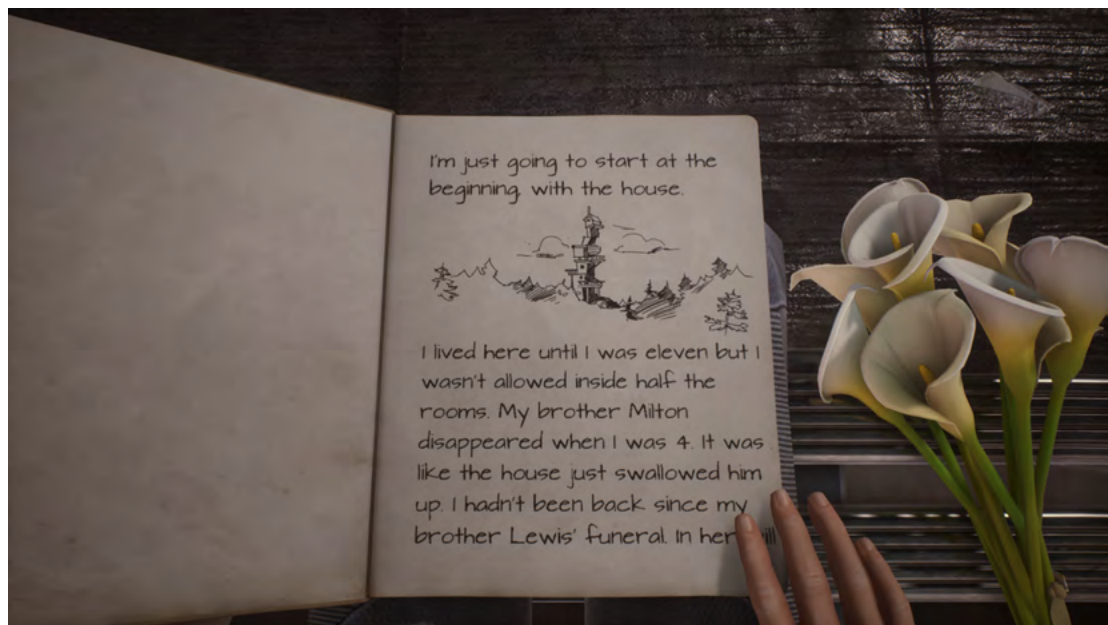


Dear Esther



gh the family's memories, where the subjective point of view flows poetically in a *mise-en-abyme* between the different members whereby the player *plays* their deaths. Once again, the complexity here lies in an exploration that flows between different levels of reality to reconstruct the continuity, and thus to make sense of the family saga.

The loop is another of the characteristic effects of video game language that constitutes a spatial and temporal disruption, associated with learning and death, as "in order to learn, one has to die" (Rodríguez Serrano, 2020). The loop is a *restart* device, and the experience gained each time means the difficulty of the game can increase each time, reflecting the idea of video game mastery as an "art of failure" (Juul, 2013). As noted above, this idea also lies at the heart of many puzzle films. Video games like *Braid* (Jonathan Blow, 2008) or *Life is Strange* (Dontnod, 2015) use the loop as a mechanic that connects with the narrative layer of the game. Thus, in *Braid*, failure takes on the form of remorse, and the protagonist's progression through the different worlds is based on the use of mechanics associated with the possibility of turning back time, while the player explores themes related to forgiveness, mystery, space, decision, and doubt. *Life is Strange* makes use of more complex structures articulated in alternative worlds. The possibility of making a mistake and the reversible nature of actions become mechanics with implications for the narrative development, even if they cannot assuage the player's guilt or prevent some of the tragedies that occur over the course of the game (Martín Núñez, et al., 2016).



What Remains of Edith Finch

These examples show us that when the loop becomes a game mechanic, there is a high degree of self-consciousness and communicativeness, as the player is perfectly aware of how and when to use this mechanic and what effects it will have, which is also appropriately signalled by the game. This is why *The Stanley Parable* may be said to offer a higher level of narrative complexity, as it transgresses the loop as a ludic device and integrates it into the development of successive games without explicitly warning the player about its effects on narrative continuity. Players will become disoriented when they realize that the loop here is not a *restart* but a *continue*, and that the successive games form part of a single narrative trajectory, with strong causal relationships between them.

3.2. Traumatized and unstable characters

Contemporary video games have been introducing greater emotional depth to their characters, even in genres traditionally lacking in narrative, such as platform games like *Thomas Was Alone* (Mike Bithell, 2012) or in the story mode of sports games introduced by *FIFA 17* (Electronic Arts, 2016) to play *The Journey* featuring Alex Hunter.

This emotional depth, in keeping with other contemporary narratives, reflects the malaise of our times and has increased the presence of unstable heroes, far from traditional happy adventurers like Mario or Link. Trauma—which has always been present, as the games of the *Wolfenstein* saga clearly demonstrate (Rodríguez Serrano, 2014)—now emerges as the source of the mental instability suffered by the characters who give rise to the narrative complexity. Thus, while a player-character's amnesia has often been used in video games as an excuse to justify the need to learn the game's main mechanics, as has the idea of the double, with effects on the functional dimension, in the contemporary video game such conditions have become fully integrated into the narrative layer, depicted as being the result of a painful trauma that will play an essential role in the character's identity and the configuration of a narrative that also often involves a disruption of spatial-temporal linearity. *Alice: Madness Returns* (Spicy Horse, 2011) makes explicit use of the theme of the double by inviting us to play out the protagonist's madness directly, thereby combining ludic and

narrative layers. Alice's schizophrenia is represented in two antagonistic worlds—the world of the psychiatric clinic and the world of her mind—while we explore the trauma she suffers over the violent death of her parents in a fire. However, in *Her Story* the construction of the double contributes to narrative complexity precisely because it subverts the canon: the protagonist, who is being interrogated by her husband's killer, is in reality two people: Eve and Hanna, identical twins who share a love-hate relationship and yet pretend to be the same person, raising strong suspicions about their emotional stability and their role in the murder. The player is *tricked* here, played by the game.

In *Until Dawn* (Supermassive Games, 2015), madness can also be understood as a strategy of narrative complexity. The player, like the other characters, is tricked by Josh, who conceals a psychopathic personality triggered by trauma over the death of his sisters and prepares a night of horror games to exact revenge on his friends, whom he blames for his sisters' deaths. But without realizing it, players will also take Josh's position and

Until Dawn



make decisions that will contribute to the creation of the very horror games they will subsequently be subjected to, by taking part in therapy sessions decontextualized from the rest of the game, like those used in *Silent Hill Shattered Memories* (Climax Studios, 2009). As in the logic of mind-game films, players are left at the mercy of the construction of the protagonist's psychopathological world and the evils that threaten it. The increasing emotional complexity of the characters also means that the game needs to adopt an audiovisual language that abandons what Roland Barthes calls "degree zero" to privilege dramatic tension, emotional identification with the characters, the right point of view, and management of knowledge. In *Until Dawn*, this is especially apparent with the jumps from a free-moving camera to fixed cameras that show closer or more distant shots to create the required expressive effects (Martín-Núñez, 2020).

3.3. The complexity of the linear structure and causal weakness

The narrative design of multiple, branching and tangled plotlines has served as a signature for studios like Quantic Dream, Telltale, Supermassive Games, and Dontnod, which are all associated with the creation of cinematic video games sustained by narrative depth. However, the complexity of these structures lies more in the illusion of control over what happens than in the power that players actually have. The choice between narrative possibilities, whether in dialogues or in actions, and the way that these shape a character's personality traits, the warnings the player receives that a certain character will remember a response or attitude, or even the possibility of seeing a flashforward to one of the potential endings are some of the strategies used to create this illusion by giving the appearance of access to a wide range of knowledge. Nevertheless, the information the player has tends to be quite restricted because we never know exactly how our decisions will affect the story. This means we must choose blindly wi-

thout knowing the real consequences, making our choices a mechanic of minimal significance. Branching storylines are sustained between the tension of the effect that players believe their actions have and their tangible effect, and the endings usually demonstrate that although the end can be reached in different ways, or even with different living characters, the arrival points do not depend that much on the player's choices. With this in mind, Fernández-Vara (2020) stresses that the connection between the decisions made by the player and their consequences are even more important within a story where the sense of agency depends on those decisions not seeming random, and she proposes a taxonomy of narrative choices that can give rise to a range of expressive actions. In this sense, the fact that the decisions could lead to an irreversible death might constitute a subversion, but, as Rodríguez Serrano points out in his analysis of death in two products by the developer Supermassive Games, when the functional death of a character is final it is written "only as a loss (we can no longer control one of the characters) without giving us the opportunity to experience the full devastating temporal wave of its effects," leading us to "a conventional conclusion: flight, survival, salvation" (2020: 176).

Other more linear narrative structures can develop higher levels of complexity by presenting actions and decisions that really do present the player with an emotional or ethical challenge. *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020), with its parallel stories that collide in a "hypernucleus" (Palao, 2013), invites players to explore the same story by controlling two antagonistic characters, thereby generating a conflict of emotional allegiance. Other games that are theoretically less cinematic and are played in successive cycles, such as *Papers, Please* (Lucas Pope, 2013), *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios), or *Gods Will be Watching* (Deconstructeam, 2014), present players with irreconcilable contradictions, as a meticulous design of ethical dilemmas in which decision making



Gris

and management of limited resources in extreme situations place players in serious predicaments, because their awareness that their actions will have both positive and negative consequences makes choosing more difficult.

It is also important to highlight the (non-) narrative complexity offered in certain games with completely linear structures, where there is a clear weakness of causal relationships. In games like *Limbo* (Playdead, 2012), *Inside* (Playdead, 2016), *Journey* (Thatgamecompany, 2012), *Gris* (Nomada Studio, 2018), and *Anyone's Diary* (World Domination Project, 2019), there is no storyline articulated on the basis of causal events or characters with defined and developed personalities; however, through the use of other strategies typical of video games, like artistic design or significant mechanics, they are able to express powerful discourses through visual and mechanical metaphors, sustained by the power of ambiguity and sensory evocation. Although this cannot be described as narrative complexity, since the narrative elements are secondary to poetic elements, it is a kind of discursive complexity that facilitates

the exploration of themes associated with trauma, such as death, social control, grief, and depression, and through player agency, the games offer a way of relating to these issues that differs from other media (Smethurst, 2015; García Catalán *et al.* 2021). These games all share the virtue of turning minimalism into a discursive force, based on a low level of knowledge and depth of information, a low level of self-consciousness and a low level of communicativeness with the player, who is not presented with instructions or challenges, and who has to discover the objective, the mechanics and how to advance in the game world through trial and error.

3.4. Narrators, meganarrators, and deceptive IGs and their necessary metareflexivity

Although the concept of the meganarrator is taken from film studies (Gaudreault & Jost, 1995: 63-64), where it is defined as the organizer of the *monstration* and narration of the story, in video games it can be understood in general terms as the architect of the ludonarrative system who

also sets out the rules of the game world, allows the player to interact with that world through mechanics, and triggers the pre-designed events and occurrences. This figure takes the form of the Invisible Gamemaster, and as a theoretical entity its reliability is key, since the stability of the world and the possibilities of gameplay depend on a relationship of (blind) faith in the instructions, goals, challenges, possibilities, prohibitions, rewards, and penalties provided by the game. As noted above, games like *The Stanley Parable* present a narrator—a kind of delegate of the meganarrator/IG in the story—who subverts the codes to reflect on the video game's system of directed freedom. Similarly, *SuperHOT* (SUPERHOT Team, 2016) is founded on a fallacious gameplay premise: the rule that “time only moves if you do” is revealed to be false, and this lie conceals the more universal truth of the video game as a medium: video game systems operate on an illusion of freedom for the player. The unreliable narrator also appears here making ironic quips about the situations in the game and breaking the fourth wall to tell players that they are not in control (Villabrille & Martín Núñez, 2020). Breaking the fourth wall, a common strategy in video games, is used as a way of signalling a critical reading of the video-game artefact, but at the same time it recognizes the position on the other side of the screen of the player, who actualizes the discourse through the gameplay. It is thus a strategy that makes it possible to re-establish the limits of the medium and constitutes a validation of the stories to normalize their cybertextual nature and reinforce their narrative potential (Navarro Remesal & García Catalán, 2015a).



SuperHOT

These two cases show how in a video game, which in essence is a regulated system guided by rules and mechanics, when deceptive narrators or meganarrators/IGs breach the very rules that depend on them, they are effectively articulating a metareflexive discourse that exposes the artificial nature of the video game as a system of control and directed freedom. Narrative complexity can be found here at a low level of knowledge that is restrictive and shallow but accompanied by a high level of self-consciousness and communicativeness, which sporadically exposes the players' role as players and the deceptive system to which they are subject.

4. NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY IN VIDEO GAMES AS AN INVITATION TO ORGANIZE, REVEAL, AND BRING CLOSURE

The contemporary video game, as a complex algorithmic system characterized by remediation, has absorbed features intrinsic to its own form of expression (which have looped back from other media to be reintegrated into its ludonarrative layer) as well as features of complex narratives in post-classical cinema (which reflect the influence

of digital and videoludic languages, re-creating them narratively and then feeding back to be integrated into the narrative layer of video games), in a kind of “double boomerang”. To explore these ideas, this article has examined how rules, mechanics, and narratives are combined in different ways in the ludonarrative of the video game.

However, video games have always had complex ludonarrative structures, in which narrative strategies and game systems intertwine in a process of communication between game and player that is highly dependent on the story. This does not mean that contemporary ludonarrative complexity does not constitute an innovation, but rather that it often involves recovering and expanding on trends and traditions with very long histories. To mark a moment prior to ludonarrative complexity or identify a turning point would thus be erroneous or even fallacious, as it is much more useful to identify and analyse the precursors to contemporary video game narratives. The historical boomerang effect reveals how games like *The Stanley Parable* and *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension* (Draw Me a Pixel, 2020) are innovative metatextual exercises precisely *because* they connect with and continue the interactive work of early video game creators like Douglas Adams.

This is why we find video games adopting features of puzzle films and mind-game films that are characteristic of contemporary audiovisual discourses: disruption of spatio-temporal linearity and loops, traumatized and unstable characters, narrative structure and causal relationships, and deceptive narrators and meganarrators and their necessary metareflexivity. The adoption of such features results in complexity when they are not merely assimilated automatically but used to subvert the traditional dynamics of videoludic language through the game design and narrative design and the way the information provided to the player is managed and controlled. In other words, they do not involve a direct assimilation of the way such disruptions occur in film language.

THE NARRATIVE LAYER IS NOT A MERE PRETEXT INSERTED TO EXPLAIN THE FICTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE GAMEPLAY; RATHER, IT COMBINES WITH THE LUDIC LAYER TO INTERTWINE WITH IT, WHILE AT THE SAME TIME BEING GAMIFIED, POSING NARRATIVE, EMOTIONAL, AND MORAL CHALLENGES FOR PLAYERS IN THE SITUATIONS PRESENTED

It is also clear that trauma often appears in these games as a starting point for the game and for its story, resulting in tormented, unstable or amnesiac characters whose backstories have little of the positive traits associated with the adventure genre or the heroic figures of science fiction, but instead delve into an emotional complexity marked by guilt, loss, love, depression, or a troubled relationship with the Other. The video game, beyond showing and telling the story, uses player agency to establish powerful connections based on what it allows or forbids the player to do, and to facilitate an exploration of issues that have not traditionally formed part of the repertoire of games conceived in terms of pure entertainment. Although it is obvious that the case studies analysed above are notable for their use of audiovisual language closely related to film, it has also been shown that narrative complexity can be found in all kinds of games where the discursive complexity goes further than the narration.

To sum up, video games that deploy complex narratives are structured in two layers: the ludic and the narrative. The narrative layer is not a mere pretext inserted to explain the fictional framework for the gameplay; rather, it combines with the ludic layer to intertwine with it, while at the same time being gamified, posing narrative, emotional, and moral challenges for players in the situations presented. This narrative gamification,

like a mechanic of reconfiguration, inevitably invites the player to solve it, to order the jumbled pieces—except that in this case they are pieces of a story—in order to discover its mechanisms of operation and the deceptive logic of its characters and narrators, and to seek an ending that can give meaning to the narrative world portrayed. ■

NOTES

- * This study has been conducted in the context of the research project *Narratological Design in Video Games: A Proposal of Structures, Styles and Elements of Post-Classically Influenced Narrative Creation (DiNaVi)* (Code 18I369.01/1), directed by Marta Martín-Núñez and funded by Universitat Jaume I, through the university's competitive call for research project proposals for the period 2019-2021 and in the context of the European initiative COST 18230 *Interactive Narrative Design for Complexity Representations*.
- 1 "Agency" is defined in the context of video games as the player's capacity as an *agent*, i.e., that players act or are able to act, and thus in this context it is defined as the player's capacity for action and decision making.
- 2 Some academics like Bordwell are averse to the definition of a mode of post-classical narration, suggesting instead there has only been an "intensification of continuity" (2002) of classical modes, although they do recognize certain formal *intensifications* and the recurrence of certain self-conscious strategies.
- 3 These hybridizations have yielded more interesting results when they have been presented as video games; notable examples include the games designed by Sam Barlow, *Her Story* (2015) and *Telling Lies* (2019).
- 4 *L'Atalante* dedicated the Notebook and (Dis)Agreements sections of its issue 15 to the analysis of this type of film (Bort Gual and García Catalán, 2013).

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NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY IN VIDEO GAMES: A DOUBLE BOOMERANG

Abstract

Video game narratives have become more complex and increasingly interrelated with game design over the last decade. However, video games have in fact always had complex ludonarrative structures. The aim of this article is to examine the looping back of complex narrative influences in contemporary video games based on the idea of a “double boomerang”, whereby, on the one hand, features that have always been inherent to video games are reclaimed and reintegrated into the ludonarrative layer while, on the other, features of complexity adopted and re-created by post-classical cinema and other audiovisual media are integrated, once again, into that same videoludic narrative layer. This analysis involves tracing the features of narrative complexity that have characterized video games historically, and the features of post-classical film narratives, and identifying them in a corpus of contemporary video games in order to analysing narrative design in relation to game design and emergent behaviour in players. The findings reveal how some of the innovations in video games connect with and continue the interactive work of early video game creators like Douglas Adams, and how features shared with post-classical cinema only work as complex features when they are not merely assimilated automatically but used to subvert the traditional dynamics of videoludic language through the game design and narrative design and the way the information provided to the player is managed and controlled.

Key words

Video Games; Ludonarrative; Narratology; Narrative Complexity; Video Game History.

Author

Marta Martín Núñez (València, 1983) is a professor and researcher at Universitat Jaume I, where she has pursued an academic career dedicated to the analysis of contemporary audiovisual discourses in the context of post-classical narrative complexity and the digital environment. She has a multi-disciplinary background, which she has applied to the exploration of various objects of study, particularly related to new narratives, interactive narratives, and contemporary photographic discourses. She is a member of the Managing Committee for the European initiative COST 18230 *Interactive Narrative Design for Complexity Representation* and principal investigator of the R+D+i project *Narratological Design in Video Games: A Proposal of Structures, Styles and Elements of Post-Classically Influenced Narrative Creation (DiNaVi)* (Code 18I369.01/1), funded by Universitat Jaume I, through the UJI's competitive call for research project proposals for the period 2019-2021. She has been teaching the course in hypermedia narrative and video game analysis in the degree program in video game design and development since its establishment in the 2013-2014 academic year, among other courses.

LA COMPLEJIDAD LUDONARRATIVA EN EL VIDEOJUEGO: UN DOBLE BOOMERANG

Resumen

Las narrativas videolúdicas han ido complejizándose e interrelacionándose con el propio diseño de juego a lo largo de la última década. Sin embargo, el videojuego siempre ha tenido estructuras ludonarrativas complejas. En este artículo proponemos comprobar el retorno de las influencias de la narración compleja en el videojuego contemporáneo a partir de un doble *boomerang* que contempla, por una parte, el retorno de rasgos que siempre han formado parte de la naturaleza del videojuego y que regresan reintegrados en la capa ludonarrativa y, por otra parte, cómo los rasgos de complejidad exhibidos y reelaborados por el cine postclásico y otras formas audiovisuales se integran, de nuevo, en la capa narrativa videolúdica. Para ello, rastreamos los rasgos de complejidad narrativa en la historia del videojuego, así como los que exhiben las narrativas fílmicas postclásicas y los aplicaremos a un corpus de videojuegos contemporáneos, analizando el diseño narrativo en relación con el diseño de juego y los comportamientos emergentes de los jugadores. El análisis mostrará cómo algunos gestos novedosos en el videojuego entroncan con, y continúan, el trabajo interactivo de creadores como Douglas Adams y cómo, los rasgos compartidos con el cine postclásico funcionan como rasgos complejos cuando no son asimilados sin más, sino, precisamente, cuando los emplean para subvertir las propias dinámicas tradicionales del lenguaje videolúdico a partir del diseño de juego y el diseño narrativo y el modo en que se controla y fluye la información que recibe el jugador.

Palabras clave

Videojuegos; Ludonarrativa; Narratología, Complejidad Narrativa; Historia del Videojuego.

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Marta Martín Núñez (València, 1983) es profesora e investigadora en la Universitat Jaume I donde ha desarrollado una trayectoria académica vinculada al análisis de los discursos audiovisuales contemporáneos en el contexto de la complejidad narrativa postclásica y el entorno digital. Tiene un perfil multidisciplinar desde el que aborda diferentes objetos de estudio, especialmente alrededor de las nuevas narrativas y narrativas interactivas y los discursos fotográficos contemporáneos. Es miembro del Managing Committee de la acción europea COST 18230 *Interactive Narrative Design for Complexity Representations* y la investigadora principal del proyecto I+D+i *El diseño narratológico en videojuegos: una propuesta de estructuras, estilos y elementos de creación narrativa de influencia postclásica (DiNaVi)* (código 18I369.01/1), financiado por la Universitat Jaume I, a través de la convocatoria competitiva de proyectos de investigación de la UJI, para el periodo 2019-2021. Imparte la asignatura Narrativa Hipermedia y Análisis de Videojuegos en el grado en Diseño y Desarrollo de Videojuegos desde su implantación en el curso 2013-2014, entre otras asignaturas.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ISSUE

For this issue of *L'Atalante*, we take a slight deviation from our focus on cinema to explore ways of understanding audiovisual narratives from the perspective of the narrative design of video games. This narrative design exhibits the complexity intrinsic to the video game medium while also being closely related to contemporary trends of narrative complexity commonly found in films, series, and other artistic discourses, both contemporary and not so contemporary. However, the demands of the gameplay experience and the agency of players necessitates an exploration specific to the medium, although always in dialogue with other approaches.

The articles in the Notebook section present studies of different aspects that relate video games to spatio-temporal interpretations and post-modern literature, to the classical myth of the Promised Land, as well as sounds, details, and emotions that are revealed to be essential to the complex construction of the ludonarrative experience. Our dialogue with Sam Barlow offers a first-hand insight, from the perspective of the creation of indie video games, into how these fea-

tures of complexity are conceived and articulated with a very conscious concern for the agency of the player, the third participant. And the (Dis) Agreements section presents a conversation with Tatiana Delgado, Josué Mochán, Adrián Castro, and Clara Pellejer, all prominent figures working in different areas of the Spanish video game industry, who offer their views on video game production in this country from the perspectives of creative direction, narrative design, the player experience, and artistic design. Finally, as usual in the Vanishing Points section, we offer a space for those other articles which, taking a diversity of approaches, explore other issues, other ways of seeing and thinking about cinema that are equally important and necessary.

We hope that this monographic issue focusing on video game narratives, added to the initiatives of other journals and publishers in our discipline, will offer an insight into the world of Game Studies, a field that is very slowly winning the battle to be recognized as a legitimate object of study in Spain.

