THE THIRD PARTICIPANT

A dialogue with

SAM BARLOW

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MARTA MARTÍN NÚÑEZ AND VÍCTOR NAVARRO REMESAL

Sam Barlow's games are strange hybrid productions that can be thought of as narrative video games, interactive fictions or, even, interactive movies. However, despite the unclassifiable nature of his projects, there is an agreement among players, critics and academics alike to recognise in his work forms that renew the relationship between narrative and games and open up new perspectives and approaches. His first title as an independent designer and writer, *Her Story* (2015), was an immediate success, which was endorsed by several industry awards, including three BAFTA Games Awards.

While many of the big narrative games are based on branched structures of the type *choose your own adventure,* where the player is invited to play through *one* of the variations of the story, Sam Barlow reverses this narrative concept in *Her Story*. He doesn't set different narrative variations: his story is one. And he leaves up to the player how to build it, so that this story will take shape in the imagination of the players in different ways, even going so far as to suggest different explanations of the facts, simply by the order in which some key fragments are reached (or not). The game also subverts the hegemonic visual code of narrative video games by rescuing Full Motion Video (FMV), which is filtered with the effects of analogue VHS. Much of the game's interest lies precisely in the performance of Viva Seifert, the actress who brings Hanna and Eve to life, whose registers range from truth to lies and the full range of nuances in between.

Telling Lies (2018) is presented as the conceptual evolution of *Her Story*. Based on the same game mechanics, the game involves a complexation of the narrative puzzles it presents: it multiplies the characters, the sources of information and the navigability through the fragments. But, really, the seed of these games can be found in Barlow's first game, from 1999, *Aisle*, a one-move text adventure in which the player can learn more about the

anodyne situation presented playing it more than once. Replayability allows for an imaginative reconstruction of the character and the story.

In the fifteen years between *Aisle* and *Her Story*, Barlow gained experience in the industry working on franchises such as *Serious Sam: Next Encounter* (Climax Studios, 2004), *Crusty Demons* (Evolved Games, 2007), or *Ghost Rider* (Climax Group, 2007). He also worked on *Elveon* (10tacle Studios) and *Legacy of Kain: Dead Sun* (Climax Studios), two cancelled projects in which he tested and learned about narrative design processes. His experience in the games *Silent Hill: Origins* (Climax Studios, 2007) and *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories* (Climax Studios, 2009), where he worked on narratives for already created and firmly established universes, will also be decisive in his career.

During a two-hour dialogue between New York, Barcelona and Valencia[1], Sam Barlow shared with us his broad experience within the video game industry and also as an independent creator, as well as his creative approaches to designing deep and complex stories and narratives that leave their articulation in the hands of the players. ∎

EARLY DAYS IN THE GAMING INDUSTRY

How did you get started in the video games industry? Your first game, *Aisle,* is an interactive fiction, a one-move text adventure game in which the player discovers what's going on when he plays more than once... so the plot building depends on the player. Was this the origin of the concepts you have developed later in other interactive fictions?

If you look back to *Aisle* and then jump ahead it does seem like there was a clear path, but it didn't seem like that at the time. *Aisle* was something I did when I was at university and it was the first time I really got on the internet. This was the late nineties, and there was this wonderful resurgence in text games, which were very convenient to share and distribute over that early, simple and slow internet. There was a fascinating community because it was born of a nostalgia for the kind of classic text games of Infocom or Magnetic Scrolls. There were more people too: Brian Nelson, from Oxford, created a tool that allowed you to build text games using the same system that these classic Infocom games were made with. We all had something of an academic mindset. This community started to put together text games that, whilst they came from nostalgia, were very ambitious. We all wanted to explore the possibilities of interactive narratives, it was very competitive. The beautiful thing of text within video games is that you can author a one person text game. You can write: "The fleet of battleships exploded and then all the planets in the solar system were destroyed". But if you were to try and do that with CGI, it would be very expensive. There was a very interesting community of people like Adam Cadre, Andrew Plotkin or Emily Short doing all these interesting experiments.

Aisle came out of a frustration that I had. In this nostalgic grounding, when you would play a new text game the tradition was that, to demonstrate how complex and sophisticated the parser was, you would type stupid things into the game and see if there was a response. In something like *Plundered Hearts* (1987), a classic Infocom game, there would be a set of commands that would make sense and would be part of the progression of the narrative, but when starting that game to test out the simulation you would see what happens asking things such as what if I try to take all my clothes off. The tradition was you would get a funny answer, and the most polished game would give you a funny specific answer. So, as we were trying to create these games that would be more ambitious narratively, people would incorporate that kind of humour. Andrew Plotkin had a game called *So Far* (1996), a very deep fantasy work that's half Bergman and half Gene Wolfe. And playing this, which is somewhat serious, I would

Aisle

still type the dumb things to test out the simulation. It frustrated me that we did this, because if you watch a serious movie you are not shouting things at the screen and saying silly jokes.

So I made *Aisle*. The initial seed was: "What if I make a game where when the player types the dumb things the game goes with it?". Naturally, a lot of the things you type are somewhat violent or stupid, and I was wondering what kind of character would the game be about if it was actually doing these things, if these made sense in the narrative. So I tried to pick a setting that was as mundane as possible, to distance it from this tradition. The game starts in the pasta aisle of the supermarket. And if the player typed something violent, the game said: "Fine, I will give you a violent story" and, essentially, punishes the player. I wanted to make people feel bad for typing these things, so they could think: "Why did I tell the character to kill this woman? It is a terrible thing to type". The game emerged from that, I was having to support this breadth of answers and that complexity, so I had to cut off the depth of the simulation. This is where this idea of a one-move game came from.

I have always had a love for literary experiments—where people are chopping things up, or J. G. Ballard writes a short story that is written as the index of a fictional book, or a story told on playing cards where you can shuffle. We can tell a story in tiny little pieces. So in *Aisle*, every time I type something I'll get a piece of story which will end the story. As I wrote it, there began to be groupings or series of stories about a character. I was fascinated by the sculptural aspect, because as a player your experience is defined by the first four or five stories, which anchor your perception. Sometimes there was an effort on part of the players to find a good story. Quite a few stories had sad endings, and I could be wrong, but I think a lot of

Aisle
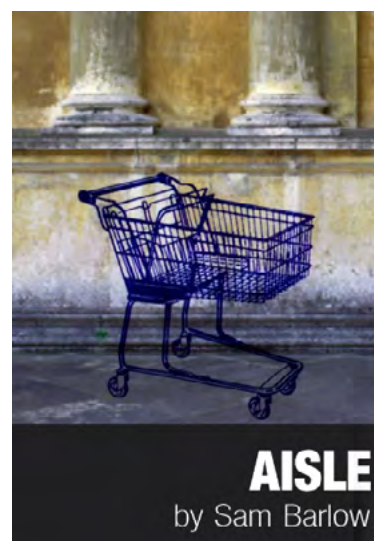
the good endings relied on you pulling knowledge back. The opening text does not mention anybody by name, it mentions a holiday in Rome, and certain routes will talk about how you went to Rome with a character called Claire. So you could roll that back into your knowledge and start again fresh and type "call for Claire". If the player could incorporate some of that knowledge, it made it easier for them to steer the narrative into a more meaningful one. This was interesting because it mirrored the development. It is quite nice that the way I wrote it mirrored to some extent how people would actually play it, trying to seek out and shape the narrative.

I had always been interested in storytelling and art, so I was doing all this stuff as a hobby and it just never occurred to me that this is a thing you can do for a living. But you can have a career writing interactive stories. So, although it feels like *Aisle* was the stuff I wanted to do and then, later on, particularly with *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories* and with *Her Story*, actually did it, there was a lot of zigzagging to get there.

How was working within established IPs in *Serious Sam: Next Encounter, Crusty Demons, or Ghost Rider*?

After working for Michael Saylor, a billionaire who was doing weird things with databases, I moved back to the UK and looked for a job at the dot-com companies, which were going burst at the time. Everyone was convinced that I was a dot-com person, but I had a friend working for a video game company, and he knew that I was an artist and that I did painting. He said: "You could be a video game artist". I downloaded illegal copies of Maya and 3D Studio and all the packages—I've since paid my dues—, put together a small portfolio and got a job as an artist on *Serious Sam*. Very quickly they moved me to the design team because I wouldn't shut up about game design. Then, at some point, I still wouldn't shut up so they made me a lead designer.

I had side-stepped into the industry. I loved video games, so it made sense. It was a very good education in some of the craft of video game narrative, even though none of those games had particularly good narratives. We did the *Ghost Rider* movie game, which was before people had high expectations of superhero movies or superhero games. We were paired with a couple of Marvel writers, Jimmy Palmiotti and Garth Ennis, but they did not allocate a lot of time to the script because it was a very small job for them. As the designer of that game, I went and I read every *Ghost Rider* comic, I was going to take this seriously. I needed to learn about *Ghost Rider*, and I read the movie script and thought: "This isn't a very good movie script". But they said: "It's fine. That's how movies work. They'll draft it". They didn't and then we got the game script. And it was frustrating because Garth and Jimmy would

Serious Sam: Next Encounter

Crusty Demons

Ghost Rider

write pages of stuff that didn't necessarily fit the game, nor did the action in the cinematics mirror what was happening in the game. At one point, I went home and I rewrote the whole script and everyone agreed this made a lot more sense, but we had to use the script that came from Marvel, it was a political thing.

You have also worked for projects which have been cancelled, like *Elveon* or *Legacy of Kain: Dead Sun*. What did you learn from those experiences?

We were brought in to a cancelled RPG [*Elveon*] that was being developed in Bratislava to save it, and that involved a top-down rewrite of a game that had already been written. The game had been developed by a German studio—German audience loves very traditional RPGs—and they wanted it to make sense for an international audience. They said: "This is a game about elves, like the Tolkien elves before all the other races existed". And we thought: "Oh, that's cool. So is this like the elves back before they were all sophisticated? Is this like a more primal, interesting take on elves?" But they said: "No, the elves have always been that way because they're elves". So they were basically taking the rich fantasy world and just taking out all the other interesting races. So we retold it

and it was a horrific job. I made up a new story that was essentially a kind of World War II film noir about spies crashing behind enemy lines and made it about elves—it was a griffin that crashed and magic rather than bombs and weapons. Because the situation was so dire, no one questioned the script, maybe with a big publisher there would have been questions about it. But I went away and wrote this, and then we recorded the whole thing with a voice cast that now is all the big names like Troy Baker and Laura Bailey. I was just really getting to understand how you do the voiceover, how you do the motion capture... I was pushing some ideas that I had about how narrative should be integrated, but these were not necessarily the best vehicles for it.

In *Legacy of Kain* we had this opening that I modeled after Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963) that took about thirty to forty-five minutes. We had beautiful stuff in there, like the first fight. The first time you got to fight the village had been slaughtered. Your guy had wandered off in the middle of a play, and comes back to find everyone dead. The killer is there, so you pick up a play sword and start trying to fight this spectral vampire assassin. You're pressing all the combat buttons and the camera is on a video game combat place, but your character is appallingly bad and just gets toyed with by this vampire who then kills him. So, the executives said: "Why are you fucking with the player? Why are you trying to make it not fun?" And we replied: "Because we're building this up, when they'll actually get to fight it will mean something". If it comes from a true place, it'll be interesting. The second time you got to fight, your character gets killed and his soul is consumed by this vampire assassin thing. But, for some reason

(that is the core mystery of that game), he takes over the body of his murderer. Again, the game goes into combat mode, but every time you press a fighting button, your character is like: "Kill me! Come on!" And for the second time, we do not let you have any video game combat [laughs]. So finally, when you got to have it, it meant something.

This comes from that era of games like *Bioshock* and it felt like we were selling out a little bit. If it's given that you have to have lots of combat in your game, then you naturally try to figure out how to make this interesting or clever, or how to comment on the violence. So at some point you end up doing *Bioshock* or *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development, 2012) or something where you're trying to have your cake and eat it, you get to have the fun violence, but then, ask: "Should you have been enjoying that?". It feels a little bit silly, but yes, we had all these debates about the player's desire: "Are you frustrating that desire? How much should you be pandering to the player?". The marketing people kept telling us this character should be aspirational. This character should be wish fulfillment for teenage boys. Would a teenage boy want to do this? Would a teenage boy want to be this character?

Silent Hill: Origins and Silent Hill: Shattered Memories are games with a very established narrative universe. How was it working through the story here?
The company I was working for had another office that, through various pieces of luck, got the chance to make a *Silent Hill* game, which was the origin story to the very first *Silent Hill* game—a terrible idea because *Silent Hill 1* tells its origin. The story of *Silent Hill* reveals what happened seven years ago with flashbacks, diary entries… So some business person who hadn't necessarily played all the games thought: "Everyone loves *Silent Hill 1,* let's do a prequel to it". And it got greenlit. So, as someone that had played those games, I found there were big issues. This game took place seven

years prior to *Silent Hill 1,* but had characters that were older than in the original game, characters who were only introduced to the supernatural in the original game and now were fully aware of it. The game was doing lots of weird things with the narrative, the tone of it did not seem true.

And there were also a series of random and lucky events. The team that was making that game had issues with their game engine. My team—who at the time was working on *Ghost Rider*—had this game engine that could do character action and make it run on a PSP [PlayStation Portable] (which was required). We put together a demo in a week of how a *Silent Hill* game would look like in our engine. We gave that to the team, and then, six months down the line, the project was still having issues. And at some point, me and particularly the lead artist I worked with, Neil (we were both fans of *Silent Hill*) kept thinking: "It's not fair that we don't get to make this thing because they're making all these mistakes". So the bosses turned around and said: "How about you guys finish this game?" And then: "Half the money is already being spent and all the time has been used up, so you get six months to make this game and very little money".

So that became a very intense development. There was no time for people to question me writing this thing. The producer, Konami, was terrified because he had this problem on his hands, also my bosses. We had only six months to get it to motion capture, to get it to all different stages, so we needed a script in a week. So I went home to write a script. And then they said there was no time to storyboard it. So I went home and storyboard it myself. I'd work a full day and go home and storyboard. Then we thought that none of the enemies in the game made any sense—in *Silent Hill* the enemies have some symbolic logic behind them and a certain aesthetic. So I went home and came up with enemy concepts, and drew them.

And as a fan and an observer, I would totally acknowledge that *Silent Hill: Origins* is a mediocre

game. It is a straight 7 out of 10 and it has no right to exist as part of the *Silent Hill* storyline. It's a redundant piece of story. There were the two things that we didn't like that we were locked into. We stuck with Travis, a character from nowhere, who suddenly has a pivotal role in the history of *Silent Hill*. They said that he had already been shown in a trailer, and done marketing stuff him. The other thing was Pyramid Head, which within the games exists only in *Silent Hill 2*. But when they made the movie of *Silent Hill*, they put him in there because they thought he just looked cool. And in *Origins* they were going to explain this character, which, of course, is the thing you should never do. You know, Ridley Scott in *Prometheus* (2012): if you have this wonderful nightmare, do not explain it. In the script that we looked at, Pyramid Head was a cannibal chef who someday decided to start attaching metal plates to his head because he was crazy. And we were like: "No, no, no. This thing is born of nightmares. He's not a real person doing this himself". So we got that thrown out, but they said that we had to have him in there—maybe the marketing had been the silhouette of this pyramid head type guy and this trucker. We kept saying: "Can we just not have him in the game?" At some point there's a note in the game that acknowledges that he was the fevered imagining of

Silent Hill: Origins

somebody that had seen a painting in the story. We did our best to lampshade this thing.

That game is not great, it is kind of *fanfic-y*. But I think it's probably the greatest achievement of any game I've worked on. In six months we took this thing, which the world has never seen—but if they had it would have been abhorrent to this incredible franchise—and we took it to a 7 out of 10. And that meant that we had a certain amount of kudos with Konami because they had seen that we had swung this background and pulled off something which was fine.

That led to a series of tortuous discussions—which, again, took a long time—to make *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories*, after a similar number of freak occurrences. At some point, we were pitching an original *Silent Hill* game on Wii, and Konami were asking for us to make another PSP game. And further down the line, someone at Konami said "Why are you making two games? They should be the same". And during all this, the same producer at Konami noted that the powers that be in Japan had greenlit the idea of doing a remake of *Silent Hill 1*. So he said: "This remake has already been signed off. If we call this a remake, we can start to work on it tomorrow and we don't have to do all the paperwork, so let's do that".

We pointed out that *Silent Hill: Origins* had been something of a remake, the movie had essentially been an attempt to remake that material, make the dialogue slightly easier to the West of there, and there wasn't a huge amount of interesting stuff to do now. Personally, I didn't feel like screwing around with someone else's story in someone else's mythology, especially the way we had to in *Origins*. So I pitched something. *Battlestar Galactica's* reboot—which I hadn't watched, but I knew the people loved it—stood on a premise where it had characters with the same names in a general situation, but was essentially a total reimagining of that story. So I said: "Let's do *Battlestar Galactica* with *Silent Hill 1* so you can still tell your bosses that it's a remake, but it will be its own thing".

Silent Hill: Shattered Memories

We took a lot of the ideas that I pushed for the Wii game, which involved a framing device of a psychiatrist, this idea that the game would dynamically assemble its story based on the way you played it. We took all these things from those previous pitches and ran with it. That was really the game where I'd come up with the idea from nothing, and it was doing a lot of what was interesting to me about interactive storytelling. It was bringing a lot of the tools from the interactive fiction world. The game came out in 2009, ten years after *Aisle*. That was really the point where I stepped back and thought: "This is what I want to be doing, I want to be playing around with how we can tell stories in this interactive way. This is building on *Aisle*. This is building on stuff I've been wanting to do and thinking about forever. I just never realized that was the goal. But now that I'm here, it's really obvious".

NARRATIVE, GAMEPLAY AND DETECTIVE STORIES

Your games have often been described as interactive fictions. Do you think it's a video game *genre*, a type of game which has evolved from text adventures, or do you think it's closer to interactive films? The notion of genre in video games is quite vague, and interactive fictions may not mean the same now that in the eighties. What do you think about your games in terms of genre?

Genre is weird. Steam just pushed this idea that they are going to help people discover things by genre more. So, with our current project we were looking at the store and we were thinking: "Which genre are we ticking?" and none of them really fit. We were looking at it and horror was not a genre, horror was a theme, the genre might be adventure game, point-and-click, or first person shooter....

When making *Shattered Memories* you had the survival horror genre which was defining these types of stories by game mechanics. You can trace that back to the original game *Alone in the Dark* (Infogrames, 1992) in France, which was very innovative and was inspired by H.P. Lovecraft. It took place in an old mansion, the character would read a lot of diary entries and notebooks—that's Lovecraft, that's the genre and this kind of Victorian cosmic horror. Then along comes Capcom and they make *Resident Evil* and they take a lot of the game mechanics from *Alone in the Dark* and they add in a bit of George Romero's zombie stuff. So they add in the fact that combat is desperate and survival based. It creates this weird fusion of the Lovecraftian stuff with the George Romero stuff, so I'm still reading diaries and solving weird puzzles. These strange and arcane puzzles fit if you are in the mansion of an ancient necromancer, but it's weird when you're in a police station. But then, that essentially becomes fixed. That is how every horror game has to play. So you end up with *Silent Hill*, where the inspirations from outside of games are films like *Jacob's Ladder* (Adrian Lyne, 1990), psychological horror, all these stories that take place in the imagination of the protagonist. But in *Silent Hill*, I'm still shooting people in the head with a shotgun, smashing them with a pipe and scavenging for supplies and health kits.

This is a frustration for me because when we think of story genres outside of games, the categorization can sometimes make more sense because you're talking about the protagonist, what is their relationship to the world and the problem, what is the tone of this thing... But in games it is conflated with game mechanics. Commercially it is a problem because genre is a useful tool to help you sell your story. It was always a frustration for me, working within commercial games, that you were very limited to what you could do mechanically and what you could do story wise. There were ten genres to pick from, and that was it. You are very limited.

Her Story came partly out of wanting to break away from that. And I had this strong belief that the detective story, the mystery story, the police procedural story, was an evergreen genre outside of games. If you have a TV channel, you would need a cop show. If you are a book publisher you are going to have some crime novels. But in games we hadn't done a great job in terms of addressing that audience. And I would pitch it to publishers and they would always tell me: "Yes, it's big elsewhere, but it's not going to work in games". I think that is, to some extent, because it's a genre that is driven by character. There's lots of dialogue and character interaction. There is a complexity to the story that goes beyond cause and effect and action.

So, *Her Story* was a way of challenging the limits between gameplay and narrative in detective stories?

When I went to make *Her Story,* I had been working on *Legacy of Kain* for three years, with the struggle where we were trying to do interesting things with narrative but at the same time, we had to have cool combat, collectibles, side quests. And I wanted to make these cool, character driven video games. I suddenly looked around and saw that these things had died a bit. *Bioshock* (2K Boston, 2007) could be at this high point in terms of acceptance within the industry, being like: "Oh, we can give Ken Levine lots of money to go and make this game that has capital T Themes and it's a singleplayer game. It tells a story and that's it, that is the whole experience".

I loved making *Shattered Memories*, I was working at *Legacy of Kain*, and I felt like if we continued to make these games and they are popular that's the course that I would like to go. But when *Legacy of Kain* was cancelled in 2013 or 2014, I looked around and, outside of Naughty Dog making a game at a time, outside of David Cage (at that point being given lots of money by Sony to make things), and maybe Ubisoft, no one was

making the prestige story game. That led me to go and try the indie world out. But I knew that I wanted to do something interesting and I felt that if this was possibly my only chance to make an indie game I should try and do everything that I wanted to do in one go. If this didn't succeed, I would go back to my normal job. I wanted to prove that detective stories are a cool thing.

And at this point I'd had this realization: growing up, I was obsessed with the immersive sense of games like *Ultima Underworld* (Blue Sky Productions, 1992), *Thief* (Square Enix Europa, 1998-2004; Square Enix, 2014-), *Deus Ex* (Ion Storm y Eidos Montréal, 2000-2016), *System Shock* (Looking Glass Technologies, 1994)... This tied into this general idea that the ultimate video game is a 3D immersive virtual reality where I will step into the shoes of my character and the world and the story will just happen all around me. And I started to question how important that stuff was, where the story was actually being delivered. *Gone Home* (Fullbright, 2013) has the fun of exploring an environment from *Bioshock* and gets rid of all the fighting and the silly gameplay. But

Her Story

when I ask myself what is driving the emotion, for me, it was the voice acting. And there was a good anecdote. I think Steve Gaynor, at some point, said the original plan for that game was to be totally realistic—you would uncover a story just by going through the house, looking at objects, seeing the detritus left by these people's lives—, but it wasn't working. People were not feeling what they wanted them to feel. And that's when he had this idea that when you read these diary pages, you would hear the voice of the character in your head, even though it makes no sense right within the narrative. And the thing that made me feel emotions in *Gone Home* was listening to that character's voice. And, yes, it was cool to walk around the world and explore. But if I had heard a radioplay with the messages from *Gone Home*, would it have been that different?

In *Her Story* I wanted to test all these ideas. So I said: "I'm going to make a detective game. I'm going to make a game with no 3D exploration, no embodiment of a protagonist, no cause and effect—and this was a key one". When we talk about interactive fiction there's a general expectation that it is what people sometimes call *choose your own adventure*, which is about cause and effect, where the interactive part of the narrative is the branching. So, you make choices, and that systemic thing, the cause and effect, is what makes the interactivity part of the story. And I didn't necessarily believe that. I was starting to question that because I thought there was a lot that happens with interactivity. There's a lot that we're doing just by

interfacing with a computer that isn't about the systemic aspect. So I said: "I'm going to make a detective game, and there'll be no 3D exploration, there'll be no variables and no meaningful state changes". Because really, in *Her Story,* all of the things happen in your head. They are not necessarily happening in the system of the game.

And the other thing I said was that I wanted to make a game about subtext, which came from *Legacy of Kain.* I would argue with the producer at Square Enix because he would read the scripts and say: "I don't get it. In this scene why doesn't the character just say what they're thinking? Why doesn't he just come out and say it?" And I replied: "Well that would be bad writing. You can't have him say *I love you* or *I hate you.* If you give that line to an actor, it will sound phony. You need to put it in the subtext. That's what writing and acting is about". And then they would say "Okay, that might be true in movies and TV because you have a human face that can express all of this, but in video games, where we only have motion capture, maybe it's not possible." I felt we should at least try because otherwise we would just write crap. I wanted to prove that the interesting narrative is in the subtext.

In so many video games—again, this was true in *Legacy of Kain* because we were trying to make this big budget game—the user experience aspect sometimes is meshed with story. The story is your reason for doing things, your goal or your objective as a player, so they wanted to make sure the objective is very clear. You don't want players to be confused about what they're supposed to be doing. You don't want them to be confused about why they're doing it. So in a game, someone would say: "I'm going to cross the mountain to kill the dragon". And that's what's happening, that's the story. Whereas you might not necessarily want the character to be as aware or as tied to the actual goals it has. I really wanted to dig into that. So I had all these things I wanted to juggle, and that became *Her Story.*

How did you face the process of writing *Her Story* as an independent game writer? Was it very different from the processes you had put up within the game industry?

I wanted to do all these things with the game itself, but also with the process. This process on *Legacy of Kain* had been painful. If you are the director and writer of a big budget video game like that, the process is that you may have written a ten-page document saying: "Here's my idea for the game and that's what's cool about it". So then Square Enix greenlights the game, says we'll make this idea, and immediately the team ramps up: you have a team of animators creating animation, concept artists creating all the characters in this world, level designers building levels, puzzles... All this stuff, and you haven't written the story yet. So the process of writing that was writing as we're making stuff up, trying desperately to keep all these different teams together. It's very messy. You hear stories—I think it was Ken Levine again, in *Bioshock Infinite*—where they had built a whole fifth of the world and it got to a point where he said: "Actually, that doesn't make sense anymore. That's all wrong". And they just threw it out... you are drafting this.

I had some jealousy (and I know it's not like this all the time or, maybe, even most of the time) towards the single author, or team of authors, thinking through the whole idea of a movie on paper where it's less expensive, where you can try stuff out and you can rip pages out and move things around until you arrive at a screenplay that you can give to someone. And they look at it and say: "Actually, this is a damn good movie". I liked that idea of, up front, people just thinking on paper. And there is a thing people say in video games: until you actually start making the game, you don't know what it is you're making. You could, in theory, design a whole game on paper and then it would just work. But because it's hard to prove something on paper, it sometimes is an excuse, it's easier to just say: "Well, we'll figure it

out when we build this thing. We will do sprints or whatever". But I felt that I really liked the scrutiny. If you read a script for a movie and it sucks, you can say it sucks. If there's a problem with the end of act two, there's a problem with the end of act two on paper. And you can give it back to the writer and say: "You have got to fix it. The story doesn't make sense".

With *Her Story* I knew that I had a year, so I said: "Well, for six months I'm not going to build anything. For six months I'm going to just figure this thing out on paper until I know what it is". When I knew what kind of game I wanted to make, I went and read all the manuals and did all the training for homicide detectives for how one should conduct an interview, read all the academic texts about what happens in that room, watched all the movies about police interrogations. I was slightly ahead of the true crime renaissance. But I discovered at that point, that you could find on YouTube clips of real interrogations. I dug into all those and did a lot of absorbing and researching. That then came together as the specific ideas of *Her Story*. Not only was I trying to make something that was a bit different to the rigid genres that existed, but I was also trying to develop the game in a slightly different way. That, again, was kind of more freeing.

Most of your games and interactive fictions develop detective stories in which the player must make their way through videos to discover what has happened. But, is solving the mystery the main objective?

I was very conscious of this in making *Her Story*. Again, a lot of this came out of arguments that I had in *Legacy of Kain* about the player's desire. With *Her Story*, I strongly felt that the players were clever. And that they are intelligent, especially as a mass. The core idea of *Her Story* was to give them something that doesn't welcome them, that is opaque, to some extent. So *Her Story* opens on the most boring thing you can imagine:

a Windows 3.1 desktop with some database software. It doesn't tell you what you're doing there, it doesn't have objectives and goals. It doesn't lead you through the narrative. My belief was that it is so provocative as it is the monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrik, 1968). It's just there and it's willing for you to crack it. And I really felt that especially in interactive things, you can be more provocative and you can actually ask more of your audience because they're engaged, they're leaning in. *Her Story* came out of this idea of giving something that feels slightly unknowable.

Human beings have these incredible brains and we're obsessed with pattern recognition, we're obsessed with creating order. The whole purpose of the imagination is a survival instinct. Whenever we tell stories, we're screwing with that framework, so I had this strong belief that you could give people something that didn't have that shape, that didn't lead them. And it would naturally be interesting, it would inspire that curiosity. And if you made it more free, that would be even more interesting to them. If you took down the barriers, so that they could just lose themselves in this thing, that desire to bring order to this big mess would spring out. But the thing that I was very interested in after *Her Story* came out was that the murder mystery, the idea that you need to solve this crime, was just the hook that got people in there. But you can solve that question, to a degree, quite easily or quite quickly. Which then leads to the more interesting objective which, for me, is understanding this woman, learning her story. Again, like I said with *Aisle*, it mirrored my journey from the start—when I'm going to make a detective game—to some point where I decide you are going to be a detective in an interrogation room.

When I started watching those videos of the interrogations of the real people, there was one particular story, the Jodi Arias case in the US, a woman who murdered her boyfriend quite violently. There was this huge public of people who

loved this story. And the way in which her character was set up according to story cliches was quite interesting to me. She was pitched as the *femme fatale*. They had hours of her interrogation online that was released to the public. So I sat and watched it for a week. And by the end of it, I was on her side, my empathy was totally with her because of that situation in the interrogation room. You have somebody that has murdered somebody—that's probably the worst thing they've ever done in their lives—and the reason they've done it is usually tied up in the whole rest of their life. And probably they have not ever had a chance to talk any of this through with people. If there are some bad things that have happened in their lives this is all being kept inside of them. So you have the homicide detective who's like: "I'm just here. I'm your friend. I just want to hear your side of the story" and all this stuff comes out. So after spending a week watching those interviews with Jodi, I was no longer interested in the fantasy of being a detective. I was much more interested in that I had really got to know this person and developed this empathy for her. And that was the interesting part. The question of whether this person did it is your A-plot in a movie. Once you go to the B-plot of "Why did Jodi do this? Why did she kill her boyfriend? Why did she end up in this relationship?" That was far more interesting. So, similar to *Aisle*, the way it developed organically was that the metastructure of the game mirrored the development structure. I think you get people in with that hook—the mystery—but then, at some point, it is just natural curiosity that comes out. And I think this is, for me, the nugget that I'm still playing with: what kind of interactive story I am telling.

How do you think interactive narratives work in relation to traditional or fixed narratives?
Sometimes we like to tell ourselves or tell other people that video game narrative is so unique that it's an entirely different way of telling a story to

the classical ways, so we don't necessarily need all that knowledge. But for the games I have been making, I'm doing the same things and using the same parts of the brain that a traditional story should. So understanding and deconstructing the tools of traditional storytelling is super useful. Looking at someone like Hitchcock was very interesting because he is a director who was focused on the relationship between the film and its audience, the story of a Hitchcock movie is not the plot. It's not the words the characters say. It's the things the audience is thinking. His whole toolkit for suspense was to suggest something to the audience. It's in your imagination, you're anticipating it, you're expecting or wanting something to happen. And when that's frustrated or twisted in some way, it creates a lot of the energy of the narrative. So it's very easy to look at the way that Hitchcock made his movies and relate that to video games. Especially having this interest that I have, which is very much thinking about what is the game trying to make the audience do, what is the game trying to make the audience want, how is it driving knowledge... Understanding that that's how all stories are told and that those things absolutely still apply.

You always have the debate, which is slightly pointless, of what's more important, plot or character. Plot is important in a fixed narrative. In a movie you need to keep my attention on the screen and you need to keep me following it all the way through it. So plot is important because it gives a direction to the narrative. It gives me a reason to keep watching what's going to happen next. But when you're divorced from that fixed narrative, when it is actually my curiosity, that is not only justifying me, but driving what I'm doing, you become slightly more divorced from the plot. And I think you can start to embrace characters and this broader concept of what a narrative might look like.

In *Her Story,* part of that came out of looking at the history of the detective story. And this was

kind of justifying my belief that the audience was intelligent. I was looking at the history of popular storytelling, seeing the origins of the detective story (the Agatha Christie stuff) and they are like puzzle box narratives. You have a detective who isn't really a character, it's like a collection of mannerisms. But the detective is just this character that walks around in order to help you solve the puzzle. And usually with those narratives, at the very end, the puzzle is explained by the detective. These were very popular and, at some point, the audience has seen every trick that you can play within that framework and the genre evolves, so you go from the "Whodunit?" to the "How done it?". The TV show *Columbo* is a great example where at the start of an episode they show you who did it—so that is out of the way. And then you get to the more recent stuff, the "Why done it?". Now you have this audience that has seen all the cop shows—some of the Scandinavian stuff is a great example of this—and we don't really care about the mystery and the puzzle, we're really interested in exploring the psychology of this character. It might be like a British TV show, *Cracker* (Granada Television, 1993) where the main character was not a detective, he was the psychiatrist. So the best bits of that were he would sit in a room opposite the suspect and just get in their brains. Serial killer movies are often in this genre because it's more about exploring this character that has ended up being so strange or interesting.

So the "Why done it?" really says to this audience: "We have all these tools from the genre that we can play with, but we're going to get really deep on an individual human being and go inside their brains and try and really understand what makes a human being tick". What that justified for me, wanting to treat the audience as sophisticated, is the idea that they would bring to *Her Story* all of that knowledge of the genre. But it also neatly mapped in that depending on how you played it, *Her Story* could be any one of those three narrative types. If you played it in a certain order, it could

be a mystery that at the very end the pieces came together. It could also be this mystery where, pretty early on, you realize this character commited the murder, but then you think: "How? What?" Or it could be this thing where you're thinking: "Ok, I know who did it and I now know how, but I want to know why, what is going on in this woman's life?" And that is literally the title of the game, *Her Story*. All of the backstory—that is very gothic and fun—leads up to that. So that kind of fluidity, the idea of working with the *genre's toolkit*... the modern audience deals with complexity on a whole different scale.

Everybody thinks that the modern audience is dumbed down, that we play video games instead of watching Shakespeare. But the level of sophistication is so much greater. My kids now have seen so many episodes of television, read so many comic books, played so many video games... just absorbed so much stuff versus the average person in 1950. We just have this toolkit that, for me, is super exciting as an interactive storyteller. And it's terrifying to a linear storyteller because the linear storyteller who wants to do a cop show now, what twist is he going to pull up? What is he going to do that's going to surprise people who have seen everything? Whereas for me this is cool because I have this audience that brings all this to the table and we can play with it and we can tell the story together.

The interfaces you use—old computer, modern computer, surveillance cameras, video chats—make the player fall into the game through everyday activities (searching, googling), there is no difficulty in this performance... Do you think this makes your games more attractive to casual gamers?
Yes, and I think there's something neat about taking an activity that is familiar, maybe even at the level of being a reflex activity, and using that to tell your story. Even going back to *Shattered Memories*, I started to formulate this idea that when a player

sits down to play your game, they need to know what on earth they're doing. And to some extent, that's why video game genres are mechanical. Because if I'm going to play a first person shooter, I know what is expected of me, I need to point at things and pull a trigger. I know which button will usually be the trigger button. So if you're going to deviate from that, you need to very quickly figure out how the player will know what they're doing.

So if you're asking a lot of the players, like in the case of *Her Story,* where I am trying to be provocative and not telling them what to do, you can't also have them confused about how to go about doing anything. The familiarity of using a search box that works like Google is important, I think. There are a lot of cop narratives where they're just searching to find a suspect in a database. Or they go to the library to look through the microfiche of old newspapers until they find the one clue. So we get that beat and we understand emotionally how it feels. In *Her Story,* if you search for a bunch of things and get nothing back, you don't feel like you're failing the game. Emotionally that's that beat. You stay up until 2:00 am looking through the database until you get the one "Aha!" moment. That's what happens in *True Detective* (Nic Pizzolatto, HBO: 2014-2019). So you have this understanding of that element that we're replicating with the interface.

In *Telling Lies* we did some other things. The way the video player works there is not the way a YouTube video player works. But we wanted to create the mindset of a surveillance job. We wanted to create the feel of spying on people. We've seen people go through surveillance tapes, rewind them and fast forward. If I'm surveilling somebody, I'm going to sit in a car and sit and watch them for hours. And nothing interesting will happen until one moment, when I see somebody across the window or overhear something. We wanted to try and replicate that mechanically by having players scrub manually through the video, by having these longer video clips, by having you dropped in at different moments. We wanted to replicate the idea of a butler spying through the keyhole. If you have that sense of spying on somebody you don't have a perfect framing on the scene. You don't see what's going on inside there until it crosses in front of the keyhole. So that kind of lack of context was important: you would only have half of the narrative. That was where the idea of dropping you into the middle of a scene would come from.

I think it's always been really important to me that the mechanical elements are obvious, either because we're replicating something specific like Google Search or because emotionally and just atmospherically, it is like we've seen this moment before, we're expanding that moment. I was conscious when I made *Her Story* that I didn't want the audience to think that this was a cheap way to make a game with cheap graphics. So I put this

Her Story
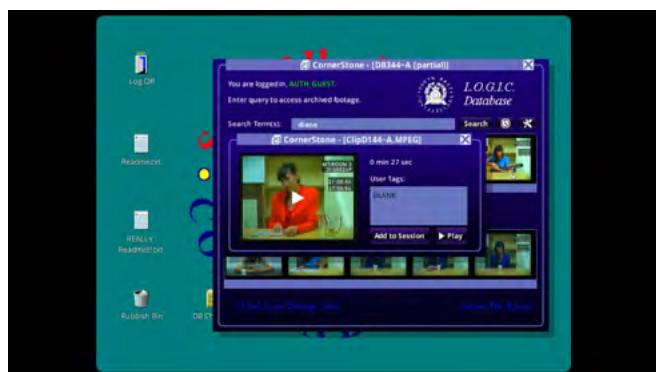
Telling Lies
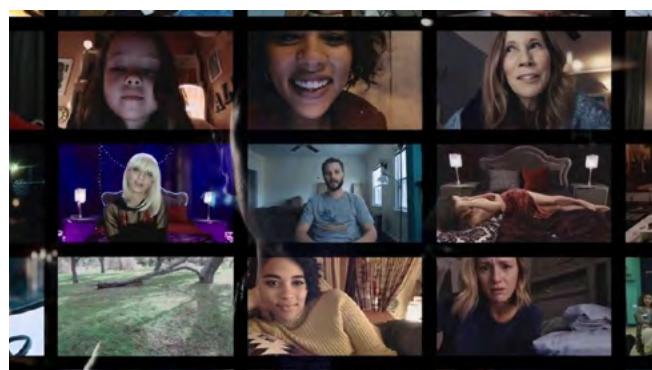
extra element of polish into the visuals with some of the post-processing, with the reflection in the screen, with some of the sound design… to really bed you into that and still have the kind of feedback, polish and the game feel that you might get in a normal game. I think those are important elements.

INFLUENCES AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

What are the main influences of your work? Which devices and narrative strategies from outside video games have been useful for you?
When it comes to creating the narratives, for me the idea of going out there and researching things and absorbing stuff never fails to not be super relevant. It's very easy to spend five hours looking on the Internet and feel like I've researched a topic. But books still hold just such a ridiculous amount of detail of knowledge and way of expressing things. So whatever I'm doing, I will make sure I'm going to read two or three books on a subject and, in the process of doing that, I will just have so many specific little details and interesting things. If you do enough of that, you will have got past the obvious things. I think that's the biggest sin of video games, maybe other media as well, because of the business constraints, because of the creative constraints.

Often, if you get ten people in a room and get to brainstorm something, someone will say an idea that everyone loves. And they love it because it's an idea that everybody saw in a movie last year or was on a TV show. And then that's something that the vice president of whatever video game publisher gets. But by the time your game comes out, there are ten other games riffing on that same thing. But if you really dig into a subject and read up on it, you will find the weird and more specific, more interesting, more detailed little bits, that allow you to create something that actually feels fresh, interesting and true.

I find looking at different points of view is always rewarding. The one that was exciting for me on *Her Story* was an academic paper on the role of laughter in police interviews, both as a tool for the detective but also its meaning when a suspect laughed. And I remember this particular piece because it was an academic text. It introduced the idea that in the case of a police interview you have three participants. There is the detective, who is asking the questions to reveal guilt. There is the suspect, who is attempting not to incriminate themselves, whether or not they're guilty. But there is also the third participant, the invisible participant (I can't remember the exact term). So when a conversation is occurring, the two people in the room are actually speaking to the third participant. The third participant would be the jury. The suspect, who is aware that this is going to be used against them later, might rephrase the question at the start because they want to make sure that if this is played, it can't be chopped up and recontextualized. Everything that is being said is said to that third participant. Also the way that the detective asks the question. He is phrasing it so that when this is played at trial, his question will in itself contain the answer.

I remember reading this and thinking: "Oh my God, this third participant… that's the player!" They are this invisible character that is in the room, that everything is aimed at, who is not actually themselves contributing to the conversation, but is the whole reason for this conversation existing. And that really unlocked in my head a real understanding of the mechanisms in this room. Why it felt interesting to me to watch people in a police interview, because even though it wasn't for my benefit, actually, it really was my benefit. And that gave me a great insight into why this is interesting as a game mechanic, why the player cares about this. And that came from looking into academic papers about police interviews.

I think reading broadly and looking at different disciplines can really help you. Not to get pre-

tentious, but the essence of making a video game is really understanding human behaviour. You have a human being sitting there, plugged into a machine, and you are trying to delight their brain, and they have to participate. There has to be shared understanding in this shared language. So you can read pretty broadly about all sorts of things, because it will become relevant.

How do you see the future of narrative in video games?

It's interesting to look back to *Silent Hill*. It was the only video game IP that allowed us to care about having a character with an inner life, to have a story that took place in the modern world without any kind of superhero embellishment. If I pitched *Shattered Memories*, and say: "I want to make a game about the complicated grief of this 18 year old girl", people would say that that doesn't sound interesting as a video game. But because it was *Silent Hill* we got away with it. Now, thirteen years on, the breadth is much greater. I think digital transformed things, because you're no longer pitching the sales manager of GameStop. Before, if it had to be sold in a store, it had to be ordered and bought by the regional sales manager of the video game shop. So you were not pitching your gameplay or the ways your game was interesting. You were having to say it was a cool game to be put on the shelves of the store. As soon as we went digital, you could be much more specific and niche. There's no way any publisher or GameStop sales manager would have bought into *Her Story* before it came out, but I was confident that there would be enough people in the world plugged into the Internet who would be interested in this thing. The ubiquity of technology allowed for things like *Her Story* being on iPhone, which was important. Everybody has a phone even if they don't have a game console. So I think that those business things, these hardware things, have enabled us to take things more seriously.

We're at a point now where we're realizing that having more interesting characters and telling stories about fresh protagonists that we haven't seen before is a good thing and there's an audience for this. There's maybe a big audience for doing these things. It's weird to think that every big budget video game now has to take the story seriously, even if the interactive narrative is not necessarily clever. There are these characters now that bring in famous actors, that's everywhere. And, to some extent, in those cases the story acts as a wrapper.

Obviously the more interesting thing to me is when the story is at the heart of it, but it acts as a baseline. I started working on *Serious Sam*, and there wasn't really a story, there were cool monsters that you had to blow up, a protagonist and five cutscenes that explained that the universe was going to be destroyed. But I didn't care, and you were able to put that game out there and no one cared. Whereas now we understand that stories are how we contextualize things and relate to things. It's cool that that baseline has gone up.

I think there are still some things we wrestle with. I cry almost every day thinking about the mobile market now. The iPhone is still the most ubiquitous video game platform we have. But right now, today, you can't talk about politics or sex or anything above a PG-13. You can no longer ask a premium price for a story game unless it's an Apple Arcade. And Apple Arcade has to be family friendly. I was so excited when *Her Story* was a big hit on the iPhone, with all of the interesting coverage and newspapers like *Le Monde* or *Liberation* in France featuring big articles. This general interest from the wider world came from the fact that people could play it on a phone. And we saw with *Telling Lies* that we didn't have the support from Apple because the themes in it were not suitable. So we still have these things that are holding us back. We still are restricted in how we tell stories. On a phone, I can watch HBO or Netflix and see anything on screen, any piece of storytelling. But the second it moves over into the games section, into the interactive section, we lose all of these things. That continues to be a challenge.

We also still struggle with some of the business side on the bigger games. There is an expectation that your game has to be 20, 30, 40 or 50 hours long, that it needs to fill everybody's free time whereas a movie only needs to be two hours long and a book can be anywhere from three to five hours long. And personally I love narratives I can consume fully in a single sitting, because I think you can give yourself over to it. I think there's something very interesting about the focus that brings. And I think we are continuing to push that idea that you can have shorter games, that you can have different shaped games. Again, digital has really helped here. It all feels positive as we continue to push.

There is obviously a fusion that happens at some point between traditional media and video games that everybody is trying to make happen. I've had countless meetings with TV and film people who's bosses want to make this happen. Because they say they are losing money to social media and video games. And it's easy to put Christopher Nolan's movie in a *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017) but that isn't really solving the problem. So they desperately want to figure this thing out. They look at what happened to music, and they look at what happened to e-books. They know that whatever the mainstream storytelling medium is, at some point it is going to become more interactive. It feels inevitable, and they have no idea what it looks like. So they are pushing that from the movie side. And you get repeated examples where they will usually take somebody that has a track record in linear media and give them some tools. Whether that is Steven Soderbergh making *Mosaic* on HBO (2018) or whether it's *Bandersnatch* on Netflix (David Slade, 2018). Usually these things are not as sophisticated as some of the work that's being done over on the interactive narrative or interactive fiction side.

And then on the game side you have people that are trying to push narrative to the forefront and trying to explore things. At some point some-thing will happen, we aren't quite sure yet what it looks like. And it will inevitably be a business or a hardware thing that defines it, I think. The biggest frustration I've had within the industry has always been that every time there is a new generation of video game consoles you want them to be as cheap and as available as the DVD player became. You think of DVDs and they were an extremely expensive cinephile device until, at some point, they became so cheap you could put them on magazines. And then everybody had them until they went away in streaming apps. Every time the investors look at it they think the early adopters of these games are going to be teenage boys, so they end up making another expensive shooty box. That cycle has always been frustrating, but it feels like with smart televisions or phone technology there is this general convergence that will enable us to inject interesting ideas into where people are consuming their stories. I think that's all positive. ∎

NOTAS

1   For the development of this section we held an interview via video conference, available at: www.cultura-visual.uji.es/videojuegos

THE THIRD PARTICIPANT. DIALOGUE WITH SAM BARLOW

Abstract

Dialogue with video game creator and writer Sam Barlow about his work within the video game industry and as an independent creator, as well as his creative approaches to designing deep and complex stories and narratives in video games.

Key words

Sam Barlow; *Her Story*; *Telling Lies*; *Legacy of Kain*; *Silent Hill*; Video game; Narrative design; Ludonarrative.

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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. Contact: mnunez@uji.es.

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EL TERCER PARTICIPANTE. DIÁLOGO CON SAM BARLOW

Resumen

Diálogo con el creador y escritor de videojuegos Sam Barlow en torno a su trabajo dentro de la industria del videojuego y como creador independiente, así como sus planteamientos creativos a la hora de diseñar historias y narrativas profundas y complejas en el videojuego.

Palabras clave

Sam Barlow; *Her Story*; *Telling Lies*; *Legacy of Kain*; *Silent Hill*; Videojuegos; Diseño narrativo; Ludonarrativa.

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