

(DIS)AGREEMENTS

DIGITAL ILLUSIONISTS: NARRATIVE DESIGN IN THE SPANISH VIDEO GAME

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I introduction*

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Over the past decade, there has been a shift in the video game industry towards developing games that not only offer enjoyable entertainment based on mastering their mechanics or tackling an increasing number of difficult challenges, but that can also provide players with more complex experiences. Although the factors behind this change are many (including the development of new social sensibilities, a more complex media ecosystem, new demands from new and increasingly diverse audiences, the development of more accessible tools and technology offering greater possibilities, the appearance of new online distribution channels, and the struggle for corporate survival in a context of recession), the role that the independent industry has played is especially noteworthy. Free of the pressures of the big studios to recover their massive investments in so-called AAA ga-

mes, indie game developers have been able to take risks and experiment with new ways of conceiving, designing, and developing video games that have contributed to the progressive evolution of the medium, although always in tension and contrast with the hegemonic model (Pérez Latorre, 2016).

Significant game mechanics like those found in *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017), unsolvable ethical dilemmas like the ones posed in games like *Papers, Please* (Lucas Pope, 2013), the design of complex spatio-temporal worlds like *Portal* (Valve Corporation, 2007) or *SuperHOT* (SUPERHOT Team, 2016), minimalist artistic conceptions like *Journey* (Thatgamecompany, 2012), watercolour-inspired visuals like those of *Gris* (Nomada Studio, 2018) or retro styles like *Fez* (Polytron Corporation, 2012), game-documen-

tary hybrids like *Never Alone* (Upper One Games and E-Line Media, 2014) or the use of FMV (full motion video) in *Her Story* (Sam Barlow, 2015) are some of the features that have opened up the range of video game resources. At the heart of many of these innovations are motivations related to the narrative design of the games, where narrative is conceived of as something more than a closed script plotting out the basic events that have occurred or are occurring as an excuse for the gameplay, instead forming part of the concept design of the video game itself.

Video game narrative is commonly only thought of as *the story*, as what happens, or the (possible) series of events that will unfold based on the characters' actions. However, the inherent complexity of video games, where it is the player whose actions and decisions activate the video game experience, allows us to consider video game narrative from more complex perspectives related not so much to what happens as to how the player makes things happen; in other words, to the margin of freedom (Navarro Remesal, 2016) players are given to inhabit the game world and interact with it, and the experiences that this gives rise to. Exploring narrative from this perspective means thinking of it in terms of the design of the video game itself: the design of mechanics that contribute narrative content and levels that form part of the narrative structures (Pérez Latorre, 2011), which sometimes become serial structures (Cuadrado, 2016), but also the construction of the game world (Planells de la Maza, 2015) and the artistic dimension, where environmental storytelling becomes especially important. And it also includes the possibilities and limitations of technology, in aspects ranging from framing and viewing and the development of the emotional connection associated with them (Martín Núñez, 2020), to new forms of gameplay in virtual reality (VR) environments. More traditional narrative aspects are also considered, like character design and the development of structured storylines, with the recent

introduction as well of subjects that traditionally have not been common in video Game Studies, such as guilt, sadness, or vulnerability (Martín Núñez et al., 2016; García Catalán et al. 2021).

In this context, video games in Spain have also undergone a marked evolution—albeit somewhat behind developments in the rest of Europe—in terms of both the consolidation of the industry and the sophistication of the discourses. Hugely successful Spanish video games like the aforementioned *Gris*, or *The Red Strings Club* (Deconstructeam, 2018), *RiME* (Tequila Works, 2017), and the *Runaway* saga (Pendulo Studios), represent only a small proportion of the games on the Spanish scene that feature some highly interesting innovations. Moreover, in 2009 the video game industry was finally recognized as a cultural industry in its own right in Spain, and the 2012-2013 academic year saw the introduction of the first degree program in video game design and development at a Spanish public university,¹ thereby granting video game production institutional legitimacy as an object of academic study. Around the same time, the field of Game Studies began to appear in Spanish academic discourse (Aranda et al., 2013; Aranda et al., 2015; Navarro Remesal, 2020).

In this complicated but fascinating context, this edition of *(Dis)Agreements* is intended to give a voice to individuals immersed in this world, presenting an open conversation² with four major figures on the Spanish video game scene who, in different areas (creative direction, game design, scriptwriting, and artistic conception), with different backgrounds (in terms of training, industry experience, or teaching experience), and in different parts of Spain (Madrid, Valencia, and Seville), have conceptualized and worked in the field of video game narrative design. Tatiana Delgado (*Call of the Sea*, Out of the Blue Games, 2020), Josué Monchán (*Blacksad: Under the Skin*, Pendulo Studios, 2019), Clara Pellejer (*Anyone's Diary*, World Domination Project Studio, 2019), and Adrián Castro (*League of Legends*, Riot Games, 2019) talk

with us to share their perspectives on their work in the video game industry. ■

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NOTES

- * This interview 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*. The discussion was transcribed by Alberto Porta, who is completing his PhD on ethical dilemmas and narrative complexity in video games at Universitat Jaume I, and Diego Villabrille Seca, who is a student in the Video Game Design and Development program at Universitat Jaume I in the context of the Study & Research program.
- 1 Spain's first official degree program in video game design and development began in the 2012-2013 academic year at Universitat Jaume I in Castellón.
 - 2 For the development of this section we held a round-table discussion via video conference with the participants, available at: www.culturavisual.uji.es/videojuegos.

discussion

PART I. THE NARRATIVE DESIGN OF VIDEO GAMES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE INDUSTRY, TRAINING, AND CONNECTIONS TO OTHER FORMS OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION

The video game industry is evolving constantly, and in the last few years in particular it has undergone significant changes. You all come from different backgrounds and fields of specialization, but you have all been involved in the areas of game design and creation. Do you feel that there is greater sensitivity to narrative questions today?

Clara Pellejer

Personally, I think there has been a necessary evolution within the field of narrative for video games. In the first video games there was a bit of a lack of responsibility when it came to thinking about what stories were told and how they were told. Now, people are considering a lot more factors that originally were not thought about due to questions of marketing, target audience, etc. Video game designers now are trying to play a more responsible role, which they're showing in their stories, and there's an effort to ensure that everything has more depth, even the most trivial details, which makes the end result much more solid.

Tatiana Delgado

For me, I think we have the good fortune that in the last few years we've seen the appearance of facilities like free game engines, which allow smaller studios to produce commercial games, and which has given people a lot more creative freedom. Ten years ago, these tools were in the hands of the big studios, which would always end up investing in more conventional types of games. But in Spanish indie companies, which have excellent teams, there is more freedom now to tell the stories they've always wanted to tell.

Josué Monchán

I agree completely with Clara and Tatiana. The fact that we don't have to have games that last a

certain number of hours and have to be sold at fifty euros each, but that we can have game experiences for four or five euros, we can have Itch.io or free engines, as Tatiana says, is great. I don't know whether these things weren't done before, or if they were, they were much more hidden. People like Andrew Plotkin and Emily Short have certainly done things that are amazingly innovative, but then video game history and retrogaming reveals that they are things that had already been done. The thing is that now it's much easier to access them and it's also easy for the big studios to catch onto these ideas. And on the other hand, I really like what Clara has said about responsibility. In my personal experience, I remember when I started out fifteen years ago, I was told that the game had to be fun and not much more: "The player shouldn't get bored and remember that they're playing." But now they're asking for more innovations on a lot of levels, even on the social level, which is something that goes beyond whether the player is having fun.

Adrián Castro

In the answers so far, I see more agreement than disagreement. I think that broadening the spectrum, making the video game more accessible for all levels and the discourse more diverse, is what is ultimately more enriching and we all come out of this process better off: everyone from the creators to the consumers of games. I mean, being able to enjoy other discourses and not just the ones we

had to accept because they were being repeated almost interminably (not just in relation to video games, but covering the whole creative spectrum), together with the democratization of the tools and other components, has ultimately brought about a really big leap forward. I think that this is exactly

what happens when a field starts to mature, that the contributions of other visions, other creators, and other realities give everything much more weight and we start taking ourselves seriously and we also get taken more seriously by people outside the field.

Do you think that industry actors who are not necessarily involved in development or in questions of discourse are more sensitive to these questions when asking or predicting what the audience might want?

Tatiana Delgado

I think if we think of a AAA game, because it requires such a big monetary investment, they take fewer risks, while more indie games have been taking new directions and trying out new ideas. Subsequently, now that the industry has seen that people like these innovations and that they're well received, AAA games are starting to incorporate them. My impression is that the industry doesn't want to take risks and it sort of uses indie games as a testing ground to see whether these ideas work.

Clara Pellejer

I totally agree. All the inventiveness and all the risks taken by indie teams result in AAA games taking on and incorporating a lot of their features that have been proven to work. Because with a AAA game, the companies can't take risks directly.

Adrián Castro

I think this phenomenon has a lot to do with our generation. I mean, we can't overlook the fact that over time, audiences have been growing and they have also started demanding different features. As a result, at the industry level, the player profile has also changed a lot, evolving away from people with purchasing power who can afford high, even extortionate prices. As Josué rightly pointed

out, this doesn't mean that it wasn't being done in different ways and different forms before. But in terms of what the industry is, of the boom in really good stories and the use of what we could call a deeper narrative in products that are more marketing- and sales-oriented at a given moment, I think it also has a lot to do with the context of the generation or the age of the players of those video games.

Josué Monchán

What you say about the generation is not only applicable to the audience, but also to us who are making the games. A few years ago, trying to get a development team (especially at Pendulo Studios, but at others as well) to consider ideas that had more to do with the humanities was more complicated. But over time, and above all thanks to the studies that have been conducted and the training programs specializing in video games, I think the situation has changed. At Pendulo Studios now, for example, we have a former student from Universitat Jaume I de Castellón who, although he's not working on narratives because he's a technical artist, has a background in humanities, in narrative and in other fields. His presence makes it much easier for such ideas to permeate, and when an idea comes up in the narrative or design area, it reaches the rest of the team much more effectively. In this way, we all understand each other

a lot better because there are members that are trained in more than just one field. Before, when someone joined the programming section they knew about programming, but they hadn't been

trained in any other area. Now, the studios and training programs are really helping to change that situation. I think that although later people specialize a lot, there's more substance there.

You probably all have different training backgrounds because a video game is a very complex cultural product that requires very different skill-sets from technical, humanities, and artistic fields. Now that degree programs in video game design and development are being established in Spain, and the video game is being seen as a legitimate object of academic study (although there's still a long way to go), what kind of training would you recommend to someone who wants to work in the area of video game narratives?

Tatiana Delgado

In my personal case, I have technical training as a telecommunications engineer, but I've never used it in my career because I work more in the design area. And what has really helped me has been role-playing. I used to play role-playing board games and that background has helped me both for analysing manuals and for storytelling. Although the stories are told much more slowly than in a video game, role-playing gave me a lot of ideas, backgrounds, character types, etc., that probably haven't been used much in video games, which you can draw on. From the perspective of a game designer working on narrative, I always say as well that it's really important to see and play other things and read media other than video games. You've got to step out of that world because that way you'll be able to include and incorporate more specific elements in your own creations.

Clara Pellejer

I only work in the artistic area, although in *Anyone's Diary* I did do part of the narrative together with two colleagues. I studied fine arts and my specialization wasn't in anything related to video games, but in conceptual art (performances, happenings, etc.), and that's where I took more elements for the narrative to *Anyone's Diary*. Because conceptual art has a way of structuring the

parts where you can't do anything without weighing up an issue, without an inspiration, without a point of reference, without considering philosophies, thoughts, and feelings. In the end, I think any experience you have can help. I can't comment on specific studies because I specialized in art, but any work that you can see or read outside video games will help you. Like Tatiana said, if all you've done is played video games, you only know what's already been done and you can't contribute anything new.

Adrián Castro

I agree as well. It probably looks as if we all reached an agreement beforehand! Previous experience and knowledge of other fields is important. Ever since I first played games and video games I pondered how board games or role-playing games were made, and I played and started creating my own stories and my own universes. I remember my neighbours' yard where I used to play when I was little, where I was the ringleader who would say "let's invent a story and play it out here," almost like a live-action role-playing game. And really, we were just a bunch of kids playing and looking for a way to entertain ourselves. When you start putting these things together you realize that when you create something of your own, on the professional level, it is highly permeable to all

these experiences you've had over the years. My academic studies were in a totally different field, much more like Tatiana's than what we're doing now and in terms of training it's great that there are more opportunities now. If you do a search of how many people there are doing this the results are staggering, and moreover, people are doing it very seriously and really committed to the training. It's incredible. I've always thought that perhaps if it had existed when I was choosing what I wanted to study, I would have chosen that option. But the truth is that I don't regret having got here in a more experimental way, taking things from here and there and creating my own imaginary

out of what for me is game narrative and game design, which I also think is enriching.

Josué Monchán

One of the real needs I'm most aware of is precisely game design: not knowing as much as I'd like to know. In spite of having "slipped into" some of Tatiana's classes [laughs], I realize I need to know more to be able to get the most out of that other training that I do have [in cinema, television, and scriptwriting] and where I feel that I'm more proficient. I always have two or three books on design on the table and I never look at them, but I feel that I'm missing that part.

How important for video game design are the connections and influences that can be taken from other media? For example, board games, films, television series, theatre...

Josué Monchán

Among all those other media that we need to draw on to, as we've been saying, not to be repeating ourselves over and over, what I'm getting the most out of right now is theatre. It's the medium that I'm realizing resembles games the most in so many ways; for example, in the types of pacts it establishes with reality, which are more diverse and further away from what we can find in other media that try to be much more restrictive with these pacts and their levels of abstraction. In mainstream cinema, it's very hard to find unusual pacts with reality, while in theatre and video games it's much easier. The reasons I feel this way about theatre I think are similar to the ones Clara was giving about conceptual art, which compels you to reflect in some way and to ask yourself questions that in other media are not raised directly because it's not viable, at least commercially. If you want to make experimental films you will be able to do some things differently, but normally you establish a pact with reality that is pretty standard, something like a default. In video

games, practically all AAA games have this pact, always based very much on cinema, and maybe, thanks to all the experimental indie video games, little games and the rest, we're looking for ways to establish relationships with narrative and with reality that are simply different. Like games based much more on literature or games that really have a more theatrical component.

Adrián Castro

One of the questions I really try to stress when I talk about narrative, design, and games is not just how it resembles other media but what makes it different. Based on the differences, I find better connections. I mean, if you begin with a difference like, for example, its inherently interactive nature, then you start realizing that it branches out and connects with a lot of elements that it does share with all other art forms. It could be with theatre or with a performance, something closer to establishing a relationship with an environment, something that goes beyond mere passive enjoyment of a film or something more like liste-

ning to a song. For me, going back a little to the first question, part of that maturity or that seriousness that game narratives have been acquiring comes precisely from that, from being able to not have a dependent relationship, to move forward without having to make excuses to other fields. I think what is really interesting is creating a relationship of equals, not a relationship of "I'm the one who wears my older brother's hand-me-downs," which was kind of what video game used to have. This is also starting to change and I don't think it depends (as people sometimes claim) on the power of the market or of companies over the discourse that the video game gets its legitimacy from its financial turnover. I don't think that has anything to do with it; instead, it's about the seriousness that subjects are starting to be addressed with in video games. For me, falling for the discourse that the video game has to make excuses for what it creates seems to misunderstand where the video game industry is really headed.

Clara Pellejer

For me, above all it's the influences I have from conceptual art, performances and happenings, which, after all, are a totally interactive narrative. This is basically what I draw from personally. My other colleagues who worked on narrative did take a lot of influence from role-playing. José Gómez, who is one of my colleagues in narrative, is an awesome master of role-play. My other colleague, Daniel Vidal, helped us with the whole part of integrating the narrative and game design, checking it for consistency. Daniel, for example,



Anyone's Diary

took ideas from all kinds of physical puzzles, like Rubik's cubes, in lots of ways. After all, they're experiences, anything you can put in your head that comes from outside video games, that will help you to make innovative and creative content and to grow, to make things that haven't been made before. But as Josué said, you need to know a lot of video game history because you might think you're discovering something that has already been done long ago.

Tatiana Delgado

I agree totally with Clara that in the end you have to have a lot of curiosity. I think that's what defines a good game designer and also if you want to work in narrative. I always describe them as people who go to Wikipedia and start clicking the

links and end up getting lost because they start following a thread and go on for hours and hours discovering information. In my case that's what it's like; I get interested in a topic and want to investigate it. For example, I really like architecture and poster design. Although it also depends on the era and the projects. When I was making *Red Matter* (Vertical Robot, 2018), I got interested in brutalist architecture, Soviet propaganda posters and whatnot. It seemed to me to tell a very different science fiction story from what could be seen in typical science fiction games of the time. I think that it's those obsessions or that curiosity that can contribute to video games. And my biggest influence I think has been, as I mentioned be-

fore, role-playing games. Because video games tell stories really well in a certain way, but they have limitations. In a role-playing board game, if you have a situation where there's a good master and good players, you can cast a spell that is impossible to achieve in other game media. And it has really amazed me over the years, because when you start role-playing you play at killing monsters and go up a level, but then you discover ways of playing like play-to-flow as opposed to play-to-win. Everyone plays to build a really cool narrative. If your character has to die because that makes the story cooler, well, you die happily and contentedly. I find these concepts extremely interesting to pick up and try to transfer to video games.

Red Matter



PART 2. RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN GAME DESIGN AND NARRATIVE, INTERACTION AND PLAYER FREEDOM

When you tackle your projects, what processes do you follow to ensure a relationship between game design and narrative? Do you develop the two in parallel? How do you work on the function and fiction aspects to avoid (or promote) dissonances?

Josué Monchán

In my case, badly. I think I still haven't found a formula that works and sometimes, when you find one, it turns out that it doesn't work for the next project. So you take an idea from each project as you go, but I think the most important thing is maximum communication between all members of the team. That's why it would be good for all of us to have points in common during our training, so we're not like "I only know about this or that." I have no idea about programming, but I'm familiar with the four notions that I need to understand the programmers' work. This enables us to communicate with each other, which is the most important thing.

What has changed a lot for me in recent years is that I don't ponder over what is and what is not interactive, or think that everything is or everything isn't, and I base my decisions on what's motivating me inside at each moment: Why am I writing this sentence? What am I defining this behaviour? Why am I giving this value to a variable? I ask myself what the player is thinking at this moment and what I want them to think right after it. This helps me whether I'm writing a micronarrative at home or making a video game.

And it ties in a lot with an academic article I read years ago that discusses the player's commitment, by Joshua Tanenbaum ["Agency as Commitment to Meaning: Communicative Competence in Games"]. He argues that agency is not really about freedom of choice or the size of the world, but the player's level of commitment to the meaning of the game; that is, the meaning of the player's own actions. Although I don't think I've fully unders-

tood that article yet (I read it again recently and I realized that there are things I don't understand and others that I interpreted in my own way), it has served me as a guide. Is what I'm proposing important to the player? And when I decide that it is important to the player, it's a lot easier for me to understand how all the pieces of the puzzle have to be; I'm not talking about the puzzle that's presented to the player, but the puzzle we have to do as developers.

Adrián Castro

I strongly agree with what Josué has said. I always tell my students that one of the most important things in the game system is taking the player and their interaction into account. Once you see that as the foundation of everything, those possibilities and the range of options that the player is going to have, everything else falls into place. It's much clearer if I keep the interactive element in mind and that there's going to be someone who will be interpreting it, than if I think about them separately or try to make one part and then leave the other for later to see how I'll fit it in then. If you base everything on the concept of interaction and the player, which for me is vital, everything else will come together organically.

Tatiana Delgado

In our case, what we usually do is start with the most general. We have a sentence defining both the narrative and what the game is going to be and from there we start breaking it down into levels. We have an outline of the game's difficulty curves: how the stress points increase, or if it's a

fear game, where the fear points are. Finally, we have values assigned from 1 to 10 that give us an idea of how the curve will vary as the game progresses. And when we have a level defined, we start talking with the puzzle designer, who creates them more in abstract form, and with the scriptwriter, who writes what happens on that level, and then we put it all together so that the puzzles have a meaning. For example, in *Call of the Sea*, which takes place on an island in the middle of the Pacific with a strange civilization, the presence of the puzzles there have a meaning: Does the expedition solve them? How? Why are the objects where they are? We do the first version practically with placeholder texts, by which I mean texts on the characters that are still just rough drafts, but that give the idea or the piece of information we need them to. After that, we start to arrange everything level by level, meaning that we try it with people and we fine-tune the texts, which is the job of the scriptwriter.

I consider myself to be part of the narrative design team in the sense that I try to connect the game design to the narrative, always min-

dful of the curves that I mentioned to keep the general vision of the game in mind. Otherwise, the difficulty or the events that occur might not have the desired curve and the player could get bored or the difficulty could drop at the end of the game. That's the theory, of course, but in practice it's harder to follow these rules as much as possible.

Clara Pellejer

My case is quite different because we started the *Anyone's Diary* project as a final project for a master's degree. We started with each of us putting in our idea of what kind of game we wanted to make. In this case, we chose the story that the programmer, Sara, had put together, which was a game like *Moss* (Polyarc, 2018), but with role-playing. We were clear that we wanted to put role-playing in as a scenario. Then we started shaping it to give it the personality and feeling that I was looking for. From there, we started to create the main character's story. We made a modular story where there were some events that were necessary, like those curves that Tatiana mentioned: tutorial mo-

ments, moments of stress, happiness, success, failure, etc., and then we added parts that we could eliminate if we ran out of time. In the end, we had a base structure and the events of the story that supported it, but that wouldn't be missed if we left them out. It was the only way we found that gave us time to finish the project, given that we had never organized anything like this before. Basically we did a storyline first and then started designing the mechanics in parallel with the level designer.

Call of the sea





Blacksad: Under the Skin

Perhaps the biggest difference between traditional and interactive narratives is the room given for players to make the characters, plots, worlds, etc., their own. In your games, how do you conceive of the degree of freedom you give to or take away from the player?

Josué Monchán

It's very sad, but the first thing I think about is the budget. At Pendulo Studios the budget is very important because our way of making games means we have to leave money for cutscenes, models, and customization so that nothing is repeated from one scene to another. We have practically no level design because everything is always new. On the other hand, right now I'm working on another game where hardly anything is visible, as everything is explained by the characters; it looks a lot more like a visual novel. Here I have a huge amount of freedom, and because I have it I can pass it onto the player. The story changes a lot precisely because it isn't going to be seen. However, at Pendulo Studios what happens is the complete opposite. Because any change is going to involve a huge amount of work for another department, I have to restrain myself more and find how I can give the player that false sensa-

tion of freedom (what Víctor Navarro calls "directed freedom") and trick them into believing that they're doing a lot of things because they want to, even though they aren't really, or that they can express themselves very powerfully, but only if it is cheap to do so because it only requires us to change a few textures. One example of how to make the game your own is *With Those We Love Alive* (Propertine and Brenda Neotenomine, 2014) which is a game on Twine that invites you to draw on your body. For example, it invites you to draw a symbol of happiness and so for quite a while you're thinking about what happiness is like and then you have to draw it on your skin. Nothing changes, absolutely nothing in the game, but what does change is how you view the game. Based on these really cheap things, suddenly you can hit on something that doesn't thrill you in terms of animation or production but that the player likes.



Anyone's Diary

Adrián Castro

I think this is where you have clear evidence of the importance of doing the game design and narrative together right from the start. If I want to tell a story and I have these types of limitations (budget-related, or even technical), I have to figure out how to give players the sensation that they're doing something they really want to, that they have that "directed freedom", a term I think is a perfect choice for this. If I manage to resolve all these dilemmas (what the player can and cannot do, how they can do it, whether I should make it more rational or more exciting, etc.), in the end what I'm really doing is giving that sensation of greater or lesser freedom based simply on design decisions without having to go into things that are too big or that aren't viable for the type of studio.

Tatiana Delgado

I agree with what my colleagues have said. The limitations are very important, and in our case, we make first-person games basically to save on character modelling. This saves us money that we can invest in other things. In the type of games we make, it's up to the player to be proactive in getting interested in the story. We know that we have to appeal to different types of players, so for people who are only interested in puzzles, we try

to ensure they find out as much as possible of the story. To do this, at each level we convey some important information that we assign to an object or a scene. We know that the person who is going to solve the puzzles has to keep these essential pieces of information, and by the time the game is over, they will have learned the whole story in general terms. Then we gradually add layers of secondary information—and on this point we're a little obsessive—so that if someone is interested in connecting all the points

in our game, they can start to absorb this general background. That's the freedom we give the player: that it's up to them if they want to dig deeper into the story as much as they want to.

Clara Pellejer

In our game, as it's VR, the truth is we give players the freedom to be able to have a 360-degree view of everything and to get closer whenever they want at any point in the game. At first we designed perspective puzzles so that the player could have full interaction to move the map. We wanted people to really immerse themselves in the role-playing world. It was very complicated to design. Later, we had to cut it down because we changed the peripheral and we had to adapt it to PlayStation. Suddenly, we only had one perspective, and as developers we had to be careful to ensure that the player wouldn't turn around and was always facing the headset reader. This made the development more complicated. Making narratives in VR is complicated, because you don't know where the player is going to want to look or where they will focus their attention, although there are methods for catching their eye. In this respect, VR has a lot of different conditioning factors in terms of narrative and design, and the truth is I really liked experimenting with it.

PART 3. ENVIRONMENTAL STORYTELLING AND NARRATIVE IN VIRTUAL REALITY ENVIRONMENTS

Do you think that the creation of immersive worlds and atmospheres that allow an exploration around the space where it's the player who sets the pace of the game changes the way of conceiving of narratives, where discovery carries more weight than narrative actions as such?

Tatiana Delgado

When we were developing *Red Matter*, which was also for VR, we had the same problems that Clara mentioned. We wanted to create a believable world. For example, in a shooter you can come across the same prop multiple times, because the important thing is to fill up the scene. Players go through a room so quickly that they don't notice. But in games where the environment tells a story, if you as a developer put an ashtray in, someone has had to use it and smoke the cigarette in it. I offer this example because I remember that one time the artists put an ashtray and several cups in the area where the character had to wear a spacesuit because there was no oxygen there, and I asked them how the characters could drink from the cup with the spacesuit on [laughs]. We think about the game in this sense: if there is a cup, a plate, a book, who put it there? And this helps us a lot as well to define the personality of the people who lived there when we create the environmental storytelling. In our case, it's a huge job because you have to create a lot of unique props, with a lot of attention to detail, but then the player appreciates it because you immerse them in a much more believable world. In fact, in this game, which is VR, you could pick up any object in the scene, but there were some that we didn't want players to pick up for something practical for the engine, like a microphone and cable. Because we didn't want to get caught up in questions of physics, and so as not to break the fiction or the presence (a term used in VR), anything that couldn't be picked up was screwed to the table and the player thus understood that they couldn't interact

with that. On the other hand, we couldn't put in objects that would break the immersive experience either. At first we put in a hammer and all the players would pick it up to try to break the scene, but because they couldn't (as we didn't design the smashing of objects) they would get frustrated and it would take them out of the story and the character. We decided to remove everything that might pull the player out of the immersive experience of the game and leave only those objects that were essential for the story to work.

Josué Monchán

At Pendulo Studios what happens is that, as we've always done graphic adventures in a traditional style, this already comes with an "in-your-face" environmental storytelling base: instead of players seeing it and discovering it, we explain it to them. We keep trying to make it more sophisticated to avoid this base problem. What we've never had is an identical object repeated in multiple scenes: we've always had to do the design process.

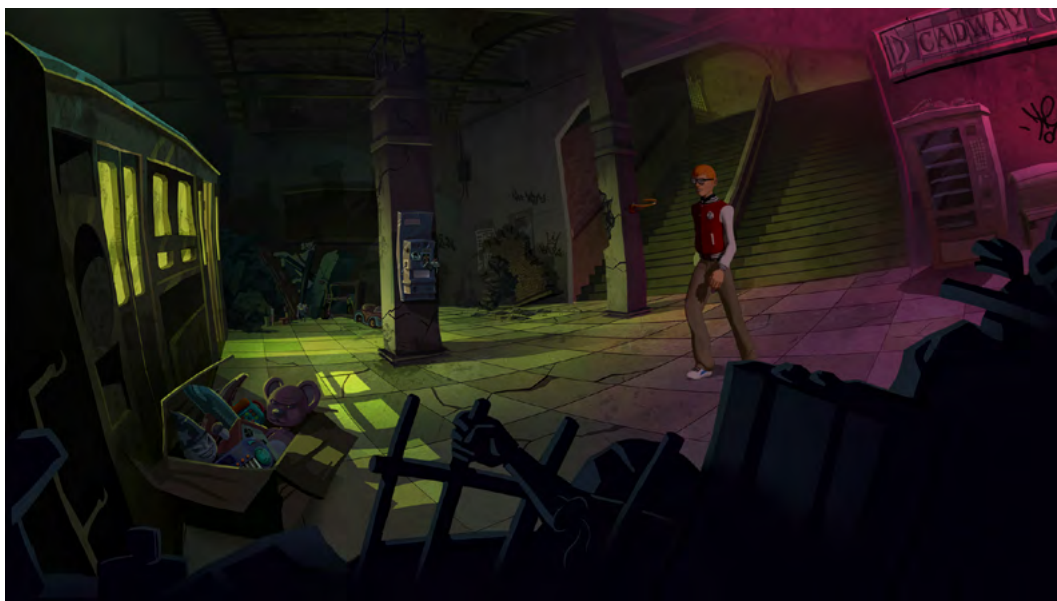
The problem we had at Pendulo Studios was perhaps a communication problem. When we started working we all worked at the same time, and the artist started drawing when we only knew the basics of the story. They would design the character's room when I didn't even have a clear idea of the personality they were going to have. They'd ask me about the character, and I'm one of those people who finds characters by making them talk. Now what happens is that based on this initial sketch provided by the narrative team—with basic physical and psychological traits—the artists will start investigating, and su-

ddenly they start giving the character a whole heap of traits before I do. As a result, I base the character a lot on what they propose, but in the end we have to work as a team so that we don't end up with discrepancies. You always end up with a few: the other day we were creating a farm and in the barn we put a big sack of apples, another of potato-

es, another of onions and at least fifty eggs, but there were no chickens. As Tatiana explained, sometimes you get yourself into a mess by filling the space, and you unconsciously associate a farm with eggs. That's why it's important that between the two areas—in this case, art and narrative—we work out these kinds of details.

Clara Pellejer

Ultimately, *Anyone's Diary* is like you're secretly reading someone's diary at night and discovering all their problems, in a nocturnal setting with very dim lighting. We started to analyse what kind of problems we might have with the VR: motion sickness, if you're playing for a long time your eyes get tired, etc. We wanted it to be a game that you could play quietly, and that if you wanted, you could get through the whole thing without any trouble, without abrupt camera changes, with very dim lighting that enveloped you, and with wonderful, really ambient music. All this helps you immerse yourself more in the story and focus on it. We needed to ensure that nothing was annoying; everything had to be integrated and encourage you to continue in that mood. While



Yesterday

you all had those problems with props, we had the problem, with the role-playing, that each object had its own texture and its own little details. For example, if you have a look around the graveyard you can find my name on a tombstone—dead from exhaustion after doing all the textures [laughs]. There are little details like that everywhere. We wanted the player to be entertained, to really want to be there and to poke around in every corner. We needed the character to be someone who you would want to help, that you would think “this person is having a hard time and I want to help them.” We had to make the player get attached to the space and the character and we needed to convey that sensibility. I don't know if we succeeded, but we tried.

Adrián Castro

For me, one of the things I feel most strongly about is experimentation, and for that, I don't think there's anything better than the inappropriately named game jams, because they're really playgrounds for developers. And as for customization and taking the utmost care with the details, I think that making a game more than just a

fun experience, fussing over it and giving meaning to everything and ensuring that nothing is superfluous—but also that there are no detectable gaps—has a lot to do with that aspect of experimentation, looking beyond a simple interactive moment, leaving a part of myself, as a developer, in the game that I'm showing you.

In one of the last projects I did together with Edu Verz, we worked on a video game that was very intense on the narrative level. It told quite a heavy story about a war that put us in a lead

role with a very harsh reality where we had to take utmost care with every detail so that there would be nothing redundant, and at the same time, that it would offer a different touch for the player inside the story: from diaries to elements that were interactive, but not significant within the gameplay. For example, this character had a make-up box that they could use without changing the game in any way, but those details were vital within the context and enriched the design of the setting.

Some of you have worked on video games specifically for VR. How would you describe narrative design in this environment? How does the fact that players are immersed in the world change the way they relate to it?

Tatiana Delgado

I think Clara explained this very well earlier. In VR you can't use tricks that are used in flatscreen games, where you can choose a cutscene, or take a camera and look at what you want the player to look at. In our game, as soon as you start, a meteorite falls and destroys a huge dish antenna. As it was the start of the game, and the beginning of the VR experience, everyone was all engrossed with staring at the ground and bending down to look at some rocks while the meteorite event was playing, and as a result they missed it completely. In the end, we took this event out because we couldn't catch the player's attention. You have to put in a trick to increase the likelihood that they see the event, but there is no way to guarantee success one hundred percent, so you have to use redundancy: if it's something very important, it needs to be shown in several places so that the information isn't missed.

VR is fascinating for the innovation it represents and how quickly it has evolved. I realized that in the beginning, people suffered from a saturation of stimuli that prevented them from retaining information and solving puzzles. When a puzzle was presented, at first we separated the

pieces into two rooms, then we put them in a single room, and finally we put them practically on the same table. The players would reset the information when they went onto another environment. You need to see how the players evolve, what they learn about this medium, and if they lose the fascination with the new environment, in the end they'll be able to retain more information.

We also found that reading was very uncomfortable in VR, so we invented a language so that the player could take a translator as a device with a screen that they would hold in their hand and bring up to their eyes at the distance they wanted. The device would translate and provide you with a description. The messages were limited because they were displayed very briefly, like tweets, and the player could obtain and process the information much more comfortably.

Clara Pellejer

We also came upon the problem with text. We didn't have the option of localization, or translators, or dubbing, because we had zero budget. Everything was designed based on metaphors and allegories and it was up to the player to make sense of the narrative through the events. And as

Tatiana observed, you can play the game, you can like puzzles, and end up finding out anything; it all depends on the player's commitment. As reading messages in VR is uncomfortable, and we had the luck of not using any voices because of our budget, we made the character without even a defined gender, and this in a way justified the absence of a voice.

Tatiana Delgado

I find this limitation and how you all solved it quite wonderful. I think you design better with limitations.

Clara Pellejer

What's more, what I like most about game jams is taking the list of limitations and seeing which one you'll try inserting into the game. Because in the end, you can take the subject matter wherever you want. In game jams, if you're not experimenting, what are you doing there? It seems to me the best place for creativity.

Adrián Castro

I can't really add much more to what has already been said. I agree with Clara and Tatiana about the question of limitations; I think they make us go further and take directions that we had never even thought of. It's true that you have to use different tricks, to keep guiding players using sleights of hand to draw their attention to one point and not another. Suddenly you've got a situation where the player has total freedom to focus on anything. You need to find a way to grab their attention and tell them: "here's where the story is," or "the message is here and not anywhere else." In the end, the channel is still the same, but it is true that it changes the exposure, so to speak, to that channel.

Tatiana Delgado

It's very important to try out the game with people as early as possible. This is vital in VR because

it's a new medium. You can have a wonderful idea and put it into practice and find it doesn't work. I remember in one case we designed a room with five puzzles, and even though puzzle number one had spotlights and movement, the players would go to a corner where there was nothing at all. In the end, we moved the puzzle into that corner. We didn't know why; there must have been something eye-catching there that made everyone go there. Play testing is vital to check how players are going to understand the game and so they can take it apart.

Clara Pellejer

Ultimately, we have a visual education and training that the user may not have. This kind of testing is essential.

Josué Monchán

I haven't designed anything in VR, and I've hardly ever played it. I tried it once and it made me so dizzy that I haven't tried it again since. What I can talk about is a point that Tatiana made in relation to the scriptwriter's fallacy: since you don't know very well where players are going to look and whether there is any information you want to give them, one of the tricks is to put it in several places. It's great because it means using a non-linear approach for the exact opposite aim: instead of the story branching out, you, the player, branch it out, and I'll bring it together for you in different ways. The non-linear approach serves both to open up and to close in.

PART 4. NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY IN VIDEO GAMES

We see features of video games now starting to be incorporated into films (spatio-temporal fragmentation, loops, amnesiac characters, multiple plots) in what have been labelled “puzzle films” or “mindgame films”, labels that themselves make reference to games.

However, we believe that films rework this complexity and this seems to feed back into game narratives, for example, in the form of unreliable narrators, self-reference, unstable characters with split or double identities, non-sequential temporal and spatial structures, parallel and interconnected narratives...

How do you understand or use this complexity of narratives in your projects? Do you think that indie games have more freedom to experiment with these ideas?

Josué Monchán

For me, the unreliable narrator is something I've liked since I studied it in English language studies, and I was barely involved in video games then. At Pendulo Studios, without realizing it we've used it in a game where the player spends a third of the story playing with the villain without knowing it. The narrator there is the game design; it's really what makes you take that direction. We've been trying out multiple points of view to tell the same story, and narrative disruption, which I would venture to suggest was introduced to everyone in the West with the TV series *Lost* (J. J. Abrams, Damon Lindelof, 2004-2010). It was a moment when its influence was very obvious and other series tried to imitate it. I like this concept of going back and forth; now, the film industry, as it earns less money than the video game industry, even adding in the music industry, suddenly wants to copy this format, and at the same time, we are influenced by films.

Tatiana Delgado

I think that the question itself highlights the need that Victor mentioned to build bridges with the academic world. In my case, I design more by instinct, perhaps because of the lack of time I have to investigate. It's true that as you go you take elements that catch your attention, that haven't been used in video games before, and you incorporate them. But it's really interesting, this dia-

logue between someone like me, as a developer, who is not so connected with the academic world, to talk to people like you who are studying these trends, and thus be able to incorporate them into our titles. Building bridges like this is really interesting and necessary.

Adrián Castro

I totally agree with Josué about the boldness of instinct that came to be popular and was globalized, so to speak, to the point of becoming a standardized language. In the end it's nothing more than a kind of cycle where we have now reached a point where this pendulum covers much more than it covered originally. I think this forms part of the maturity process and this is why there's an urgent need to start questioning what is instinctive or influence and why it happens, to analyse why when we design something a certain way, whether it's narrative design or game design, we push certain keys that we don't push for any other platform or medium, and to start giving everything the name it has. It's great because we're also at a moment when the academic-development relationship, to coin a phrase, is becoming increasingly necessary precisely for this reason, because questions, movements, or discourses are starting to emerge that need to be explored on another level. What would be unfair would be for us to delve into interpretations of how much we're advancing as a generation—both of the people who design video games

and of the people who play them—without going past the surface in terms of analysing and laying the foundations to question our own discipline and what we do.

Clara Pellejer

Also, academic study of all these influences can help us move forward. If we simply see that something works or is becoming standardized, but we don't go to the root of it or look for where it comes from, we can't get a sense of what trends and audience needs will be in the future. I think

this analysis is necessary, to delimit terms and definitions of concepts, because I really did lack that in my training. In the end, the audience standardizes certain things and they don't find them innovative anymore, like *Lost*, for example, or when you see a romantic comedy and you think "another rom-com, they're all the same." People get tired of the same old patterns. I think it's very important to analyse all this and I think it's essential to engage in this dialogue between the people who study and teach it and the people who develop it.

And finally, what video game has surprised you most for its narrative?

Tatiana Delgado

I was really impressed by *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017) because it makes you a participant in the action. As the player sets off the consequences, I think this way of inserting you inside the story is awesome.

Adrián Castro

Kentucky Route Zero (Carboard Computer, 2013) completely blew my mind. I tried to approach it as coolly as possible, without knowing what it was about, and suddenly, I started to see how it told the story and how things unfolded. The truth is it impressed me a lot. If I have to choose just one, because there are so many, but for the sensation of surprise it gave me because of the way everything was conceived, I'd choose that one.

Josué Monchán

Katana Zero (Askiisoft, 2019) is a game that apparently has no narrative intention. But it's in those little things that you discover and you think: "how cool, this has probably been done for a thousand years but I didn't know it." You start a gameplay conversation, which you have options to choose from, and instead of all the conversation options

appearing at once, first you're offered the chance to interrupt with a "shut up" before the other character finishes speaking. This is what Tatiana mentioned before, about how each kind of player wants to play: I introduce narrative elements into the game, but I know there are players who don't want them and I'm giving them the option to say openly: "I don't want narrative." I found this really innovative because they do it as a narrative excuse, rather than a cancel button. I just love these kinds of little tools; I think digging into these details is better than having a more complex big concept. *Katana Zero* is not a game that is going to go down in history for its narrative, but I believe it has an innovative tool.

Clara Pellejer

During quarantine I played *Wandersong* (Greg Lobanov, Dumb and Fat Games, 2018). The story is an adventure: you're told you are the hero who will save everything and you set out on a journey. The thing is that you're a bard, and your main mechanic is singing, whether it's to make decisions in dialogues, unlock puzzles, or for fighting. But suddenly you're operating a girl with a sword who is destroying everything: now there's no option for

dialogue or to resolve conflicts in a friendly way; she is the real hero. After that you go back to playing with the bard and everything has changed. You don't sing joyfully anymore; you only mutter some out-of-tune note vaguely, the whole city is totally grey and there's a new element: a clock. Hours go by as you move, change areas, sing softly, etc. It's a city with its ponderous rhythm, its schedules, its factories, and its atmosphere. The character is depressed and his whole environment and mechanics change to adapt to the story at that exact moment, which changed my whole perspective on what I'd been playing up until then.

| conclusion

MARTA MARTÍN NÚÑEZ

VÍCTOR NAVARRO REMESAL

The narrative design of video games, beyond what we would consider strict narrative associated with the unfolding of events, is at the heart of video game concept design, and closely associated with other areas such as the design of mechanics, puzzles, and levels, the possibilities of player agency and interaction, the game's concept art, and the technological possibilities. The dialogue with Tatiana Delgado, Josué Monchán, Clara Pellejer, and Adrián Castro, who have explored all these aspects from their different perspectives, has shown why they are all important in different ways for the achievement of a more profound narrative experience. The complexity of the video game as a cultural product requiring skill-sets from technical, artistic, and humanities fields also reveals that none of these areas is self-sufficient, and the most interesting ideas emerge precisely in the border territories where different fields of knowledge intersect and when designers and developers are able to understand and communicate with the different departments.

Designers tackle the challenge of designing worlds—and all that they contain—where players can interact freely but, at the same time, subtly guided by the game to find the key pieces that will allow them to advance. In this sense, their work is similar to that of an *illusionist*, as they are able to direct the player's gaze with sleights of hand, trying not to be discovered. New platforms like virtual reality thus pose new challenges for designers and developers because the players' fasci-

nation with the environment makes it impossible to predict—and therefore guide—their behaviour. The importance that all our roundtable participants assigned to detail we found to be especially revealing. This is particularly important for the construction of characters where everything, from their physical or psychological features as revealed in their dialogues, to the design of spaces, props, and belongings, needs to be conceived and designed to convey their personality and their past. But it is also important for artistic design, as each object and each texture is uniquely designed to create the necessary atmosphere, and, of course, for the design of mechanics, puzzles and levels, where the difficulty curves need to be carefully planned and constructed to achieve the right balance between challenge and achievement in keeping with the moments of dramatic tension.

Video games, as extraordinarily rich and complex cultural products, thus require comprehensive, and multifaceted training. As virtual spaces of remediation, they need to draw from other cultural forms, and film is one of these—perhaps the most obvious given the importance of audiovisual language in our culture. But there are also other forms of cultural expression, which, with (supposedly) more disparate approaches, can greatly enrich the gameplay experience, such as literature with its narrative systems, theatre with its conception of space, or conceptual performances with their way of interacting with the audience. ■

DIGITAL ILLUSIONISTS: NARRATIVE DESIGN IN THE SPANISH VIDEO GAME

Abstract

In keeping with the theme of this issue, the *(Dis)Agreements* section explores a series of key questions in an effort to understand the different dimensions of the narrative design of video games, focusing on the Spanish industry, in the form of a dialogue between professionals from different areas: Tatiana Delgado, Josué Monchán, Clara Pellejer and Adrián Castro, with the academics Víctor Navarro Remesal, and Marta Martín Núñez. The dialogue begins with a discussion of contextual issues like the shift of sensibility in the industry towards an awareness of the importance of narrative depth in video games, the role of regulated training in video game design and development, and the importance of cultivating connections with other cultural forms like cinema, but also with less obvious forms like conceptual art or theatre. The conversation then moves onto aspects of video game creation, such as the relationship between game design and narrative, player freedom and agency, environmental storytelling and the particularities of narrative in virtual reality, and the integration of features of narrative complexity.

Key Words

Video games; Spanish video games; Narrative; Ludonarrative; Video game narrative design.

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Tatiana Delgado (Madrid, 1975) has worked in the video game industry as a game designer and level designer for more than seventeen years, for companies like Rebel Act Studios, Enigma Software Productions, Zinkia, Tequila Works, Gameloft, and King, developing games for PC, Xbox, Wii, DS, and mobile devices. In 2017, she co-founded the Vertical Robot studio dedicated to virtual reality, where she worked on the design and narrative for the games *Daedalus* (2017) and *Red Matter* (2018). Currently, she is co-founder of the studio Out of the Blue, dedicated to the development of narrative puzzle games, where she has just released *Call of the Sea* for PC and Xbox (2020). Contact: info@revistaatalante.com.

Josué Monchán (Lleida, 1973) has worked in the video game industry for fifteen years. For Pendulo Studios he wrote the *Runaway* sagas, *Hollywood Monsters*, and *Yesterday*, and he has received awards including the Excellence in Storytelling award at Game Connection San Francisco in 2015 for *Blues and Bullets* (A Crowd of Monsters, 2015). He has also translated

ILUSIONISTAS DIGITALES. EL DISEÑO NARRATIVO EN EL VIDEOJUEGO ESPAÑOL

Resumen

Siguiendo la línea marcada por la temática del número, la sección *(Des)encuentros* plantea una serie de cuestiones clave para comprender las diferentes vertientes vinculadas al diseño narrativo de videojuegos centrado en la industria española en forma de diálogo entre profesionales de diferentes áreas, Tatiana Delgado, Josué Monchán, Clara Pellejer y Adrián Castro, con los académicos Víctor Navarro Remesal y Marta Martín Núñez. El diálogo abordará, en primer lugar, cuestiones contextuales como los cambios de sensibilidad de la industria hacia la importancia de la profundidad narrativa de los videojuegos, el papel que juega la formación reglada en diseño y desarrollo de videojuegos, o la importancia de cultivar las conexiones con otras formas culturales, como el cine, pero también con otras formas menos evidentes como el arte conceptual o el teatro. A continuación, el diálogo profundizará en aspectos de la creación de videojuegos, como las relaciones entre diseño de juego y narrativa, la libertad y agencia del jugador, la narrativa ambiental y las particularidades de la narrativa en los espacios de realidad virtual, o la integración de rasgos de complejidad narrativa.

Palabras clave

Videojuego; Videojuego español; Narrativa; Ludonarrativa; Diseño narrativo de videojuegos.

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otras, y anteriormente ha sido profesor de Cine de Animación o Publicidad Digital e Interactiva. Sus principales intereses de investigación son la libertad del jugador, el Zen en los videojuegos, el *gêmu* o videojuego japonés y la preservación. Contacto: vnavarro@tecnocampus.cat.

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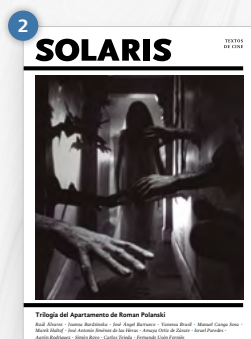
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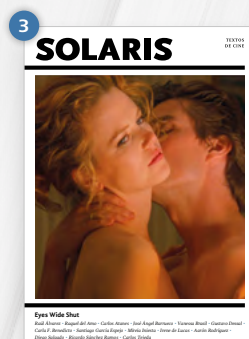
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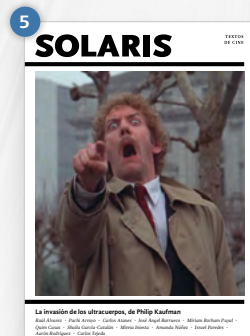
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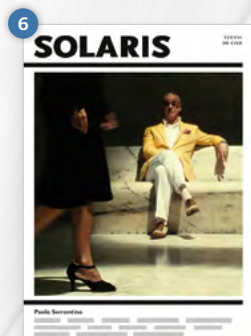
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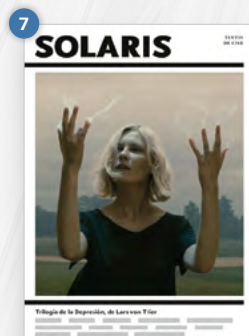
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