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LUDONARRATIVE COMPLEXITY IN VIDEO GAMES: A DOUBLE BOOMERANG*

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

The Stanley Parable puts the player in the skin of Stanley, an office worker accustomed to following orders, who one fine day is puzzled to find that he hasn't received any and decides to leave his office to find out what's going on. The narrator, in a voice-over, recounts the events that unfold, but he does so in the past tense, inviting the player to follow a fixed story—because things *have already happened* somehow. However, players can also assert their *agency*[1] in the system to challenge events that *have already happened* and override them. As players advance in the game, their actions and decisions will elicit reactions from the narrator, who will change his behaviour accordingly, even making fun of his blind obedience to the system and confessing that he is being contro-lled by a player, or conversely, begging the player to listen to him and trust him as if he were a jilted lover. *The Stanley Parable*, which runs in a loop (as after each ending the game restarts with slight differences that are subtle at first but become increasingly obvious, especially in relation to the narrator's attitude), constitutes an extremely lucid reflection on player agency and directed freedom in a game system, reflected in the tension between the narrator—and the game's *structured* narratives—and the player character—and his/her freedom to trigger *other* narratives. The game exhibits a complexity that adds a playful layer with the narrative to subvert fundamental components of video game language, like the player's role and function within the structured narrative,

The Stanley Parable

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This analysis of complexity as a double boomerang involves tracing the features of narrative complexity that have characterized video games historically, and the features of post-classical film narratives, and identifying them in a corpus of contemporary video games in order to analyse narrative design in relation to game design and emergent behaviours in players. The methodology for this study draws on explorations of video game narrative in Game Studies (Fernández-Vara, 2015; Planells, 2015; Navarro Remesal, 2016) from the perspective of semiotics (Pérez Latorre, 2012, 2017), audiovisual narrative and discourse analysis (Gaudreault & Jost, 1995; Gómez Tarín, 2011; Marzal & Gómez Tarín, 2015), and the model proposed by Hartmut Koenitz (2015) for the analysis of interactive narratives, focusing more on the system than on the resulting outcome, which is only one of multiple possibilities. The combination of these models for video game analysis reflects the fact that narratives in video games call for specific methodologies and approaches, but also that many of these new paradigms are based on concepts from traditional narratology.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Colossal Cave Adventure

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

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

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

It is not hard to see why: in addition to the familiarity of literature to theorists, the written narrative was a carefully designed key factor of these adventure games. The IG, acting as a narrator, goes beyond merely describing the game, often taking poetic licence and employing humour: "The floor acts like a trampoline on an ice rink, or like something they've been working on for years at Disneyland," replies the interactive adaptation of *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* produced by Infocom and written by the original author, Douglas Adams, in 1984. In an interview for the BBC, Adams described the game this way: "It is the first game to move beyond being 'user friendly'. It's actually 'user insulting' and because it lies to you as well it's also 'user mendacious'" (BBC Archive, 2018). *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* featured other narrative innovations, such as change of focalization. At different points in the game the player would control different characters, in some cases with conflicting desires and objectives: "in fact in this particular game you become several of the characters, so you have to be aware of how you treat other characters in the game when you're one character" (BBC Archive, 2018). In another production by Adams, *Bureaucracy* (Infocom, 1987), players have to work through a bureaucratic maze to change their mailing address, and the game opens with a metatextual twist by presenting a "software registration form" that requires the player to provide personal information that the game will constantly get mixed up later on.

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

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METATEXTUALITY, METALEPSIS, UNRELIABLE NARRATORS, CHANGES OF FOCALIZATION AND SELF-REFERENTIAL JOKES ARE SOME OF THE FEATURES OF INTERACTIVE FICTION, AND ALSO OF SOME RELATED GENRES

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

The ludonarrative complexity of interactive fiction, where the challenge and the story depended on the same elements, was continued in graphic adventure games, a genre popular in the 1990s that dominated the market, with productions by Sierra Entertainment/Sierra Online, LucasFilm Games/LucasArts, and to a lesser extent by Coktel Vision, Broderbund, and Cyberdreams. This was a period characterized by formal experimentation, thematic diversity and a focus on adult audiences. Examples of the innovations of this period include time travel in *Space Quest IV: Roger Wilco and the Time Rippers* (Sierra On-Line, 1991); visual and verbal gags in *The Secret of Monkey Island* (LucasFilm Games, 1990); multiple avatars in *Maniac Mansion* (LucasFilm Games, 1988) and *Day of the Tentacle* (LucasArts, 1993), the first with cutscenes and the second with parallel narratives; erotic humour in *Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards* (Sierra On-Line, 1987); psychological horror in *Dark Seed* (Cyberdreams, 1995), the treatment of social topics like homosexuality and cross-dressing in *Police Quest: Open Season* (Sierra On-Line, 1993), and change of

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

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

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

If post-classical narratives[2] exhibit the influence of video game and digital system logics, re-created in different ways and integrated into contemporary films (and television), it is because post-classicism is defined by a mastery of the classical codes that is also capable of absorbing, transforming, and appropriating what was initially a reaction against classicism: other film traditions, such European art and essay films, Asian cinema, advertising, video installation art, and critical discourses (Elsaesser & Buckland, 2002: 79). Beyond the question of a distinction between narrative and spectacle that has sometimes characterized post-classical cinema based on a preference for showing over telling (Company & Marzal, 1999), other features can be identified that stretch some of the conventions of the IMR associated with causal logic or the construction of space and time. Such alterations change the cinematic mode of enunciation and the way that information is conveyed and ordered, as extensively mapped out by Thanouli (2006, 2009) and conceptualized in terms of rhetorical repertoire by Palao *et al.* (2018).

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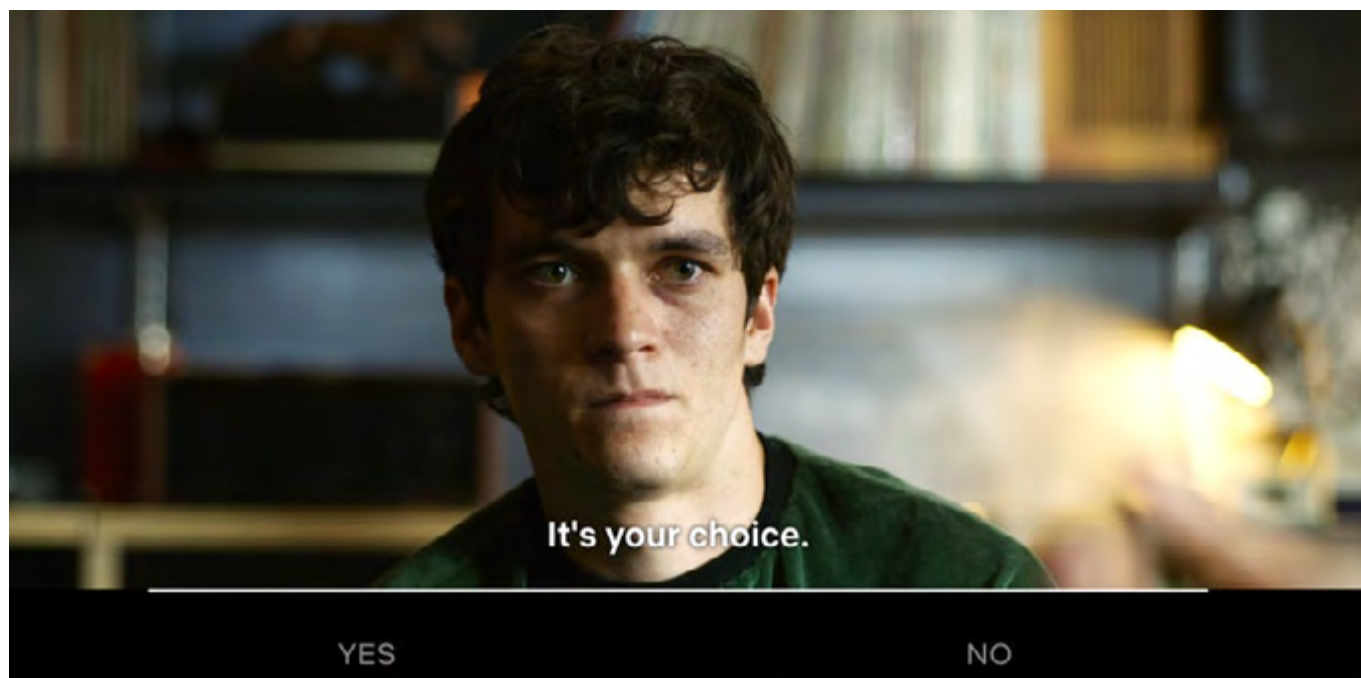
Black Mirror: Bandersnatch

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

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

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

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

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

On the other hand, the classification of mind-game film not only refers to the narratological perspective, but also encompasses psychological and psycho-pathological, historical, and political perspectives to include films that revel in the spectator's disorientation or confusion by withholding information, with unexpected twists or trick endings. These are films[4] for which the concept of play is essential, either because a character is being played with unwittingly or because the audience is being played with by withholding certain information or presenting it ambiguously. Mental disorders are a common element of such films, featuring unstable or pathological characters who seem normal and thus play with the perception of reality of both the audience and the characters themselves, forcing them to choose between incompatible realities or multiverses, exploring questions about consciousness and memory, the reality of other minds, or the possible existence of parallel worlds (Elsaesser, 2009: 13-15). Along the same lines, García Sahagún, in her research on the identity crisis as a theme in contemporary film, highlights how stories that play with mental instability and memories, presented through the appearance of the double and the transgression of memory, "intensify the interpretation through the repetition of the character's life—like two superimposed temporal

WHILE THE PUZZLE FILM DIRECTLY SUGGESTS A GAME THAT INVITES THE SPECTATOR TO (RE-)ORDER AND (RE-)ARRANGE THE (NARRATIVE) PIECES THAT HAVE BEEN DISLOCATED FROM THEIR NATURAL PLACE IN THE STORY, THE MIND-GAME FILM ALLUDES TO THE SUSPENSION OF THE CONTRACT BETWEEN THE FILM AND THE SPECTATORS, SO THAT THE LATTER MAY FEEL TRICKED, *PLAYED* BY THE FILM

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

In this way, while the puzzle film directly suggests a game that invites the spectator to (re-)order and (re-)arrange the (narrative) pieces that have been dislocated from their natural place in the story, the mind-game film alludes to the suspension of the contract between the film—with its true and internally consistent diegetic worlds—and the spectators, so that the latter may feel tricked, *played* by the film because "in addition to its chaotic arrangement, the story positions us from points of view disturbed by madness or trauma" (García Catalán, 2019: 29). Although these features appear in various filmographies and diverse genres, for this study we are especially interested in the mechanisms used in films that integrate video-game logic in order to create a complex narrative structure based on a world with certain established rules, such as in the different planes of reality in *Inception* (Nolan, 2010) (Cameron & Misek, 2014), the loop in *Source Code* (Duncan Jones, 2011) (Buckland, 2014: 185; Navarro Remesal & García Catalán, 2015b), or the recurring resurrection of the protagonist in *Edge of Tomorrow* (D. Liman, 2014) (Loriguillo-López & Sorolla-Romero, 2015).

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

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

The narrative complexity in mainstream post-classical cinema, however, despite creating confusing stories that aim to disorient the spectator through plot twists and ludic logic, requires an intellectual effort—"brain candy", as Elsaesser calls it (2009: 38) —yet these cannot be described as a kind of subversion of the classical codes of film language. As Bordwell points out, "if we want to capture the nuances of historical continuity, we don't want every wrinkle to be a sea change" (2006: 9) because these innovations are "a kind of carnivalesque disguise that clearly favours the celebration and subversion of what has been identified as film language itself in order to reinforce it rather than to redefine or challenge it" (Sorolla-Romero *et al.*, 2013: 108). On the other hand, although the logic of digital systems is the source of these mutations, post-classical cinema should be viewed not as a mere integration of that logic but as an answer to it, because a film is always offered as a space of meaning when it serves as the host screen of inputs from *other* screens: "cinema, as the host screen, is posited as an interface of meaning, in contrast to other screens that it hosts but that are considered purely informative, denotative, and incapable of generating meaning in their own right" (Palao *et al.*, 2018). Disruptions of linearity and of different planes of reality, and the deceptions and games of the enunciation are thus pyrotechnic mechanisms that leave codes and clues to be deciphered, revealing constructed stories that are always read in a linear way. For this reason, as Simons suggests, "the models of narratology and game theory may be atemporal and reversible, but the processes they describe are not. This is exactly the point where narratology, game theory, and complexity theory converge" (Simons, 2014: 27).

3. FEATURES OF LUDONARRATIVE COMPLEXITY

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

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

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

The game *Dear Esther* (Thechineseroom, 2012), a poetic reflection on grief and loss, offers a similar idea, only in this case the main mechanic is the exploration through the space itself. While the player wanders aimlessly around a deserted island, short audio stories unfold that will turn that wandering into the articulation of the narrative. These video games begin with fragmentation and leave the linear reconstruction in the hands of the players, who are able to find a horizon of meaning in the information they discover as they go. The game system loses control over the order in which the information is obtained (although in Sam Barlow's games there are some rules to limit it), and thus the ending is not so much a *solution* to the mystery as an *expansion* of the information and a *deeper understanding* of the acts, motives, and psychologies of the different characters that make it possible to connect and give meaning to the information discovered.

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

Her Story

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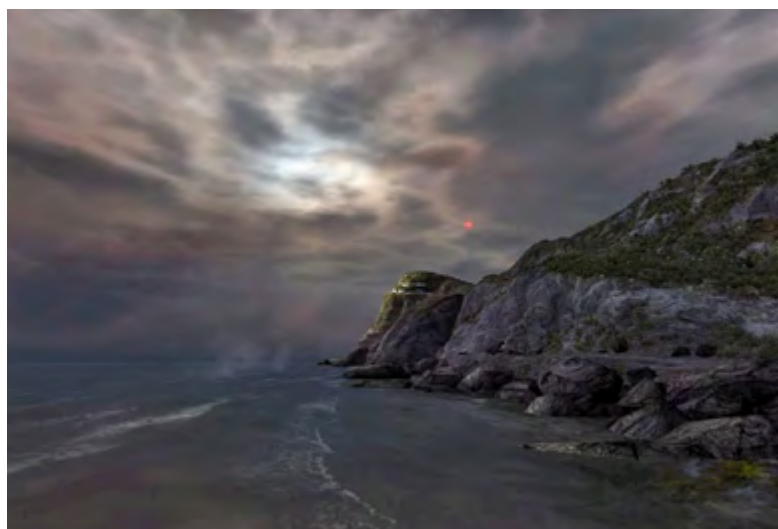
gh the family's memories, where the subjective point of view flows poetically in a *mise-en-abyme* between the different members whereby the player *plays* their deaths. Once again, the complexity here lies in an exploration that flows between different levels of reality to reconstruct the continuity,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

The loop is another of the characteristic effects of video game language

What Remains of Edith Finch

that constitutes a spatial and temporal disruption, associated with learning and death, as "in order to learn, one has to die" (Rodríguez Serrano, 2020). The loop is a *restart* device, and the experience gained each time means the difficulty of the game can increase each time, reflecting the idea of video game mastery as an "art of failure" (Juul, 2013). As noted above, this idea also lies at the heart of many puzzle films. Video games like *Braid* (Jonathan Blow, 2008) or *Life is Strange* (Dontnod, 2015) use the loop as a mechanic that connects with the narrative layer of the game. Thus, in *Braid*, failure takes on the form of remorse, and the protagonist's progression through the different worlds is based on the use of mechanics associated with the possibility of turning back time, while the player explores themes related to forgiveness, mystery, space, decision, and doubt. *Life is Strange* makes use of more complex structures articulated in alternative worlds. The possibility of making a mistake and the reversible nature of actions become mechanics with implications for the narrative development, even if they cannot assuage the player's guilt or prevent some of the tragedies that occur over the course of the game (Martín Núñez, *et al.*, 2016).
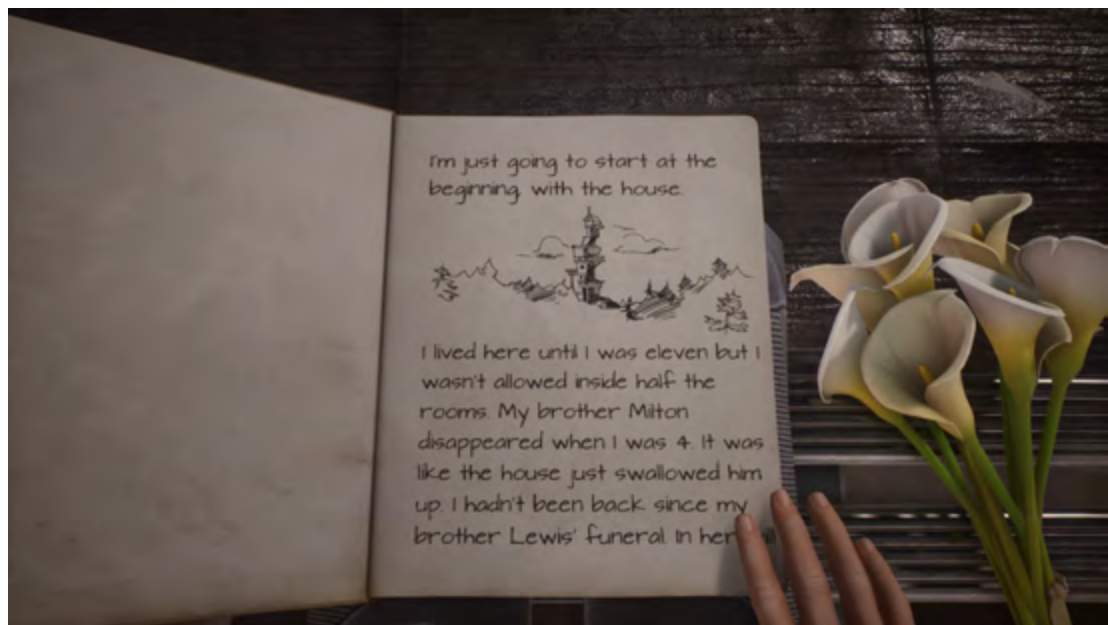
These examples show us that when the loop becomes a game mechanic, there is a high degree of self-consciousness and communicativeness, as the player is perfectly aware of how and when to use this mechanic and what effects it will have, which is also appropriately signalled by the game. This is why *The Stanley Parable* may be said to offer a higher level of narrative complexity, as it transgresses the loop as a ludic device and integrates it into the development of successive games without explicitly warning the player about its effects on narrative continuity. Players will become disoriented when they realize that the loop here is not a *restart* but a *continue*, and that the successive games form part of a single narrative trajectory, with strong causal relationships between them.

3.2. Traumatized and unstable characters

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

This emotional depth, in keeping with other contemporary narratives, reflects the malaise of our times and has increased the presence of unstable heroes, far from traditional happy adventurers like Mario or Link. Trauma—which has always been present, as the games of the *Wolfenstein* saga clearly demonstrate (Rodríguez Serrano, 2014)—now emerges as the source of the mental instability suffered by the characters who give rise to the narrative complexity. Thus, while a player-character's amnesia has often been used in video games as an excuse to justify the need to learn the game's main mechanics, as has the idea of the double, with effects on the functional dimension, in the contemporary video game such conditions have become fully integrated into the narrative layer, depicted as being the result of a painful trauma that will play an essential role in the character's identity and the configuration of a narrative that also often involves a disruption of spatial-temporal linearity. *Alice: Madness Returns* (Spicy Horse, 2011) makes explicit use of the theme of the double by inviting us to play out the protagonist's madness directly, thereby combining ludic and narrative layers. Alice's schizophrenia is represented in two antagonistic worlds—the world of the psychiatric clinic and the world of her mind—while we explore the trauma she suffers over the violent death of her parents in a fire. However, in *Her Story* the construction of the double contributes to narrative complexity precisely because it subverts the canon: the protagonist, who is being interrogated by her husband's killer, is in reality two people: Eve and Hanna, identical twins who share a love-hate relationship and yet pretend to be the same person, raising strong suspicions about their emotional stability and their role in the murder. The player is *tricked* here, played by the game.

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

Until Dawn

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

3.3. The complexity of the linear structure and causal weakness

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

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

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

Gris

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

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

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

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

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

also sets out the rules of the game world, allows the player to interact with that world through mechanics, and triggers the pre-designed events and occurrences. This figure takes the form of the Invisible Gamemaster, and as a theoretical entity its reliability is key, since the stability of the world and the possibilities of gameplay depend on a relationship of (blind) faith in the instructions, goals, challenges, possibilities, prohibitions, rewards, and penalties pro-

SuperHOT

vided by the game. As noted above, games like *The Stanley Parable* present a narrator—a kind of delegate of the meganarrator/IG in the story—who subverts the codes to reflect on the video game's system of directed freedom. Similarly, *SuperHOT* (SUPERHOT Team, 2016) is founded on a fallacious gameplay premise: the rule that "time only moves if you do" is revealed to be false, and this lie conceals the more universal truth of the video game as a medium: video game systems operate on an illusion of freedom for the player. The unreliable narrator also appears here making ironic quips about the situations in the game and breaking the fourth wall to tell players that they are not in control (Villabrille & Martín Núñez, 2020). Breaking the fourth wall, a common strategy in video games, is used as a way of signalling a critical reading of the video-game artefact, but at the same time it recognizes the position on the other side of the screen of the player, who actualizes the discourse through the gameplay. It is thus a strategy that makes it possible to re-establish the limits of the medium and constitutes a validation of the stories to normalize their cybertextual nature and reinforce their narrative potential (Navarro Remesal & García Catalán, 2015a).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NOTES

* This study has been conducted in the context of the research project *Narratological Design in Video Games: A Proposal of Structures, Styles and Elements of Post-Classically Influenced Narrative Creation (DiNaVi)* (Code 18I369.01/1), directed by Marta Martín-Núñez and funded by Universitat Jaume I, through the university's competitive call for research project proposals for the period 2019-2021 and in the context of the European initiative COST 18230 *Interactive Narrative Design for Complexity Representations.*

1 "Agency" is defined in the context of video games as the player's capacity as an *agent*, i.e., that players act or are able to act, and thus in this context it is defined as the player's capacity for action and decision making.

2 Some academics like Bordwell are averse to the definition of a mode of post-classical narration, suggesting instead there has only been an "intensification of continuity" (2002) of classical modes, although they do recognize certain formal *intensifications* and the recurrence of certain self-conscious strategies.

3 These hybridizations have yielded more interesting results when they have been presented as video games; notable examples include the games designed by Sam Barlow, *Her Story* (2015) and *Telling Lies* (2019).

4 *L'Atalante* dedicated the Notebook and (Dis)Agreements sections of its issue 15 to the analysis of this type of film (Bort Gual and García Catalán, 2013).

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INTRODUCTION

NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY IN VIDEO GAMES: A DOUBLE BOOMERANG

Abstract

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

Key words

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

Author

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

LA COMPLEJIDAD LUDONARRATIVA EN EL VIDEOJUEGO: UN DOBLE BOOMERANG

Resumen

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

Palabras clave

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

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ISSUE

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

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

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

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

LUDONARRATIVES. NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY IN VIDEO GAMES

REDEMPTION OUT OF HISTORY. CHRONOTOPICAL ANALYSIS OF *SHADOW OF THE TOMB RAIDER*

TOMASZ Z. MAJKOWSKI

In this paper I will use chronotopical interpretation of *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* (Eidos Montréal, 2018), the latest installment in the long-standing *Tomb Raider* series, to explain the reason behind the game's inability to address ideological issues underlying the series. As the final part of the *prequel trilogy*, introduced with the premiere of the *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics 2013), the game concludes Lara Croft's coming of age story. The protagonist turns from an idealistic student stranded on the mysterious island, featured in the first installment, into a fully formed and determined adventurer, casting away her father's long shadow and triumphing over the sinister Trinity organization. The game, taking place in magnificently presented, although somehow stereotypical, jungles of South America sends Lara on a quest to stop the imminent end of the world, and to discover a lost city where remnants of pre-colonial grand civilizations live secluded from the modern world. At the end of the game, Lara was supposed to reach the position of independent and confident adventurer she occupies in the first game of the series.

LARA CROFT'S ATTEMPT AT DECOLONIZATION

The game development team, with the lead designer Jill Murray—author of the critically acclaimed anti-colonial instalment of the *Assassin's Creed* series *Freedom Cry* (Ubisoft Montréal, 2013; Hammar, 2017)—took an opportunity to revisit some troublesome aspects of the franchise in a spirit similar to the treatment of series sexist imaginary in the *Tomb Raider* from 2013. The game fully acknowledges that Lara Croft's modus operandi is the legacy of European imperialism (Breger, 2008), and looting cultural artifacts from indigenous non-European peoples is just a modernization of the Victorian lost treasure trope (Mathison, 2008), replacing colonial greed with archeological curio-

Shadow of the Tomb Raider

sity. At the beginning of the game, Lara's callousness in obtaining archeological treasures triggers an (un)natural catastrophe which destroys an innocent Mexican town and starts the countdown towards the apocalypse. The game plot serves as a redemption arc: the heroine is simultaneously fighting Trinity, the organization trying to take over the world through the usage of ancient artifacts, and trying to revert her grave mistake from the prologue, possibly sacrificing herself in the process. She is also supposed to gradually move from the position of Western colonizer into an ally of the indigenous people, more interested in the preservation of local heritage than in her personal pursuit of knowledge and fame.

The main part of the game is set in the Peruvian jungle, and built around the legend of the lost city of Paititi—a supposed major settlement of the Inca empire, unsuccessfully searched by European explorers ever since the 16th century. The theme is consistent with the previous instalment of the prequel trilogy, all revolving around lost ci-

vilizations (Yamatai Kingdom in the first, and the sunken city of Kitezh in the second). As its predecessor, it disturbs the dichotomy of aboriginal creators of the lost city contrasted with outsiders: instead, *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* introduces a palimpsest of colonial spaces. Lara Crofts visits three major locations, bearing witness to three waves of colonization. First, after surviving a plane crash and vicious fight against a terrifying jaguar, she arrives at Kuwaq Yaku. It is a modern Peruvian shantytown deep in the jungle, deeply scarred by the arrival and subsequent withdrawal of a US oil company. The consequences of unchecked exploitation are presented through the portrayal of the village as poor, disorganized, plagued with crime and violence—and littered with empty barrels and other visual signifiers of the ecological and economic downfall. The second layer is San Juan mission: a former Jesuit outpost signaling European colonization in the 17th century, currently half-abandoned and heavily damaged by an earthquake. The mission turns out to be litera-

lly built upon ruins of the former civilization, and its secret basement hides a product of the contact zone (Pratt, 1992): a strange amalgam of Christian imaginary and grotesque mummies, the game quite consistently ties with the native culture. Finally, there is Paititi itself, though the lost city is not presented as Incan, but as a place settled by migrants from the Mayan empire, yet another amalgam of two distinct pre-colonial cultures, as settlers were joined by Incas fleeing Cusco after the Spanish invasion.

The game provides interesting interplay on the human sacrifice motif, commonly associated with South American native empires. Paititi is ruled by the Cult of Kukulkan, a decadent and

artifacts framed as adventure in general, and Lara Croft's vocation in particular. With this, it address concerns voiced on numerous occasion by game scholars and critics alike (Breger, 2008; Bezio, 2016; Murray, 2019; Walker, 2018a)—or, at least, tries to do it. As multiple reviewers pointed out (Drumm, 2018; MacDonald, 2018; Lacina, 2018; Plante, 2018; Von Republic, 2018; Walker, 2018b), the game falls short of its decolonizing premise, as it clings to the idea of the white savior and still features a rich English woman disturbing graves in places she considers exotic, and allows Lara to collect various valuables and treasures without any remorse. A few reviewers find the fact Lara *goes native* with Inca and Maya-inspired costumes borderline offensive, and the *immersive mode*, introducing voice lines in native languages instead of English feels ridiculous, as Lara holds her part of all conversations in perfect Queen's English. Finally, the redemption arc seems shallow and forced: the idea of Lara cleaning a mess of her

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IT IS QUITE EASY TO PINPOINT MAJOR REASONS BEHIND THE *SHADOW OF THE TOMB RAIDER* **SHORTCOMINGS: IT FAILS TO MOVE BEYOND THE IMPERIALISTIC BASIS OPEN–WORLD GAMES ARE BUILT UPON, AND IT REMAINS A FANTASY OF APPROPRIATION AND IDENTITY TOURISM, PROVIDED FOR THE WESTERN AUDIENCE EXPERIENCING THE POSTCOLONIAL CONDITION OF SOUTH AMERICA FROM THE COMFORT OF THEIR OWN LIVING ROOMS**

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millenarist religious order that maintains the social order through the practice of human sacrifice. But the cult itself is a fabrication of European missionaries, who infiltrated the city in search of the all-powerful artifact and started the evil religion oppressing Paititi residents to this day. The leader of the cult is also the only Paititian who moves freely outside the town and possesses another identity as an archaeologist and the leader of Trinity organization—the ultimate rival for Lara Croft.

As the short summary exposes, *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* undertook a substantial effort toward problematizing the narrative of European exploration and appropriation of non-European

own making is very quickly abandoned in favor of the traditional narrative of the heroine saving the helpless locals from the evil and greedy priest with magical powers—a paradigmatic colonial narrative originating in the Victorian lost race romance (Rieder, 2012).

It is quite easy to pinpoint major reasons behind the *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* shortcomings: it fails to move beyond the imperialistic basis open-world games are built upon, and it remains a fantasy of appropriation and identity tourism, provided for the Western audience experiencing the postcolonial condition of South America from the comfort of their own living rooms. Such game features can be subsequently tied to the unredee-

mable imperial character of mainstream games production and its role in upholding global Empire, in Hardt and Negri's sense (Breger, 2008; Fuchs *et al.*, 2018; Harrer, 2018; Dyer-Witheford and Peuter, 2009). It can also be argued that the ideology informing the genre *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* represents is inherently tied to the novels for adolescents, produced in the heydays of the British Empire—a claim I made elsewhere (Majkowski, 2016; Mukherjee, 2018; Lammes, 2010). In this paper my main aim is to go beyond such observations—valid as they are—to present how the spatiotemporal architecture of the game, analyzed through the lenses of Bakhtin's chronotope, contributes to the game failure as a serious criticism toward *Tomb Raider* series troublesome legacy.

THE TROUBLE WITH THE CHRONOTOPE

So far, the concept of the chronotope has been given little love in Game Studies, despite the general consensus about the spatiotemporal character of digital games, an aspect stressed out by the very pioneers of the discipline (Aarseth, 2007; Fuller and Jenkins, 1995; see Aarseth and Günzel, 2019 for contemporary discussion). I believe there are several reasons behind game scholars' reluctance to rely on the concept introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin in his writings from the 1930s. Firstly, it does not fit any of the three major areas of inquiry popular when studying game spaces. It is not an ontological concept, while the prime interest of game scholars is with the ontological status of digitally-created spaces and their relationship with the user, understood in terms of exploration (Günzel, 2007, 2019; Leino, 2012; Michael, 2008), subjugation (Magnet, 2006; Mukherjee, 2015), or dwelling (Kłosiński, 2018; Vella, 2019). It is also too imprecise to serve as a basis for formal analyses of overlapping spatial layers and temporal aspects of a gameworld (Juul, 2004; Wei et al., 2010; Zagal and Mateas, 2010). Finally, the chronotope is not a narrative tool and even though it is a way

to describe how space is embedded with meaning, it neither describes the way coherent stories can be extrapolated from spatial clues (Fernández-Vara, 2011; Jenkins, 2004), nor does it support the concept of media-independent storyworlds manifesting in digital games (Ryan, 2004; Ryan and Thon, 2014).

I believe there are two additional reasons why the concept is hardly employed even in studies of ideological and historical conditions for spatiotemporal relationship in digital games. The first one is purely incidental: the rise of organized Game Studies, with its distinct ways of knowledge circulation in the form of conferences and journals, happened when the interest in Bakhtin was already in decline in Anglophone academia. It was the time the *Bakhtin cult* started to fade away, with the legend of the solitary and secluded Russian genius put into question with accusations of plagiarism, contested authorship of several texts, and the discovery of censorship interventions into his texts (Hirschkop, 2001; Ulicka, 2001 for summary). Moreover, the reception of Bakhtin's central concept of the carnivalesque lost its almost messianic fervor, as it was universally questioned as factually inaccurate, naively optimistic or politically impotent (see Mrugalski and Pietrzak, 2004 for summary; see Klevjer, 2006 for discussion in digital game context). It is only understandable game scholars from the first decade of the 21st century did not invest time and energy in studying the legacy of a fallen academic demigod, introducing more promising concepts from Foucault or Lefebvre for spatiotemporal analysis.

But there is also a more substantial difficulty with the application of the chronotope, stemming directly from the first problem: it demands time and effort to grasp what the term, famously called "almost as a metaphor (almost, but not entirely)" by Bakhtin himself (1981: 84), actually means, and how it can be operationalized—especially when moving it out of literary studies. What follows is by no means a definitive formulation, or even a very

BUT THERE IS ALSO A MORE SUBSTANTIAL DIFFICULTY WITH THE APPLICATION OF THE CHRONOTOPE, STEMMING DIRECTLY FROM THE FIRST PROBLEM: IT DEMANDS TIME AND EFFORT TO GRASP WHAT THE TERM, FAMOUSLY CALLED "ALMOST AS A METAPHOR (ALMOST, BUT NOT ENTIRELY)" BY BAKHTIN HIMSELF, ACTUALLY MEANS, AND HOW IT CAN BE OPERATIONALIZED

informed one, of course. But in my interpretation, to properly address the concept, it is important to consider it simultaneously from the perspective of epistemology, historical poetics, and ethics, as a Bakhtinian understanding of spacetime provides a nexus to resolve the fundamental contradiction of his main intellectual inspirations: abstract German Neo-Kantian epistemology school, especially writings of Ernst Cassirer and Hermann Cohen, and the concrete, every-day, pre-intellectual ethics proposed by thinkers associated with the Orthodox Third Renaissance in Russia (Ulicka, 2008).

This fundamental difficulty is related to an apparent ease in understanding the term, as Bakhtin opens *Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel* (1981) with a proper definition: "We will give the name chronotope ('literally, time space') to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin, 1981: 84). What follows, though, is a strange and meandering discourse with many apparent detours, including long digression on novelistic heroes or strange passages devoted to "series" of eating and defecating in Rabelais. Meantime, chronotope changes its meaning: from the pretty straightforward description of spatiotemporal relationship within

a novel, to a fundamental directive underlying entire genres, to the condition upon which the subjectivity of a literary character is created, to a very particular depiction of certain novelistic themes, to a basic condition of understanding, as Bakhtin concludes: "every entry into the sphere of meaning is accomplished only through the gates of chronotope" (1981: 258).

To further complicate things, it is important to consider that the first usage of the word chronotope happens in *The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism* (1986)—which, despite the seriously-sounding title, is a brief note focusing mostly on Goethe, a part of the unpublished and partially lost book of Bildungsroman Bakhtin was trying to write in the 1930s. Here, chronotope means something entirely different: the way historical time is present in the work of art through the depiction of space—literally, how art "saturates landscape with time" (Bakhtin, 1986: 36). Here Bakhtin claims that the ability to perceive space as a repository of the past was a unique artistic ability of Goethe, closely related to the Romantic change in the understanding of history. Therefore, it was unheard of before the 19th century—a claim directly contradicting Bakhtin's own analysis of a chronotope in ancient Greek adventure romance presented in Forms of Time… Finally, that last essay was originally written in 1937-38, but heavily edited while prepared for publication in 1973, two years before Bakhtin's death, and only then supplemented with concluding remarks regarding the universal character of the chronotope. For all those reasons, the term is quite open for various interpretations, well beyond the straightforward concept of a direct spatiotemporal relationship presented in a work of art, which in turn decides its narrative genre—though certainly this last understanding is valid and well-justified.

BUT WHAT IS THE CHRONOTOPE, ACTUALLY?

Bakhtin's concept of "chronotope" is rooted in early cognitive science—even though in *Forms of Time...* the author ties it—in a quite casual manner—to Einstein's physics. As is well-documented (Holquist, 2002; Morson and Emerson, 1990; Steinby and Klapuri, 2013; Ulicka, 2008), the Russian scholar first encountered the concept during a lecture from Alexey Ukhtomskii, a pioneering neuroscientist who claimed that all cognition has spatiotemporal character, and the human brain is conditioned by external conditions to perceive spatiotemporal stimuli in a certain order of importance. As this conditioning is modified by the changes in life conditions, it undergoes historical changes: historical epochs can be divided according to changes in perception (see Ulicka, 2008 for detailed discussion). This hypothesis allowed Bakhtin to distance himself from the Kantian distinction between perception and thing-in-itself, as in the chronotope theory the former is shaped directly by the latter. For that reason, the chronotope formed a basis for Bakhtin's concept of literary realism, as a historically rooted way to understand external phenomena, constantly transforming, since it is driven by changes in social and living conditions resulting in new ways to address the human condition—a vortex of ideas Bakhtin calls "ideology". Understanding one's ideological position as created by historically-rooted, concrete spatiotemporal perceptions of reality allows for artistic recreations of such position in the form of a literary (or game) chronotope, which, in turn, produces all possible (and impossible) actions and events of the plot through chronotope. The individual configuration of actions and events featured in a novel might vary, but they always produce a protagonist capable to act in a way the chronotope enables—therefore operating within the ideology informing the chronotope.

Such interpretations resolve apparent contradictions in Bakhtin's many descriptions of the chronotope. Firstly, it allows to distinguish between two kinds of chronotope: the large dominant ones governing the overarching ideological structure of the narrative—such as "adventure chronotope" or "bildungsroman chronotope", documenting an epoch's general perception of space and time, and small chronotopes of certain motifs, such as "the road", "the parlor", "the threshold", or "the provincial town", presenting concrete sites where ideology manifests through (Holquist, 2002; Ulicka, 2018). It also allows to reconcile chronotope as time manifesting through space from *Bildungsroman...* and chronotope as the spatiotemporal relationship presented in the novel from *Forms of Time...*, as Goethe's unusual ability to "see time in space" is a testament to changes in the large chronotope, with Romanticism introducing the concept of historical perspective.

For Greek adventure novels, space is largely abstract, and the passage of time does not affect characters, as the ideological concept of spacetime is related to happenstance: time manifests exclusively through action, and space acts as stage for this action. Meanwhile, for Romantic fiction, time is made apparent through visual clues of past human activities, commonly in forms of ruins and other visions of decay. As a consequence, for early adventure romance the plot is shaped exclusively by current events, resulting in the popularity of "small chronotopes" of a road, or a threshold, all signifying the possibility of sudden change. For post-Romantic adventure novels time becomes historical, tying past events to the present, leaving its mark on space and tying past activities to present ones.

This last issue is a crucial one: the spatiotemporal composition is not an abstract way to measure the passage of time, but a way to introduce human activity into the work of art. It does not only frame the only possible way for the character to change over time (Holquist, 2002; Morson

THIS LAST ISSUE IS A CRUCIAL ONE: THE SPATIOTEMPORAL COMPOSITION IS NOT AN ABSTRACT WAY TO MEASURE THE PASSAGE OF TIME, BUT A WAY TO INTRODUCE HUMAN ACTIVITY INTO THE WORK OF ART

and Emerson, 1990), but most importantly it also allows for meaningful action, informing such change. Here, I am following a brilliant formulation laid down by Liisa Steinby (Steinby and Klapuri, 2013: 105-149). As the chronotope determines possible and impossible actions for a character, not only constituting this character but also providing a tool to combine aesthetical and ethical perspectives: "Chronotopes open up to the characters a certain time-space of possible action, which is conditioned by a locality or a social situation but still leaves the individual the freedom of ethical choice." (2013: 122).

PLAYING WITH CHRONOTOPE

Even though Bakhtin analyses exclusively literary chronotopes, his final remarks from *Forms of Time…* about the chronotopical basis of any understanding, opens up the possibility to apply such reasoning to other narrative forms, digital games included. Moreover, as with many other Bakhtinian concepts and terms, his reasoning presented above seems better suited for game analysis than for literature, as the medium is built around the notion of action (Galloway, 2006; Mukherjee, 2017), a term central to Bakhtinian philosophy. In this case, the way chronotope constitutes possibility for action understood as the interplay between external conditions and free choice in literature is subject to interpretation—while in a digital game it is actually enacted, and the tension between voluntary and involuntary aspects of a concrete activity performed in certain spatiotemporal conditions forms one of central pillars upon which Game Studies were built.

Despite that immediate connection, the Bakhtinian chronotope was first introduced into Game Studies in a limited way as a tool for genre analysis. Goeffrey Rockwell, to my knowledge the first scholar proposing Bakhtinian framework for studying digital games, points out the geneaological usage of the chronotope, claiming the study of spatiotemporal relationship within a game is a handy way to distinguish between game genres (Rockwell, 2002). It is also the direction Marc Bonner, as well as Alexey Salin and Ekaterina Galanina, follow, though with certain alterations. In his unpublished presentation given during Games and Literary Theory 2018 conference, Bonner points out that digital games as a medium reconfigure spatiotemporal relationships, challenging Bakhtin's assertion about the dominant role of time in the chronotope and introducing an "open world chronotope" of games, where narrative temporality plays second fiddle to the spatial navigation (Bonner, 2018).

Salin and Galanina echo this observation, analyzing similarities and differences in adventure chronotopes in literature and games and concluding that even though many spatiotemporal properties of adventure novels and digital games are similar, there is an important difference in the relation between space and time in those media. Because the novel is a narrative unfolding over time, it is dominated by the temporal aspect, with space presented as discrete and subjugated to the demands of the plot. In digital games, it is space that is continuous, with narrative time divided into discrete units and introduced only when certain spatial conditions are met (Салин and Галанина, 2020). In a talk presented during the Philosophy of Computer Games 2019 conference, Salin went even further, claiming digital games produce their own "cyberchronotope", organized by the logic of spatial navigation (Salin, 2019).

Dean Bowman (2019) is less preoccupied with genealogical aspects of the chronotope—in the analysis of *Gone Home* (Fullbright, 2013) he focuses on the chronotope as a means to create subjectivity, pointing out that the game (and other so-called "walking simulators") introduces unusual spatiotemporal relationship to break out with the mainstream position the player is forced to occupy in most commercial games—as a male, active, and violent subject. By introducing the domesticated and enclosed spacetime of home, *Gone Home* changes the way the player's subjectivity is produced, alongside with its ideological basis, thus it "arguably constructs a kind of feminine enclave in the male-dominated spaces of modern videogames" (Bowman, 2019: 165).

Similarly, Astrid Ensslin and Tejasvi Goorimoorthee put forward the bildungsroman chronotope, the other distinct spatiotemporal frame Bakhtin analyses, to study games focusing on journeys of personal development. They point out that "in line with the Bakhtinian chronotope, the games highlight movement through life as a walkable space in terms of both a temporal process and a narrow or confined corridor (Passage), physical topography designed for goal-directed linear movement from origin to destination (The Path), and the process and result of travelling long distances (Journey)." (Ensslin and Goorimoorthee, 2020: 382). The paper suggests further connections between games and the concept of chronotope through the intersection of fictional spacetime of the game and the biographical time of the player.

My point of departure is similar to the positions described above. I share Bakhtin's conviction that all meaning is presented and accessible through its concrete spatiotemporal position. I believe digital games produce their own kind of spatiotemporal framework of understanding, which subsequently can be divided into genres—and those, in turn, form a basis for the way the character's subjectivity is created. I will start my analysis with the way *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* introduces past human activities through spatiotemporal marks, then I will move to the analysis of spatiotemporal properties of the game world, and finally I will analyze the way the central character is dependant on chronotopical convention—and how it influences the possibility of postcolonial critique.

BURNING, CRUMBING AND COVERED IN SLIME

As other parts of the series do, *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* presents a gameworld full of spatial indicator of historical time, in forms of ruins and remnants. Lara Croft is an archaeologist, after all, and the series title refers to a tomb, the most iconic reminder of the passage of time. Therefore, it is only valid to start this interpretation with the analysis of the small chronotope of the tomb.

The tombs Lara Croft raids are anything but straightforward mementos of the past, though: they are elaborate labyrinths, connecting the past with the present through complex system of traps and spatial riddles, created in the past, but influencing the heroine in the present. Thus, the game establishes a dialogue between Lara and the ancient designers of the tomb, as the heroine answers questions left by the long-dead architects through the reconfiguration of space. It is worth noting the same dialogue is established between the player, solving puzzles, and the game designers who created them, equating the game narrative and the praxis of play through the game chronotope (see Karhulahti and Bonello Rutter Giappone, in press, for a discussion on relation between puzzle-solving and game narrative).

The basic mode the spatiotemporal relation the game establishes is not direct action, though, but observation: even if the gameplay is quite dynamic, the successful exploration of the tomb relies on the player's ability to understand spatial logic behind the labyrinth and then successfully

traverse it. This demand the game requests from the player is yet again apparent within the narrative: in *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* Lara frequently comments on her surroundings, providing the player with additional clues when their progress is stalled for a certain period of time—i.e. if the player spends too much time without progressing in space.

Through successful navigation, Lara creates an additional spatiotemporal link: the tomb, hitherto forgotten and mysterious, is reintroduced into historical narrative, as presented by in-game notes and thorough mapping of the complex. The relation with the past, established through saturating the gamespace with time, is therefore anamnetic: Lara's actions establish a link between the present and the forgotten past, providing additional lessons in morality in the process. This part of the series problematizes Lara's carefree attitude toward exploration of ancient tombs by repeatedly punishing her both at gameplay level (tomb

exploration is by far the most difficult part of the game) and within the narrative. It is tomb raiding that causes Lara to accidently trigger the end of the world, while the expedition to a tomb that was supposed to hold the artifact capable of stopping the apocalypse ends in a fiasco.

A similar logic governs open game spaces—Kuwaq Yaku, San Juan Mission, and Paititi, presenting three layers of historical time existing simultaneously. In the most contemporary settlement of Kuwaq Yaku, the past is represented not only through ever-present reminders of US colonial attempt, described above. The village itself is built near the ruins of an ancient temple, a reminder of more glorious days of the native people. Though the building is in a state of hopeless disrepair—a living reminder of the passage of time—it turns out to be the literal portal into the past. Lara has to go through the passage hidden behind the temple wall, and follow the path of trials, to reach the lost city of Paititi, where the glory of Incan and

Shadow of the Tomb Raider

Mayan cultures remains intact. Even though the game suggests Paititi and Kuwaq Yaku exists within the same time and space, the passage connecting them forms a semi-magical path, segregating the worthy from the undeserving of visiting the past. The trials Lara has to face are performed as a series of spatiotemporal puzzles, constructed in a way similar to the architecture of the tomb chronotope, already interpreted as dialogue between past and present. It is worth noting the game demands the player to navigate this path only once: when the spatial link between Kuwaq Yaku and Paititi is established, the player can travel between them freely, using a fast travel feature.

Shadow of the Tomb Raider

Paititi itself is an area untouched by the passage of time. Even though Lara Croft finds occasional reminders of the past there—most prominently in the form of hidden tombs—and can reconstruct the history of the Mayan colonization from scattered clues, the largest city ever introduced in the *Tomb Raider* series differs from both Kuwaq Yaku and San Juan mission, as it is not presented in a state of disrepair. The settlement is well-kept, with a fully functional temple not bearing any signs of ruination. The gamespace relation to the past is therefore established through

an opposite strategy here: instead of showcasing ruination of historical objects, the game performs their full restoration. This way, the two ends of historical timeline *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* introduces are presented through spatiotemporal means: in Paititi, the player witnesses the pre-colonial culture in a state before its destruction, and Kuwaq Yaku presents the postcolonial condition it was reduced to—with San Juan Mission serving as an intermediary link, presenting visual tropes of European colonialism in its most direct form. To drive this point home, the game reverses the logic of restoration and destruction regarding actions possible for Lara Croft. When entering Paititi, the place where the past is restored, she has to adjust to native customs and abandon modern clothing and firearms—this functionally ruins her capabilities as a playable agent. Meanwhile, Lara is at her full capabilities while in Kuwaq Yaku and San Juan—therefore the actions available for the protagonist are tied to the destructive properties of colonization.

Within the presentation of time through spatial means—the chronotope as presented in Bakhtin's *Bildungsroman...*—postcolonial overtones are therefore obvious, with the presentation of the indigenous paradise in constant treat from outsiders, and exposing various layers of colonization in both Kuwaq Yaku and San Juan mission. This topic is reinforced through the way Lara Croft (and the player) interacts with the visual signifiers of historical past, constantly resulting in their inevitable destruction. Not only does Lara disable or trigger ancient traps, she is constantly causing various structures to collapse, get flooded, or burned—in the most spectacular moment of the game, she even blows up a refinery, a remnant of US coloni-

zation. In that regard, she acts precisely the same way European colonizers did, causing irreversible damage to whatever little is left of the indigenous heritage sites. In a way, she is history personified: she brings what is forgotten from the past to light, at the price of the destruction of the very object she has taken interest in (Mignolo, 2003).

There is an additional, more troubling aspect of spatiotemporal representations, though: the

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IN A WAY, SHE IS HISTORY PERSONIFIED: SHE BRINGS WHAT IS FORGOTTEN FROM THE PAST TO LIGHT, AT THE PRICE OF THE DESTRUCTION OF THE VERY OBJECT SHE HAS TAKEN INTEREST IN

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role of nature. As the game constructs the logic of inevitable destruction and decay to stress its postcolonial critique, it simultaneously creates the society of Paititi as a primordial one. It is an innocent community, troubled by the intrigues and greed of Western explorers, represented by the Trinity organization hiding behind the doomsday cult of Kukulkan. This motif is reinforced by the role of savior Lara Croft has to fulfill. This way, despite its good intentions, the game easily caters to the colonial "noble savage" trope. Paititians are innocent, technologically backward, honorable, and naïve people deprived of agency—it is a white explorer's mission to save them from the clutches of the evil cult.

Such narrative creates yet another temporal link within the gamespace: between childhood and adulthood. Even though initially presented as immature, Lara turns out to be an adult who has to take responsibility for child-like natives, to deliver them from the machinations of doctor Dominguez, her evil doppelganger from Trinity. Not only does the game build on the trope of the nurturing mother clashing against the destructive father: as it constantly reminds the player, Lara has

to endure horrible tribulations in order to fulfill her mission, and this adds a narrative of anti-conquest to the mix. Anti-conquest is a concept introduced by Mary Louse Pratt to describe an attitude of European explorers and missionaries to describe their own adventures in terms of the sacrifice they are suffering to deliver primitive tribes of Africa or the Americas through the means of modern science and rational reason, thus justifying subsequent colonial intervention as a moral obligation (Pratt, 1992).

Thus, the first fundamental contradiction within the game is exposed. Not only does it conflate the concept of the passage of time as decay with the idea of the passage of time as maturation. Within historical time it offers quite a relentless critique of the South American postcolonial condition. Meanwhile, in a biographical time, present as both Lara's progressing story and as a metaphor of innocent childhood being the primordial state of humanity, there are strong references to Victorian colonial adventure novels, with its central theme of a lost race waiting for the white savior (Hanson, 2002; Katz, 2010; Rieder, 2012).

TRAVERSING THE CHRONOTOPE

Both Bonner (2018) and Salin and Galanina (2020) point out the fundamental difference between literary and game chronotope as a change in relationship between spatial and temporal component. For Bakhtin in the literary chronotope the dominant element is time (Bakhtin, 1981: 85)— while, according to all three game researchers, the latter is characterized by the dominance of space. Even though *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* is certainly built with this principle in mind—that is, the progression of the plot and narrative time is strictly dependent on player's position within the game space, and rarely triggers without the player's direct command—there are certain differences between the two spatiotemporal architectures included in the game.

Some parts of the game are organized according to the principle described by Bonner as "open world chronotope": the player roams freely in the vast and impressively rendered gamescape, free to observe its features and engage in various activities, as Lara looks for various collectibles, deals with shopkeepers and engages in casual conversation with local population—dialogues not important enough to deserve their own cutscenes. It is also the space of multiple sidequests, with Lara looking for a certain point in space to perform a desired action and help a person asking for her assistance. The dominance of space is almost absolute within this chronotope: even if certain tasks are performed, and subquests fulfilled, the spatiotemporal composition remains unchanged, as if the passage of time does not happen. Following Salin and Galanina suggestion, I will call this type of spatiotemporal organization within an open world a "navigation chronotope", as the main activity available to Lara is navigation through the gamescape. Within this large chronotope there are two recurring small chronotopes: the jungle and the settlement, separated by the presence of NPCs [Non-Playable Characters] capable of having a conversation.

Beside vast spaces of the navigation chronotope lie pockets of spacetime organized by different rules. Those are the small chronotopes of the tomb and of the arena, where combat happens. They are always removed from spaces of general human activity, so innocent civilians never intersect with enemies Lara must destroy. It is worth noting those two spatial categories overlap sometimes, as several tombs are guarded by mysterious subterranean humanoids, viciously attacking Lara for the better part of her adventure, only to be turned into allies in the finale. In both cases spatiotemporal logic is different from the one informing navigation chronotope, as timing becomes a crucial element of the play experience. In multiple tombs the player has to not only solve spatial puzzles but also perform according to a rhythm introduced by various devices to avoid swirling blades or pendulums and similar deadly contraptions. In those areas, time becomes a far more important aspect of the chronotope—as is the case of combat arenas. *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* features stealth mechanics allowing the player to quietly eliminate opponents and avoid direct combat. To do so, the player needs to study how enemies' positions change over time—and learn their routine. And when the actual combat starts, everything becomes time-dependent: the player has to move between covers, avoid enemy attacks, and time their own actions. The spatial organization of the arena—recognizable at first glance—is very compliant to the temporal aspect of combat, it is built to facilitate certain movements and actions of game agents. The same spatiotemporal organization governs the architecture of the tomb, where acrobatic feats have to be performed in a certain rhythm and order. I call this spatiotemporal logic "exertion chronotope", as it demands non-trivial effort from both Lara and the player. As already analyzed, this large chronotope contains small chronotopes of the tomb and of the arena.

It is therefore my conviction that *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*—as many other open world games—is a composition of two different chronotopes, facilitating two different modes of action on both gameplay and narrative levels. As already stated, the main activity within the navigation chronotope is to wander across the surroundings in search of various visual clues: collectibles, quest-givers, quest goals, and so forth. This chronotope is a safe space, as the time flow is under the player's total control, with all NPC actions looped and static environment. Lara is never in danger in there, whether she is wandering through the lost city of Paititi or the unexplored Peruvian jungle. This spatiotemporal composition enables a slow, reflexive mode of gameplay based on two main activities: observation and accumulation. To successfully operate, the player has to distinguish between important and unimportant parts of the

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scenery and activate all important parts. As time is looped there, with game agents performing the same activity over and over again, such activation rarely results in change within this spacetime other than collecting additional goods or information. Even with their quests fulfilled, NPCs remain in the same loop, as if nothing has changed. And for good reason: with a looped time completely subjugated to space, no change is possible without a profound reconfiguration of space. In this case, said reconfiguration is usually equated with expansion, as Lara unblocks a path leading to yet another navigation chronotope, without any further changes introduced. When the heroine opens the portal to Paititi, denizens of Kuwaq Yaku do not change their routine, and the player can resume any subquests or search for remaining collectibles later in the game.

The exertion chronotope enables a different mode of acting upon the game. Here, observation is subservient to control: to successfully beat action sequences, the player has to establish firm control over Lara's movement and actions, as well as dominate the seemingly unconquerable obstacles. Once it is done, they are rendered obsolete: killed enemies do not respawn, and traps are easy to bypass or defunct. It is due to this fact that the time-oriented exertion chronotope allows for change, and time passage is linear here: Lara progresses from beginning to end, instead of moving within loops of the navigation chronotope, a fact stressed by the linear progress through the exertion chronotope space—from the point of entry to an exit. The linearity of time allows for permanent change in narrative composition: once explored, a tomb often becomes inaccessible due to damage caused by Lara, and once conquered enemies vanish permanently. It is therefore no surprise that moving through exertion chronotope is also the only way to progress the game narrative and to witness meaningful consequences to Lara's actions and choices.

Shadow of the Tomb Raider's gameplay, as analyzed from a chronotopical perspective, is the-

refore an oscillation between a more passive mode based on the relaxed observation of space, and an active mode demanding focus on the temporal aspect of the game to remain in control. It is therefore no surprise those two chronotopes construct Lara Croft in two different ways and provide her with the means to perform two different sets of actions. The navigation chronotope produces what I will call *Reflexive Lara*: a level-headed and compassionate heroine, observing her surroundings and often engaging in dialogue to provide help to those in need. Her basic abilities are dialogical interactions with NPCs and the accumulation of knowledge or resources through careful investigation of the surroundings. Meanwhile, the exertion chronotope is where *Exertive Lara* resides: an action heroine capable of dispatching hordes of enemies and solving time-sensitive puzzles. She is also the one governed by the linear passage of time—therefore capable of changing her surroundings and herself. It is Exertive Lara who destroys ancient tombs and psychologically progresses from obsession over Trinity, through the sense of guilt, to thirst for vengeance, to the final sacrifice and self-acceptance. All these transformations do not affect Reflexive Lara, who remains unchanged through the entire course of the game. She appears already fully formed and capable, a quality stressed by the fact that she remains the sole active subject within the navigational chronotope. Meanwhile, Exertive Lara is frequently acted upon: attacked, chased, or forced to avoid death in crumbling structures. Therefore, it is Exertive Lara who faces personal trials forced upon her by the passage of narrative time, while Reflexive Lara solves only other people's problems.

This chronotopical composition is hardly unique to *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* (see Karhulahti, 2013 for a discussion about kinestetic and reflexive modes of playing), and it is my conviction all open world games interlace navigation and exertion chronotopes. What makes this case interesting is the way the game tries to re-evaluate the ethical position of both characters constructed by this chronotopical composition. With Reflexive Lara, the game tries to frame observation as witnessing, through showcasing many consequences of European colonialism within the navigation chronotope. In a similar vein, Exertive Lara is depicted as the destroyer of both cultural heritage and any opposition, vengeful and borderline obsessive in her quest to stop Trinity.

THE GAMEPLAY, AS ANALYZED FROM A CHRONOTOPICAL PERSPECTIVE, IS THEREFORE AN OSCILLATION BETWEEN A MORE PASSIVE MODE BASED ON THE RELAXED OBSERVATION OF SPACE, AND AN ACTIVE MODE DEMANDING FOCUS ON THE TEMPORAL ASPECT OF THE GAME TO REMAIN IN CONTROL. IT IS THEREFORE NO SURPRISE THOSE TWO CHRONOTOPES CONSTRUCT LARA CROFT IN TWO DIFFERENT WAYS AND PROVIDE HER WITH THE MEANS TO PERFORM TWO DIFFERENT SETS OF ACTIONS

The game fails to achieve this effect, though, since it is too reliant on digital game conventions, thus introducing a contradictory ideological framing of Reflexive Lara as first and foremost a collector of objects and knowledge, and Exertive Lara as a champion for the oppressed, fighting a just war against unquestionable villains. The dissonance between this double position Lara occupies, witness-destroyer and collector-champion, is especially painful, as it clashes postcolonial ambitions with a very reactionary colonial narrative of lost race romance.

LARA CROFT AS SUBJECT OF HISTORY AND

BIOGRAPHY

While describing the reasons behind Shadow of the Tomb Raider's inability to criticize colonial adventure tropes, it is important to consider how the main narrative arc interacts with the possibilities offered by two game chronotopes. The game creates a postcolonial world of oppression, and confronts it with a well-established protagonist, with an explicit aim to present the way Lara Croft progresses from being a self-absorbed tomb raider, a poster girl from imperial attitudes toward non-European cultural heritage, into a considerate and mindful curator of said heritage, treating indigenous people as equals. And it is a promise the game ultimately fails to deliver: the change in Lara's attitude seems not only ungrounded and ill-motivated but also superficial. The heroine remains who she was in the first place (a tomb raider), it is only the rhetoric framing her activities that changes. To uncover the source of this fiasco,

it is important to consider one final aspect of the chronotopical analysis: the interaction between historical and biographical time.

As Bakhtin (1981: 108-110) claims, the invention of the adventure chronotope in Greek novels introduced a new type of protagonist: a private person, whose trials and tribulations are played out at the scene of private life, as opposed to the strictly public and political subject of an epic, a travel novel, or an early form of biography. By following the conventions of an adventure narrative reappropriated for a digital game in the way described by Salin and Galanina (2020), *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* unwittingly follows the ideology of a private life while constructing its heroine. The exertive Chronotope, especially combat arenas, is non-specific for the concrete geographical area the game is set in, in a way Greek romance creates a nonspecific world as the backdrop for its protagonists' trials: indeed, very similar arenas are encountered in the previous entries in this

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trilogy. The main plot also follows this direction: despite the setup, depicting Lara's archenemy as a benefactor of various South American communities and herself as a cause of people's misery, it very quickly drops the political angle to present Lara's personal quest for vengeance and redemption. Even the fact that the heroine has to assume the supposedly-public role of the killed Paititi queen changes nothing: through this position,

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HERE THE CENTRAL ISSUE LAYS BARE: WITHIN THE GAME THE PUBLIC AND POLITICAL IS CLEANLY SEPARATED FROM THE PRIVATE, AS THOSE TWO ASPECTS OF LIFE ARE PRESENTED THROUGH DIFFERENT CHRONOTOPES, PROVIDING DIFFERENT TEMPORALITIES AND DIFFERENT SETS OF POSSIBLE ACTIONS

Lara exercises vengeance upon her nemesis and then retreats into the safety of private life—*nota bene*, in the novel a luxury of an imperial subject, who is capable of withdrawing from dangers of history into the sanctuary of privacy (Jameson, 2006).

Meanwhile, the postcolonial criticism is expressed mainly within the navigation chronotope, through the way its space displays the temporal aspect. It is therefore the space of navigation, where fully-formed Reflexive Lara dwells, that is constructed as political commentary on the colonial legacy in South America. But all those imaginaries cannot influence the heroine, as within the looped time of the navigation chronotope any change—including transformation of the protagonist's ideological position—is impossible.

This contradiction is very apparent when time-travel episodes are considered. Only twice in *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* does Lara move against the currents of time. As already analyzed, she finds a way to the lost city of Paititi, the enclave of pre-colonial America. It is a feat done through spatial means, and it establishes a spatial continuity between Paititi and the rest of the gameworld. It is also easily replicable, as Lara moves in and out of the city with ease. The second time travel is a retrospection: a level detached from the rest of the game and impossible to revisit, where Lara replays her childhood memories. This sequence, one of a kind and separated from any other game chronotope, serves as an explanation for Lara's personal motivation and provides the narrative frame for the entire plot. It is also very private, as opposed to the public character of Lara's journey to Paititi.

Here the central issue lays bare: within the game the public and political is cleanly separated from the private, as those two aspects of life are presented through different chronotopes, providing different temporalities and different sets of possible actions. The game's historical time, subject of the postcolonial criticism, is therefore deprived of any possibility to influence the game plot. The plot's progression remains the province of biographical time, within which all emotional and psychological progress of the protagonist happens, equated with moving forward through the exertion chronotope (Ensslin and Goorimoorthee, 2020).

It is therefore my conviction that the fundamental inability to seriously discuss postcolonial legacy and the role of the *Tomb Raider* series in the upholding of imperial imagination stems from the chronotopical composition of the game. As a subject created by the game chronotopes, the version of Lara capable of change exists exclusively

within private biographical time, and postcolonial criticism is possible only within historical, public spacetime. Lara Croft can achieve personal redemption and emotional closure—but it cannot relate to the political aspect of the game, as the heroine occupies a comfortable position outside history. ∎

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REDEMPTION OUT OF HISTORY. CHRONOTOPICAL ANALYSIS OF *SHADOW OF THE TOMB RAIDER*

REDIMIR LA HISTORIA. ANÁLISIS CRONOTÓPICO DE *SHADOW OF THE TOMB RAIDER*

Abstract

In this paper I will use chronotopical interpretation of *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* (Eidos Montréal, 2018), the latest installment in the long-standing *Tomb Raider* series, to explain the reason behind the game's inability to address ideological issues underlying the series. As the final part of the prequel trilogy, introduced with the premiere of the *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics 2013), the game concludes Lara Croft's coming of age story. The protagonist turns from an idealistic student stranded on the mysterious island, featured in the first installment, into a fully formed and determined adventurer, casting away her father's long shadow and triumphing over the sinister Trinity organization. The ideology informing the genre *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* represents is inherently tied to the novels for adolescents, produced in the heydays of the British Empire. In this paper my main aim is to present how the spatiotemporal architecture of the game, analyzed through the lenses of Bakhtin's chronotope, contributes to the game failure as a serious criticism toward *Tomb Raider* series troublesome legacy.

Key words

Chronotope; Tomb Raider; Lara Croft; Bakhtin; Space; Time.

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Resumen

En este artículo llevaré a cabo una interpretación cronotópica de *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* (Eidos Montréal, 2018), la última entrega de la extensa saga *Tomb Raider*, para explicar por qué el juego es incapaz de enfrentarse a los problemas ideológicos de la saga. Como última entrega de la *trilogía de precuelas*, que se estrenó con *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2013), el juego concluye la historia del paso a la edad adulta de Lara Croft. La protagonista del juego pasa de ser una estudiante soñadora perdida en una isla misteriosa, como se exponía en el primer juego, a convertirse en una aventurera bien preparada y decidida que deja atrás la larga sombra de su padre y que triunfa sobre la siniestra organización Trinity. La ideología detrás del género que *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* representa está estrechamente conectada con las novelas para adolescentes escritas durante la época de mayor apogeo del imperio británico. En el presente artículo, mi objetivo es investigar cómo la arquitectura espacio-temporal del juego, con un análisis basado en las teorías de Bajtín sobre el cronotopo, contribuye a una lectura del juego que deja al descubierto su intento fallido de criticar el legado problemático de la saga *Tomb Raider*.

Palabras clave

Cronotopo; Tomb Raider; Lara Croft; Bajtín; Espacio; Tiempo.

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Referencia de este artículo

POSTMODERN DETECTIVE FICTION IN VIDEO GAMES

CLARA FERNÁNDEZ-VARA

1. INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. POSTMODERN DETECTIVES IN LITERATURE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> THESE TWO NOVELS PROVIDE US WITH A SERIES OF FEATURES THAT CAN HELP US IDENTIFY POSTMODERN ELEMENTS THAT CAN ALSO BE FOUND IN GAMES: THE CITY AS AN EXPLORABLE SPACE FOR MULTICURSAL NAVIGATION, UNSTABLE IDENTITIES, AND METAFICTIONAL REFERENCES

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

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

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

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

3. POSTMODERN DETECTIVE VIDEOGAMES

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

3.1. *Her Story*

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

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

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

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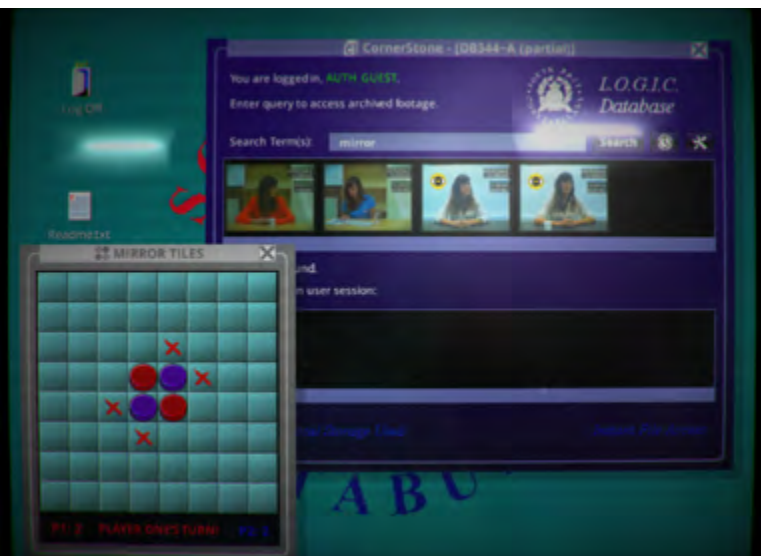
Her Story begins by showing us a recreation of a computer desktop from the nineties

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

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

3.2. *Blade Runner*

The other two games covered in this article draw many of their postmodern traits from the texts they adapt or are inspired by. That is the case of the 1997 video game *Blade Runner*, which takes the world from the 1982 Ridley Scott film of the same title as the space for a new adventure. The film has been classified as a postmodern detective story, and referred both as part of "neo noir" or "future noir" (Silver and Ursini, 2005: 125; Sammon, 1996). The game, however, is not an adaptation of the movie; rather, the story runs parallel to the events of the film. The crime at hand is a series of murders; evidence points at replicants (synthetic beings) being the culprits, which calls for the intervention of a special division of the police department, the *blade runners*, who identify and *retire* (an euphemism for *execute*) replicants. Only specially trained police forces can become blade runners; since replicants are indistinguishable from humans, the only way to tell if someone is synthetic or not is to pass a test called Voight-Kampff. The character the player controls is blade runner Ray McCoy, a name that points out at one of the core themes of the game, as well as the film it is based on—the impossibility to figure out who is human and who is a replicant.

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.3. *Deadly Premonition*

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

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

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

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

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

The story is more complicated than that—as the game advances, the car conversations make it clear that Zach and York have been very close for many, many years. It turns out that our detective has a split personality—York is the character Zach created after a traumatic childhood event. York is cool, in a movie detective kind of way, but he is also naïve and not particularly good at dealing with people; he needs Zach to act and become

a detective. His split personality bestows York / Zach with special insight about the world, special powers—he can read his fortune for the day in his morning coffee—as well as give access to an alternate, dark world.

Both York and the world of *Deadly Premonition* are split up, in the same way that the town of *Twin Peaks* had two sides. The daytime world is where the player can explore the town, meet its inhabitants and get to know them, while the dark world appears at night, or whenever York gets close to the killer or to key information to solve the case. This dark world is decaying and full of zombies who wail in pain and attack York. The dark version of Greenvale is where the player helps York pick up evidence for the case. The game calls this process *profiling*, where once the player has gathered all the evidence, York visualizes what happened in the crime

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

scene as a hazy, fragmented flashback. York is the one carrying out the exegesis, although the final result is not overtly clear; the player just provides the ingredients. The player picks up the evidence while the game does the detective work once more, but the resulting flashback is fragmented enough and overlaid with audiovisual static that it invites the player to interpret the events even if the ambiguity is relatively shallow.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

IN ALL THREE CASES, THE PLAYER IS INVITED TO EXPLORE THE TEXT, WHICH IS A DETECTIVE-LIKE ACTIVITY, BUT THIS EXPLORATION DOES NOT RESULT IN FINDING A SOLUTION; RATHER, IT REVEALS AMBIGUOUS STORIES AND UNSTABLE IDENTITIES

4. POSTMODERNISM VS. INSTRUMENTALITY

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. CONCLUSION

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

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

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

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

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POSTMODERN DETECTIVE FICTION IN VIDEOGAMES

Abstract

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

Key words

Detective fiction; Videogames; Adaptation; Noir; Postmodern.

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LITERATURA DETECTIVESCA POSMODERNA Y VIDEOJUEGOS

Resumen

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

Palabras clave

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

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

ÓLIVER PÉREZ–LATORRE

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

Part of the originality of this study lies in its methodological perspective, which differs from (hegemonic) studies of narrative complexity that focus on the cognitive dimension, the notion of the "puzzle film", or the structural complexity of the narration as a whole (Mittell, 2006, 2015; Buckland, 2009), and from the current trend of experiential analysis based on big data and gameplay metrics (Wallner & Kriglstein, 2015, and the projects of the Software Studies Initiative[1]). Adopting a perspective similar to that taken by García Catalán, Sorolla Romero & Martín Núñez (2019), I propose to (re-)interpret narrative complexity as a phenomenon that can and should (also) be understood with a focus on the emotional dimension and through micro-qualitative analysis. This analytical approach identifies and evaluates short video game passages with a special affective significance. Without having to be totally isolated from the whole, these passages can be of interest if subjected to a detailed analysis that considers them with a certain degree of autonomy. In other words, paraphrasing the popular expression, I seek to argue that the devil of emotional complexity in video games is in the details.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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

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

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

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

Meta-emotions: emotions based on another emotion felt previously while watching a film. For example, after wishing for the death of a particular character, we may feel guilty or ashamed for doing so.

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

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

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

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

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

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

FIVE MICROANALYSES OF EMOTIONAL COMPLEXITY IN VIDEO GAMES

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

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

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

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

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

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

In one of these plotlines, Clementine, Kenny, and the baby reach the town of Wellington only to discover that their promised land is surrounded by a metallic wall. After a brief conversation, the security guard offers to let only Clem and the baby enter. The player must thus decide whether to keep the group together and return to the wasteland, or to enter Wellington with the baby, leaving Kenny behind. Whatever the player decides, the scene acquires a strong dramatic charge, concluding with an image of the doors into Wellington closing, whether they be separating the group or shutting all three outside to face the dangers of the post-apocalyptic world once again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the first episode and during the first part of the second episode of *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015), Max (the player/protagonist) is given hints that Kate Marsh (a friend of hers) is having problems. Apparently, some intimate videos of Kate are being shared among the students at Blackwell Academy. Max sees Kate looking worried and anxious at different moments, but sometimes Kate tells her to leave her alone.

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

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

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

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

The potential emotional effects of this scene in *Life is Strange* cover several of Plantinga's analytical categories (2009), and at the same time suggest a number of adaptations of the theory for application to the video game medium. First of all, "direct emotions", which in films Plantinga associates with those elicited by the events of the plot, in video games are complementary to the emotions we feel based on our own actions and decisions and their consequences in the game. The player's frustration over having failed would be an example of this variant of "direct emotions" in video games. In any case, in the scene of Kate's suicide this frustration takes on some special nuances.

In a medium typically associated with the reversibility of decisions (the option to play again), Dontnod Entertainment manages to square the circle by imposing an experience of irreversibility, giving the scene a particularly tragic effect. By integrating Max's power to rewind time into the gameplay, the removal of that power in the scene of Kate's suicide generates an especially intense sense of impotence. On the other hand, the contrast between picking up on small hints at the right moment and the fatal consequences of failing to notice them make the rooftop scene especially effective as a catalyst for regret and guilt in the player.

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

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THE CONTRAST BETWEEN PICKING UP ON SMALL HINTS AT THE RIGHT MOMENT AND THE FATAL CONSEQUENCES OF FAILING TO NOTICE THEM MAKE THE ROOFTOP SCENE ESPECIALLY EFFECTIVE AS A CATALYST FOR REGRET AND GUILT IN THE PLAYER

Fig. 3. *Life is Strange*

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

Fig. 4. *What Remains of Edith Finch*

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

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

In a reinterpretation of Aristotle's theory of catharsis, Plantinga suggests that one of the key factors behind our love of narrative consists in what he calls "working-through scenarios" (2009: 169-190), affective processes normally located at the end of the story, which combine sadness and pain with an implicit suggestion of their recoding in more positive terms, from an emotionally constructive perspective. Thus, when a story leads
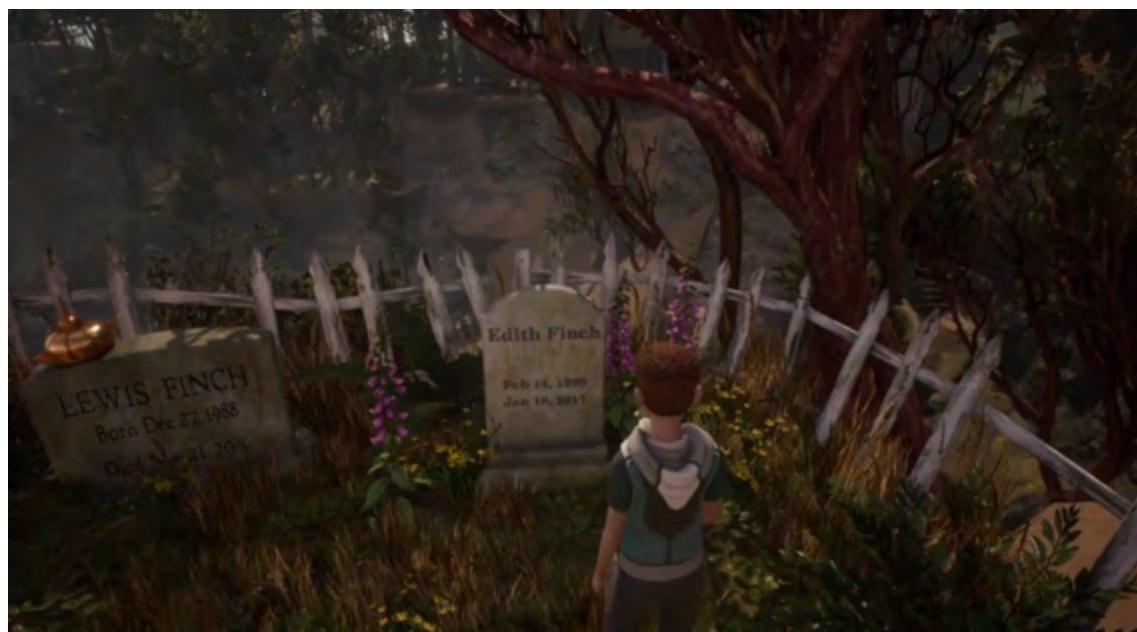
to one of these scenarios of affective resilience, along with a tragedy befalling an important character or a bitter denouement, it often goes hand-in-hand with a kind of implicit cognitive-emotional hook on an interpretative level, which each reader/spectator/player can apply in her own way. At the end of *What Remains of Edith Finch*, Edith's diary becomes a clear example of this kind of emotional/interpretative hook.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A second instance of emotional dissonance in *Rinse and Repeat* is related to what Plantinga (2009) calls "artifact emotions" (in films): in this case, a sensation of estrangement, associated with a subversion of expectations. As noted above, Yang vests this small scene with a gay eroticism based on photorealist graphics and a meticulously detailed design and setting on a par with triple-A video games. As a result, unlike other indie games, this is not a game that distinguishes itself from the mainstream by the crudeness of its graphics (Juul, 2019), as its subversiveness lies in Yang's re-appropriation of photorealism to create characters and relationships outside the norm for popular video games.

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

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

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

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

Fig. 5. *Rinse and Repeat*
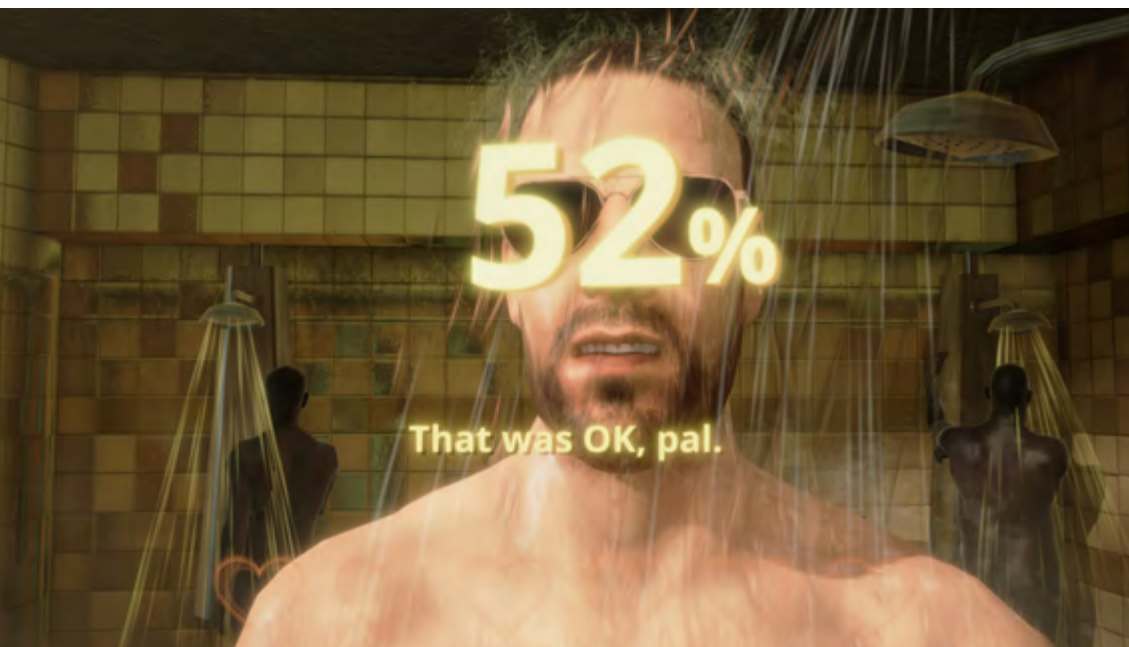
another inch towards the door) and the fact that Niko himself is the killer of the dead man he is trying to deliver.[2]

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

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

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

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

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

Fig. 6. *Grand Theft Auto IV*

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

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

CONCLUSIONS

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

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

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

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

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

NOTES

1   Software Studies Initiative: http://lab.softwarestudies.com/p/research_14.html.

2   It is worth reassessing the concept of "ludonarrative dissonance", which Hocking (2007) defines in strictly critical, negative terms in relation to video game design, given the value of such dissonance for irony, comic effect, etc.

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

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

Abstract

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

Key words

Video games; Complexity; Emotion; Microanalysis; Experience.

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Resumen

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

Palabras clave

Videojuegos; Complejidad; Emoción; Microanálisis; Experiencia.

Autor

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EMOTIONAL AMBIVALENCE IN *THE LAST OF US*: EMOTIONS IN VIDEO GAMES, BETWEEN NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY AND PLAYER ALLEGIANCE

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INTRODUCTION

Playing a video game is generally considered to be an enjoyable experience. This assertion probably doesn't need support from academic literature, and yet, if we take a moment to think about our time playing video games, we will realize that in emotional terms it is an extraordinarily diverse and complex experience: a state of extreme excitement, in which our consciousness flows freely; rewarding, even when it is not necessarily delightful or successful. In fact, as Jesper Juul (2013: 42-43) points out, we experience failure with pleasure, in a curious paradox similar to other forms of fiction like literature and cinema.

Emotions, such as the player's enjoyment or vicarious responses to a character's pain, reflect the kind of narrative complexity found in works of fiction. The emotions elicited by a text—in this case, a video game text—are the product of narrative and aesthetic mechanisms and participatory dynamics. We can see this in recent video games like *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015), *Hellblade: Senua´s Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017), *Celeste* (Matt Makes Games, 2018), *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013), and *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020), all of which feature complex characters whose emotional richness, often filled with contradictions, leads the player to make difficult and sometimes even morally reprehensible decisions. These characters, played by the players, convey emotions that are the result of a gameplay experience inseparable from the storyline.

For this study we have chosen the two aforementioned instalments of the game *The Last of Us,* because of the transformative arc experienced by their main characters, and the emotions that they can elicit from the player as a result. The questions we seek to answer are: How do we feel while we're playing a video game? What elements of a video game and a fiction narrative elicit emotions from us? A list of the emotions or the content

An anxious and claustrophobic moment in *The Last of Us*

thereof seems to us less relevant to this analysis than the formal relationships that trigger them. Our methodological approach will therefore draw mainly from film narratology. In other words, our aim is to deconstruct the appeal of *The Last of Us* as a video game text, particularly in relation to the characters' suffering and the player's aesthetic and ludic enjoyment.

FROM CINEMATIC EMOTIONS TO VIDEO GAME EMOTIONS

In a video game narrative, as in other fiction forms, the characters express emotions that allow us to better understand their intentions and motivations. The consumers of these narrations can also experience emotions, sharing them with the characters, or even feeling them vicariously. In many video games, players are linked to a specific character with whom they experience the game; this character is known as the player character (Planells, 2015: 138).

The player character enables users to project themselves into the diegetic world of the game and to operate (play) within it. The immersive experience in the fiction world constitutes a context of experience and a source of emotions different from those of our everyday lives. We cross this threshold thanks to the character in whom we are embodied, i.e., who defines us as an entity in the game world. The configuration of this character is therefore essential to the emotional experience that the player gets from the game. In this sense, we are emotionally stimulated through the character. As Klevjer (2012: 21) suggests, in games involving an embodied character, the player discovers the fiction world not through the screen but with the screen, and therefore with the character, as if that character were a vehicle for exploring the story that conditions its reception. The emotions referred to here are not those of a real individual, but of a theoretical or ideal figure. In this sense, the receiver of a given text is defined as inscribed or placed in it, as the implied reader/

spectator/player (Anyó, 2016: 43-52), rather than as a specific or ethnographically considered individual, as would be the case in cultural studies, gender studies, or other fields closer to sociology and anthropology.

As a minimum definition, with room for nuance in each of the theories that have studied them, emotions refer to changes or alterations in an individual that at the same time involve states of consciousness, their content, as it were, and their physiological manifestations, or form. The relationship between content and form, and also their relationships with thought and with the world, is the focus of most theories that have sought to explain emotions. It seems important here to identify which emotion, at least etymologically, relates to movement, just as the movement of the player character is necessary in video games, often physically through the diegetic space, in order to activate the story.

IN THE FINAL DECADES OF THE 20TH CENTURY, THE STUDY OF THE EMOTIONS GRADUALLY BROKE AWAY FROM THIS PHYSIOLOGICAL DETERMINISM AND BIOLOGICAL UNIVERSALISM, AS THE INTRODUCTION OF A CULTURALIST PERSPECTIVE BEGAN TO RECOGNIZE EMOTIONAL DIVERSITY ON THE ONE HAND, AND THE INTIMATE LINK BETWEEN THE FACULTIES OF REASONING AND THE PERCEPTION OF THE EMOTIONS ON THE OTHER

Western thought in relation to the emotions, particularly since René Descartes' highly influential text *Les passions de l'âme* (1649), has been founded on the idea of a separation or opposition between emotion and reason. This notion, consolidated by Romanticism, relegates the emotions to the realm of the irrational, ungovernable and even arbitrary, as a kind of naturalist and intimist biological universal. This perspective was perpetuated by Charles Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), and by the James-Lange Theory (1884-1890) asserting the inscrutably physiological origins of all emotions.

This theoretical viewpoint, supported by authors like Paul Ekman, Robert Plutchnik, and Carroll Izard, predominated throughout most of the 20th century, and was characterized by the production of numerous lists of emotions that are curiously diverse given their concern with a supposedly universal phenomenon unaffected by cultural diversity.[1] In the final decades of the 20th century, the study of the emotions gradually broke away from this physiological determinism and biological universalism, as the introduction of a culturalist perspective began to recognize emotional diversity on the one hand, and the intimate link between the faculties of reasoning and the perception of the emotions on the other, in the work of authors like António Damásio, Michelle Z. Rosaldo, R.I. Levy, Catherine Lutz, and Cheshire Calhoun & Robert C. Solomon (Surrallés i Calonge, 2000: 178-183).

In the field of film studies, by the 1970s or 1980s two basic schools of thought had emerged to explain the role of emotions in relation to audiovisual media: the psychoanalytic perspective and the cognitivist perspective. To the psychoanalytic perspective we owe the concept of identification, which we believe essential for connecting narrative mechanisms to fictional emotions, while the cognitivist perspective places emotions in relation to knowledge, rather than in opposition to it. Nevertheless, both perspectives suffer from certain limitations. The psychoanalytic perspective in film studies, drawing mainly on Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, treats emotions as hidden, almost ineffable forces. Cognitivist theories, on the other hand,

tend to overlook the diversity of human emotions, presenting them in the form of supposedly universal lists, with what we would argue is an excessive attention to content.

In our view, what is needed is not to compile lists of emotions, which in any case involves a minefield of subjectivities, but to analyse the narrative mechanisms and other devices that elicit them. The objective should not be so much to determine the content of emotions as to identify their narrative origins, their relationships with the story and the game, and their intensity, which is possible through a narratological analysis.

The cognitivist approach, as its name suggests, defines emotions on a rational basis—or to be more exact, in relation to conscious knowledge. In film studies, it is assumed that an understanding of cinematic emotions involves focusing on the intellectual component of the emotion, i.e., the spectator's evaluation of the object that unleashes it, in a process that entails changes in physiology, mood, and thinking (Plantinga & Smith, 1999: 6).

Noël Carroll (2003: 66), one of the most emotions-oriented theorists in film studies, relates each emotion to a cognitive judgement or criterion associated with it. Thus, being harmful is the criterion for fear, misfortune is the criterion for sadness, etc. The basic point of Carroll's theory is the way in which the important events in a film have been predetermined on the emotional level by means of the mechanisms of film language that make the story being told emotionally meaningful to us. Films are thus emotively prefocused, because the emotions they evoke are governed by appropriate criteria, and this is something that can even be analysed by genre. For example, in horror films, fear is the prevailing emotion, provoked by the criterion of the danger or threat of harm, invariably of a fatal nature, accompanied by something disgusting, impure, or abominable (Carroll, 2003: 79).[2] All these emotions, and their

One of the terrifying clickers that populate *The Last of Us Part II*

appropriate categories, depend on the narrative structure and aesthetic given to the film: its cinematic form.

Although cognitivism's (and particularly Carroll's) contributions to the analysis of emotion in film have been extremely valuable, they can be criticised for two shortcomings. The first is a certain tendency towards the production of lists of emotions, prioritizing content over narrative mechanisms, with a perspective that once again falls prey to a kind of universalism. The second is a certain analytical vagueness in relation to cinematic form. Indeed, although Carroll explicitly states that emotions are prefocused by film language, and therefore their content derives from the film's form, this idea is not developed, as the focus is on emotions and their criteria of appropriateness. It is not possible to conduct a narratological analysis of the mechanisms for emotional construction, which we believe would be more revealing, without an analysis of audiovisual language itself.

In his study of the kinds of emotions associated with video games, Bernard Perron (2005) draws on film studies to propose three basic types. The first two are common to films as well, while the third is unique to video games. His first category is fiction emotions, or *F emotions*, characteristic of immersion in a fictional world that is experienced as real insofar as the player agrees to enter that world as a separate context of experience. Perron calls these "witness emotions" due to their vicarious nature, but they are emotions nonetheless. His second category of emotions, also shared with film, is that of artefact emotions, or *A emotions*, associated with the spectator's admiration for the narrative product as a product, for the artistry of its creation, and related to a fascination with the realism of its mimetic representation of the world. Finally, *G emotions*, or *gameplay emotions*, are exclusive to video games, resulting from the player's action in the fiction world, which has a direct effect on that world, altering it in one way

or another. While the first two types are passive emotions, the third is active. There is thus a direct relationship between the player's vicarious or witness emotions—*F emotions* and some *A emotions*—and that player's ability to deal with the challenges posed by the game—*G emotions*—since meeting those challenges, and moving forward in the story, depend on it.

On the other hand, Jonathan Frome (2007: 832-833; 2019: 859-862) uses two criteria: the player's role—which he divides into observer and actor, the first being similar to a film viewer while the second is unique to video games—and the type of emotion—divided into emotions associated with gameplay action, emotions associated with the narrative, characters, and dramatic situations, artefact emotions related to aesthetic enjoyment, and ecological emotions, which involve responses that are the same as those experienced in real life. Ecological emotions seem a somewhat fuzzy concept, mainly due to the lack of clarity on how they are distinguished from the other types—particularly after studies like those by Byron Reeves & Clifford Nass (1996) and Norbert Wiley (2003). There is a similar fuzziness to artefact emotions, which Perron suggests could be integrated into narrative emotions, given that they form part of the cinematic form.

PLAYER CHARACTER AND EMOTION IN *THE LAST OF US*

In the *The Last of Us* saga, there are several characters that we play, but only two that have clear leading roles. In the first game, Joel is the main player character, although in some stages we also play with Ellie (quite significantly, as will be discussed below); and in the second game, although we play with Joel for a short initial scene, and with Abby in several sequences, Ellie is the main protagonist. In the connection between game world and gameplay, the player character possesses a dual role: one constructed in narratological terms,

and the other as a vehicle for interactive game-play, or what Burn & Schott describe as a "heavy hero" and a "digital dummy" (Burn & Schott, 2004: 213-233). Given the participatory nature of video games, the player character is at once a fictional and a functional embodiment of the player.

For Cuadrado, who compares films and video games in an effort to deconstruct the operation of the emotive process in each medium (2013: 158), the characters in a video game often have an instrumental function; they are vehicles for the game rules or for a series of actions available to the player to engage with the game world. The jump to the "dramatic character occurs when the character, in addition to being instrumental for a series of actions, acquires some of the qualities of a character from a film, play or book, a character with emotions, psychology, traits, etc." (Cuadrado, 2013: 163).

Some of the options that facilitate functional embodiment

In a narrative video game, the player character is the trigger, the force that sets the story in motion. Without the player character there is no story. How and where the player character acts has an impact on the narrative complexity. Britta Neitzel (2005: 238), drawing on the narratological categories posited by Gérard Genette, proposes the concept of "point of action" to refer to the player's relationship of control over the game, and facilitates an analysis of the player character as the axis of the narration. But it is also necessary to consider point of view, the perspective from which information reaches the player. In audiovisual media, point of view referring to visual and auditory focalization needs to be separated from point of view with an exclusively cognitive value, i.e.,

ocularization and auricularization of focalization itself (Gaudreault & Jost, 1995: 139). The two video games analysed here are 3D games in which players control a specific player character—Joel, Ellie, or Abby—with a point of action that is intradiagetic, homodiegetic, and immediate. The perspective is in the third person, with the player's view limited to a position behind the player character. The point of view thus never completely aligns with the character's, although the character always serves as a point of reference. A strong bond is established with the avatar, permitting a much more intense sense of immersion in the scene. The soundtrack reinforces this bond. In the gameplay, the sequence shots and spatial design of the setting, with automatic changes of framing that range from wide establishing shots to closer shots for confrontations in enclosed spaces and labyrinthine passages, are key elements for eliciting emotions of terror and suspense. The frame itself and the space outside it both contribute to maintaining the emotional tension. It is also a game with certain time shifts, amplifying emotions associated with the pure narrative enjoyment resulting from gathering all the information necessary to understand a story presented in bits and pieces, as the narration sometimes switches from internal focalization, where the character and player share the same knowledge, to spectatorial focalization, where the player knows more than the character, and even external focalization, where the player knows less, as will be discussed below.

Fictional embodiment is the element that connects the player with the game world. The player character is a character immersed in a fiction

The violent apocalyptic world that characterizes *The Last of Us Part II*

production and consumers, the two games belong to the genre known as survival horror, and the player characters are configured within the range of basic functions of the genre. Joel, Ellie, and Abby allow players to explore scenes, look for tools, weapons, medicines, or resources, shoot at and attack enemies, sneak forward, escape, improve their weapons and materials, produce cures, open doors, and drive vehicles. The essential dynamics are related to survival in scenarios with infected zombies and human enemies. The player characters thus offer options of attacking, acting stealthily, or fleeing, allowing us to progress in the game and to push the story forward. Both games set us an ultimate goal—to find the Fireflies in the first, and to find Abby in the second—which we advance towards by means of intermediate goals faced in each stage: fighting through a scene filled with the Infected, finding a character with key information, fleeing an ambush, looking for the gasoline that can be used to start a generator, etc. And all these goals are achieved with very limited resources. The gameplay thus maintains a ludonarrative balance with the game world.

There are very few gameplay moments when there is no looming threat of a sinister creature or a cruel enemy lurking behind a door or around a corner. Players are kept constantly on edge. It is easy to feel disgust at the revolting sight of a clicker's bite, in addition to frustration, as it spells death for the player character. In the gameplay we also find emotions associated with mastery

world and the protagonist of a specific story. He or she is the dramatic character, and it is here that narrative emotions come into play. Joel and Ellie are two characters living in a dystopian United States where a virus—a fungus called Cordyceps—has infected much of humankind, turning people into zombie-like creatures who, as the infection progresses, look increasingly revolting and become increasingly dangerous ("clickers" and "bloaters"). In addition to the virus, the surviving humans fight each other in armed battles, having split into rival factions, representing the government, rebel groups, cannibals, and religious sects. It is a wretched and threatening world, made repugnant by the monstrous appearance of the clickers, especially when a player's lack of skill in the game results in the player character being bitten by one. And yet despite the danger posed by the Infected, the worst enemies of the surviving humans are actually other humans.

Functional embodiment or the instrumental function, on the other hand, is related to the gameplay dynamics, and this is where gameplay emotions are elicited. In this sense, based on their

and control, especially in relation to shooting dynamics, which we can improve as we practice and advance in the game. Getting through complicated armed confrontations unscathed or sneaking through a danger zone without being detected provokes emotions associated with overcoming difficult challenges and achieving goals. There are also emotions associated with the exploration of a scene, or the discovery of secret places, hidden resources, and other collectables.

One of the Infected attacks Ellie

The two categories of emotions can be separated for strictly analytical purposes. But when we play, *The Last of Us* intertwines the two. In the first instalment, the personal relationship between Joel and Ellie, and between the player and the two characters, gradually takes shape through the different cutscenes and through our efforts to overcome obstacles. Encounters with other characters have an impact on the emotional quality of human interactions, which is an ever-present theme. Put simply, a kind of father-daughter relationship is established between Joel and Ellie (Eichner, 2016). In the game's first moments, Joel defends Ellie in a cold, professional way, moving ahead to clear the Infected out of a particular area, for example. Later, in the museum in Chapter 3, in a cutscene Ellie and Joel stop to look at the views of the city from above, and Joel realizes that his feelings have changed. At the same time, we realize it as well: a frontal medium shot of the two, a reverse shot from behind them, so that we can also see the devastated but spectacular landscape, and finally a medium shot of Joel, with Ellie now outside the frame, while he looks thoughtfully,

perhaps reflecting for a brief moment on sometime in the past when his daughter was still alive. The shot frames him alone, and gentle extra-diegetic music accompanies this melancholy moment. Joel's brief distraction earns a reprimand from Tess, which we receive, as players connected to Joel. It is worth noting that this emotively prefocused moment (to use Carroll's terminology) comes after long hours of gameplay with Joel, consolidating our relationship with the character at least in instrumental or functional terms.

Tess' sacrifice when she is bitten and infected, Bill's opinion that survival takes precedence over friendship (a viewpoint that Joel doesn't share), the list of collectibles that Ellie carries with her (objects of emotional value to her), Sam's death just as his friendship with Ellie is beginning, the suicide of Sam's brother Henry, and the relationship with Joel's brother Tommy are all different episodes in a plot centred or focused on personal relationships and their emotional content of rage, calm, guilt, forgiveness, trust, anxiety, fear, or grief.

By the time they're driving to Pittsburgh in the pick-up truck, the empathy between Joel and

Ellie has become complete. Ella admits to having taken some things of Bill's (magazines and other belongings) without permission, leading to a typically father-daughter interaction about one magazine that Joel insists she should not be looking at because of its erotic content. However, the relationship between Joel and Ellie is often rocky. In Chapter 7, for example, Ellie laments that "everyone I cared for has either died or left me. Everyone […] except for you," to which Joel, bitter over their disagreement and his own past, replies: "You're right; you're not my daughter and I sure as hell ain't your dad." This conversation, in a cutscene, is presented in a medium close-up with shots and reverse shots between the two characters, until the devastating remark by Joel, who is shown alone in the frame. Once again, the cinematic form of the cutscenes prefocuses the emotional content through some well-executed direction.

Although a game like this offers us a solid plotline with a clear dramatic progression and transformative character arcs for the protagonists, there is more to it than this. Our emotional connection is not sustained solely by the cinematic form, but also by the instrumental function or functional embodiment of the characters. In Chapter 8, to cite one of many examples, the battle against the Infected is exciting for its balance between the level of difficulty it poses and the skills in weapons use, stealth, marksmanship, etc., that we have learned in the previous hours of play along the way. Our engagement with Joel is not unrelated to these skills we have learned, which if applied effectively will help us to survive and to keep progressing in the adventure, but also to keep taking care of Ellie.

ALLEGIANCE AND EMOTIONAL AMBIVALENCE

Many video games, especially in the graphic adventure genre, have markedly linear narrative structures, and thus the interactive dimension affects how easily players advance through the narrative more than the structure of the narrative itself. This is what has been labelled progressive narration (Juul, 2005: 71-72), for which the two *The Last of Us* games provide good examples that can be analysed in the same way as screenplays, according to the schematic paradigm of a plotline divided into two turning points and three acts, as explored previously in relation to the first instalment by Àngel Colom & Lluís Anyó (2015). In this case, complexity, although inherited from traditional narrative, is found in the relationship between narration and gameplay.

In video games, players have a central role in the development of the plot, which conditions their experience in the fiction world, a learning process that ideally provides a balance between failure and success. The relationship between the player's extradiegetic actions and the character's intradiegetic actions can be classified as identification.

The foundations of psychoanalytic theory in film are found mainly Edgar Morin's work on affective participation (Morin, 2011), Jean-Louis Baudry's double identification (Baudry, 1978) and, most influential of all, Christian Metz's primary and secondary identification (Metz, 2001). In short, this understanding of identification in cinema involves considering it in relation to the very act of viewing, in a blurring between the viewing subject and the cinematic device that makes such viewing possible. This identification occurs through every aspect of film language, from framing to editing, and affords the spectator a ubiquitous viewing experience and safe enjoyment that is to a large extent voyeuristic and fetishistic. This primary identification results in a secondary identification, related to the diegetic content and, in particular, the characters who drive the story. It is important to note that this secondary level of identification related to content is always mediated and conditioned by primary identification, which is essentially related to the formal mechanisms that narrate the story.

In the field of Game Studies, engagement is considered an essential defining characteristic of the player, in terms of the player's active role in the development of the plot. In this sense, we can differentiate between engagement and immersion. The latter, which has been the subject of extensive theoretical analysis in literary, film, and new media studies, including pioneering work by Murray (1999: 111) and Ryan (2004: 117), refers to a diegetic dimension. However, in video games, the extradiegetic dimension of immersion, which McMahan calls "engagement" (2003: 69), is also of special importance.

Murray Smith, an author who could be assigned to the cognitivist school, reviews the concept of identification in film psychology in depth, and proposes the alternative concept of engagement, whose main characteristic is the spectator's rational and ideological distance from the text, rather than his or her unconscious submission. Engagement is divided into three levels (Smith, 1995: 81-86): recognition, of the characters by the spectator, based on the textual form; alignment, which marks the spectator's relationship with one or more characters; and finally, allegiance, which is the spectator's moral and affective agreement with the character.

Although engagement may seem conceptually very close to identification, the essential difference lies in the fact that from the cognitivist perspective, contrary to the psychological view, the move from alignment to allegiance—in other words, the move from primary to secondary identification—is a conscious, evaluative process.

Víctor Navarro, also taking a cognitivist perspective, explores the question of player motivation. He finds an answer in theorists like Stéphane Bura and Jesper Juul, who argue that the player plays to feel emotions, not to complete levels (Navarro, 2015: 68). Then, based on Aki Järvinen, Navarro proposes an emotional design model for video games based on emotions as positive or negative evaluations. Emotions are the result of the conscious recognition of an agent, an event, or an object, which provokes a reaction and sets up the action. According to Järvinen, the game creates a provocative or triggering situation that incites player action and establishes uncertainty as to whether the goal can be achieved. Navarro's model, although somewhat mechanistic, is interesting for the central role of responsibility for the narrative given to the player. However, this role is not exclusive, as the player's actions, which push the story forward, depend on textual triggers, i.e., formal strategies of video game language that can be analysed. Of less interest in our view is his list of emotions (Navarro, 2015: 74-75), very typical of universalist theories, although the author

Ellie and Joel

himself questions its viability and highlights its limitations.

As can be seen, Carroll's concept of emotive prefocusing is similar to that of the provoking or triggering condition, the first being passive and applicable to cinema and the second being active and applicable to video games. Both are conscious and are found in the audiovisual text. Antonio José Planells refers to a similar conscious process when he connects intention and motivation. An action in a video game, carried out by the player (i.e., the player character), such as shooting or hitting, will be associated with an immediate intention, such self-defence or killing an enemy, and a more general or distant motivation, such as obtaining a diegetic or extradiegetic reward (Planells, 2015: 135).

Complexity in video games therefore cannot be judged solely in terms of their narrative content, but should also consider their processes, the active learning that the player must undertake to direct the player character and, in so doing, direct the narration. This is the "full experiential flow", as Torben Grodal calls it, the experience of learning the procedures in a video game that differentiates it most from other narrative forms like cinema (Grodal, 2003: 148-149) and that culminates with the feeling of *fiero*, the term given to the pride we feel after a triumph (Andrews, Bradbury & Crawford, 2020). If we focus on the idea of engagement, it is clear that Joel and Ellie are the player characters who receive our moral and affective support from the outset. In the case of the first game, Joel and Ellie form a team and have the same ultimate goal: to find the Fireflies. Thus, in Chapter 9, after a violent confrontation in which Joel is seriously wounded, we shift to controlling Ellie at the Lakeside Resort without knowing whether the character of Joel is still alive; there is no disruption, only

COMPLEXITY IN VIDEO GAMES CANNOT BE JUDGED SOLELY IN TERMS OF THEIR NARRATIVE CONTENT, BUT SHOULD ALSO CONSIDER THEIR PROCESSES

a restrained emotion of uncertainty about Joel's condition, and perhaps an emotion of enjoyment thanks to a narrative ellipsis that will keep us on edge for a long time due to this change in focalization, from internal to spectatorial, through parallel editing. In this case, it could be argued that on the emotional level, the player characters are largely interchangeable, as they possess the same general motivation, and the procedures learned with one can serve us when we control the other. This narrative fragment, with cutscenes and gameplay, cuts back and forth between Ellie and Joel, both of whom are player characters with the same goal: to find each other again. While Ellie tries to flee from David, the leader of the cannibal group, Joel is searching for her. Our allegiance to both player characters is total, as their goals are practically the same in instrumental and dramatic terms. The cross-cutting scenes end with a cutscene where they finally meet, after Ellie has killed David with a rage that is wild but justified under the circumstances, and Joel embraces her and consoles her. The extradiegetic sound is gentle, calm music, while the diegetic sound stops and, on-screen in several close-ups, the two characters remain locked in their embrace. The emotional ambivalence, with the coexistence of two or more opposing emotions, comes later in this case, when in the final chapter, Joel (as the player character) saves Ellie from being killed in the operating room. After an ellipsis, Ellie asks Joel what happened. Joel lies, telling her that there are a lot of people like her who are immune to the virus, but that she wasn't of any use for the vaccine, while we see a flashback of the difficult decision he took to kill Marlene in order to save Ellie, while at the same time giving up the chance to obtain a vaccine. In the end, for a fleeting moment, Ellie is the player character, perhaps

because we need to be distanced from Joel, who has made a morally complex, even reprehensible decision. The player's allegiance may possibly be affected by this decision. As players, witnessing this moment as spectators, we cannot help but wonder what we would have done in his place, what decision we would have made.

In the case of the second game, emotional ambivalence, with the strategy of changing the player character, forms a central part of the narrative and the gameplay from the outset. Regardless of whether we have played the first game or not, our allegiance is directed at Ellie and Joel. In the first stages of the game we naturally control Ellie and (briefly) Joel. But soon the first moment of disengagement occurs. In Chapter 1, in Jackson, in the stage at the overlook, we control an unknown character with whom we have not developed any level of engagement. In this case, it is not a matter of player choice, as it is imposed by the game. There is no way to give up control of the character in question if we want to advance in the game. Later

we will discover that this unknown character is Abby and that while we were controlling her in the game, what we were really doing was taking her to Joel so that she could kill him. We will control this character again on numerous occasions, and with different emotional responses, always aware that she is Joel's killer and that Ellie wants revenge. While the first time we control her the most prominent emotion is uncertainty, a kind of external focalization where we don't know exactly what is going on, the second time the emotion that emerges is contradictory. After we see Abby kill Joel, several hours of gameplay pass in the stages in Seattle where we only control the character of Ellie, with whom we have reinforced our engagement after Joel's murder. As a result, the change of player character to Abby constitutes a blow to our renewed allegiance.

Our first contact with Abby as a player character after Joel's death may elicit feelings of rejection, but such rejection has to be absorbed and at least partially overcome in order to keep playing,

The fight between Abby and Tommy

as once again, we will not be able to advance in the game without Abby. And we are obliged to do so for hours. In this way, as we get to know the character better, our engagement with her increases. And although we may never come to accept Joel's murder, as we progress in Abby's story we will begin to develop empathy for the character. The moment that perhaps best exemplifies this occurs in Chapter 8 at the port in Seattle, when we are playing with Abby and, together with a companion, we are trying to hunt down a sniper who is shooting at us. During the gameplay, we try to dodge the bullets while the Infected appear in our way. This is a somewhat difficult stage where, due to the game dynamics, we quickly become eager to get rid of the sniper so that we can get past it. When at last we reach the sniper, he kills our companion and ambushes us. At this moment, we discover that the sniper is Tommy, Joel's brother and Ellie's friend, and thus part of a group that we were emotionally aligned with. After a body-to-body struggle, Tommy falls into the water and flees. From the player's perspective we identify his face, but the character of Abby does not recognize him because her back is turned. This spectatorial focalization results in ambivalence. We therefore experience different points of view, while feeling uncertainty because we don't know which player character we will continue the story with.

NARRATIVE AND VIDEO GAME COMPLEXITY

The narrative act, so transparent in classical cinema, holds a problematic status in post-classical cinema. Narrativity (De Felipe & Gómez, 2008: 204), multiplexity (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2009: 69) and the mind-game film (Elsaesser, 2013) all display a taste for narrative complexity that has become a clear feature of contemporary audiovisual production. The idea of breaking away from a simplistically dualist conception of good and evil, and the desire to give a voice to different groups in order to offer a more plural, complex, and ambiguous explanation, are very much a part of cinema today. We have also seen it in the changes of point of view, point of action, and player character focalization in *The Last of Us*, which leads us as players into a state of emotional ambivalence.

In this case, narrative complexity is founded on player engagement, which is the result of the relationship between the different active and passive emotions, associated with the narrative and with the gameplay. Our allegiance to the player character has two dimensions. It cannot be dissociated from the way in which sound and image, in both the cutscenes and the game, directs our attention and interest, in an emotive prefocusing that fosters engagement through gameplay emotions and the goals shared by player and character. At the same time, this allegiance, which is also constructed through film language and the story, is intertwined with our learning of the skills needed to progress in the game and in the story. ∎

NOTES

1   For a review of these debates, see: Le Breton (1999: 163-194); Surrallés i Calonge (2000: 175-177).
2   This idea is explored extensively by Carroll (1990).

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EMOTIONAL AMBIVALENCE IN *THE LAST OF US*. EMOTION IN VIDEO GAMES, BETWEEN NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY AND PLAYER LOYALTY

AMBIVALENCIA EMOCIONAL EN T*HE LAST OF US*. LAS EMOCIONES EN LOS VIDEOJUEGOS, ENTRE LA COMPLEJIDAD NARRATIVA Y LA LEALTAD DEL JUGADOR

Abstract

This article offers an exploration of complexity through a narratological analysis of video game emotions, considered in two dimensions: the first related to audiovisual language strategies; and the second associated with gameplay. The objects of study are the two instalments in the video game saga *The Last of Us*. Emotions may be pre-focused in the cinematic form, and they may also be the result of an evaluative process. But in addition to these cinematic emotions, we also consider gameplay emotions, which are based on the playable nature of video game narratives and player engagement, as players experience a wide range of emotions by virtue of their allegiance to the player character. This allegiance is prone to ambivalence and contradiction due to the game's narrative complexity and its content, the story, as demonstrated by the strategies used in *The Last of Us* associated with point of view and point of action.

Key words

Cinema; Video Games; Emotions; Engagement; Ambivalence; Player-avatar; Complexity; Narratology.

Resumen

Se propone aquí pensar la complejidad a través del análisis narratológico de las emociones videolúdicas, que tendrán una dimensión doble, la primera más relacionada con los recursos del lenguaje audiovisual y la segunda más vinculada al *gameplay*. Se analizarán en detalle los dos títulos de la saga *The Last of Us*. Las emociones podrán estar prefocalizadas en la forma fílmica y, también, podrán ser resultado de un proceso evaluativo. Pero además de esas emociones fílmicas, atenderemos a las emociones del *gameplay*, por el carácter jugable de la narrativa videolúdica, y al compromiso del jugador que, en forma de lealtad al personaje jugador, vinculará gran número de emociones. Esta lealtad no está exenta de ambivalencias y contradicciones, por la propia complejidad narrativa y su contenido, la historia, como se demuestra en *The Last of Us* y sus recursos vinculados a cambios en el punto de vista y el punto de acción.

Palabras clave

Cine; Videojuegos; Emociones; Compromiso; Ambivalencia; Personaje jugador; Complejidad; Narratología.

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BETWEEN SENSATION AND CONTAINMENT: THE MULTIDIMENSIONALITY OF LISTENING IN *INSIDE*

TERESA PIÑEIRO–OTERO

You start the game. A noise, similar to the sound of trees rocking in the wind, precedes the view of the space: a dark forest, with focal lighting and a minimalist design. Then, abruptly, a faceless boy enters, wearing a red sweater that sets him apart from the grey background. He runs. And without knowing why, or where to, you know you have to do it too, that you're in danger; you have to run, to hide, to survive.

This is the first impression players have of *Inside* (2016), the horror video game developed by the independent studio Playdead. The sequel to *Limbo* (Playdead, 2010), this game[1] is a side-scrolling puzzle platformer in 2D (although with scenarios in 2.5D) that depicts a dystopian world where a boy is running for his life, escaping the institutional control that has subjugated his society, stripping it of its humanity. To complete the game, the player will have no more information than that directly presented by the visuals and, especially, by the audio: often, the sounds of approaching dangers and the changes to the ambient noise constitute the only guides in the game. There are no dialogues or texts, or even any cutscenes—except for the brief depiction of each of the avatar's deaths—to provide context to the narrative or gameplay. According to Aghoro (2019), this absence of dialogue is consistent with the story of control and hostility that *Inside* tells, while also requiring players to use lateral thinking and pay greater attention to their environment.

As a complement to its environmental storytelling, the experience offered by *Inside* and its game mechanics also represent a communication process, as every right and wrong decision (the latter invariably leading to death) will provide the player with valuable information for completing the game, turning the individual-avatar into a kind of test subject. In this way, "failure and repetition present a dimension and a condition for the possibility of ludic tragedy" (Martín-Núñez, García-Catalán & Rodríguez-Serrano, 2016: 9).

For Jesper Juul (2013), the way a game designs the player's failures and the pathway to success constitutes a characteristic feature of that game and will inform the user experience from an affective perspective as well. In the case of *Inside*, the death of the avatar triggers a transition that breaks with the rhythm of the game in visual, auditory, and aesthetic terms, with the use of a

Inside

cutscene to return the player to the beginning of the challenge. This has an impact on the player's perception of the game, and on its rhythm and synchrony (Costello, 2019). The representation of the death itself is a fluid experience, marked by a "musical suture" that establishes continuity and places it on the same narrative and auditory level as life (Kamp, 2016).

Inside constitutes a representative example of an indie video game, a label that now transcends the production and distribution process to include aesthetic and narrative aspects that give it the status of a cultural category (Parker, 2013). Indie video games generally stand out for their authenticity and aesthetic value, and for offering experiences that go beyond mere entertainment (Pérez Latorre, 2016). The minimalist aesthetic of *Inside* offers a unique reflection on issues like loneliness, the fragility of the individual, alienation, and power. These are existential themes that are expressed through a powerful use of symbolism (Pérez Latorre, 2016; Parker, 2013), turning video game creation into a political and ideological act (Ruffino, 2013).

As Pérez Latorre (2016) suggests, indie video games exhibit a kind of cultural appropriation of experimentalism through the game design, turning their conceptual limitations into artistic potentialities. In contrast with the hyperrealism and complex mechanics of triple-A video games, indie games usually provide aesthetic experiences

in which attention to detail is key: in *Inside*, any auditory stimulus is crucial to the player's survival. As an example of *memento mori* design (Parker, 2013), Playdead's game fosters a reflection on life as it takes the player on a slow, winding journey which, unlike mainstream games, comes to an abrupt end. In this way, evading death or cracking the puzzle in *Inside* is not experienced as a success, but as just one more step for survival. The music accompanying some of these moments does not sound triumphant; instead, it is limited to alleviating the previous tension and even hints at a kind of hope which, rather than being fulfilled as expected, leads to an ending where the human blob (the "Huddle"[2]) rests peacefully, *liberated*, in a natural environment.

The particular features of the concept and design of *Inside* have caught the interest both of the gamer community and of professionals and academics. The game has been analysed from diverse perspectives ranging from visual aesthetics (Delbouille, 2017), iteration (You, 2019), agency in video games (Garcia, 2017), the concepts of parasitism and control (Bailey, 2018; Biondi, 2017), the

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WHILE THE ABSENCE OF SPEECH IS ONE OF THE IDENTIFYING FEATURES OF *INSIDE*, SOUND FORMS PART OF THE GAME'S VERY ESSENCE

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subject-avatar and its personalization in the form of a silent child (Reay, 2020), and identity loss (Navarro-Remesal, 2019).

While the absence of speech is one of the identifying features of *Inside*, underscoring the protagonist's vulnerability and solitude (Reay, 2020), sound forms part of the game's very essence. Martin Stig Andersen (2016a), sound designer and audio director for *Inside,* refers to it as a "game

that listens" in the sense that its gameplay is based on the audio: the first hints of a threat are always auditory hints, and the sound constitutes a key element for solving the puzzles. This conception of auditory design has given rise to studies like Arnold's (2018) on the function of the sound loop in gameplay, and Aghoro's (2019) on the use of sound effects in the creation of individual gaming experiences, both of which place the emphasis on listening as a key element for success in *Inside.*

Since the progression of the game is based on the sequential exploration of a story of which the avatar is the protagonist, the definition of the sound in relation to other components of the game, as well as its interaction with the players, also results in a narrative experience. With this in mind, the purpose of this article is to analyse sound placement, focalization, and listening in *Inside* as a key element in the gameplay and narrative experience of the game.

SOUND IN VIDEO GAMES: AN APPROACH

Video games are audiovisual products, and as such, their reception involves a process of "audio-viewing" (Chion, 1993) that adheres to the conventions for sound and music in audiovisual media. In her conceptualization of sound in video games, Collins (2008) draws on the ideas of key authors on sound in cinema, like Michel Chion and Claudia Gorbman, to underscore the similarities between the two media. The parallels between cinema and video games in the area of sound design are especially obvious in cutscenes; both the sound production in these non-interactive sequences and the kind of listening they trigger are similar to those of conventional audiovisual media (Bridgett, 2005).

However, the interactive nature of video games—specifically, their gameplay—is reflected in their non-linear and dynamic sound, and in their characteristic use of that sound. In addition to contributing to a video game's narrative structu-

re (Aarseth, 2001), sound design should provide feedback on the player's actions, instructions on player objectives, and guidance within the game world (Collins, 2008). Good sound design informs the player "to head in a particular direction or to run the other way" (Collins, 2007: 8), giving it an essential role in the user experience.

In a video game, sound forms part of the environment; it belongs to the game's structure, but it is also free, responding to the actions of the player—with "effect sound objects" connected in various ways to the avatar, props, characters, entities, and other events (Stockburger, 2003). This facilitates different narrative and gameplay options within the limits established by the design. For Aghoro (2019), the integration of (simultaneous) action sound and its interaction with the acoustic space leverages the transformative and generative potential of the video game that arises from the intersection between *paidia* (free play) and *ludus* (regulated play) (Jensen, 2013). Both types of sound—which, based on their function, Collins (2007) labels "interactive" and "adaptive"—contribute to the development of the fictional world during the game (Aghoro, 2019).

As an interactive story, the video game's narrative agency is shared between the player and the system, and mediated by the individual's interpretation of the system and the latter's response to the former's actions (Harrell & Zhu, 2009). The inclusion of more players adds a psychological dimension—the auditory experience and action that Arnold (2018) contextualizes in social terms—and brings some of the ideas of relational aesthetics into play.

The game's sound positions the player-subject in relation to others and to the environment. In contrast with the image, which is limited by and subject to the frame, sound reaches beyond the space of the game to connect the world on the screen with the world of the experience. The omnidirectionality of hearing effectively expands the game world through acousmatic sound (Chion,

Inside

1993). Advances in sound recording, editing and playback technologies have resulted in the emergence of a "sonic superfield" that allows the player to locate the sound and to anticipate events, as well as to make contact with parts of the game world that are hidden from view (Collins, 2007). As Oldemburg (2013) suggests, the reinforcement and repetition of sounds can even facilitate constant understanding and orientation in game or player environments where visual information is lacking.

This capacity of sound in video games, added to its dual status as a provider of useful information for gameplay and as a contributor to the construction of the fictional world, thereby enhancing player immersion, makes its identification with the concept of diegesis problematic (Jørgensen, 2007, 2010; Nacke & Grimshaw, 2011).

According to Collins (2008), the player participates in the process of sound production in the game while also being affected by sounds. This raises questions about the location of the source as a defining element.

For Shinkle (2005), playing a video game is a diegetic activity as there is a conscious interaction with the interface; but it is also an extra-diegetic activity, as it involves a physical response to the game environment and experience. Diegetic and non-diegetic sounds thus tend to be mixed together, creating additional levels of interpretation that transcend the traditional separation between diegetic and non-diegetic worlds (Jørgensen, 2010).

In contrast with the classical conception of diegetic sound as something located in the world of the story (Bordwell & Thompson, 1995), Grimshaw (2008) defines it as sound arising from some entity of the game while playing. Regardless of its location in relation to the narrative world, Jørgensen (2007, 2010) proposes the term "trans-diegetic", which fuses information from the system with the game world, as a way of reconciling the dichotomy between diegetic and non-diegetic sound in video games. The use of this term stresses the functional role of sound in relation to the player's actions in the game world, and highlights the relative nature of its origin (Jørgensen, 2010).

The necessary decoding of these auditory stimuli in order to progress in the game requires a shift from passive hearing to a kind of active listening that allows the player to recognize scene changes or to make decisions based on the sounds (Arnold, 2018). In this sense, sound in video games produces "meaning effects", which Bundgaard (2010) defines as cognitive responses to a textual stimulus.

In the specific case of *Inside*, the absence of cutscenes reflects a dynamic type of sound practically throughout the game, which results in its conception as a listening game and places the focus on player reception. If, as Andersen (2016a) suggests, the sound in *Inside* indicates to players when and how they should walk, the listening mode adopted will be essential to successful completion of the game, but also to player involvement and engagement.

As Tinwell, Grimshaw & Williams (2010) point out in their discussion of horror video games, the sound design in *Inside* awakens the imagination, facilitating recognition of dangers before they appear on screen; but it also awakens feelings of fear or unease and even elicits a sensation of alienation, through sounds that do not meet player expectations for the scene or others that seem indifferent or anempathetic to the hostile environment in which they occur. The sound of trees rocking in the wind or of falling rain is unaffected by and apparently unrelated to the tension experienced by the avatar, underscoring this feeling of alienation.

In this sense, the combination of interactive and adaptive audio elicits different modes of listening that interact and overlap in various ways, making the gaming experience richer and more complex.

THE COMPLEXITY OF LISTENING IN THE GAME

The subject-avatar in *Inside* is exposed to a soundscape which, in the game's dystopian world, can be associated with the concept of acoustic territory (LaBelle, 2010) due to the political connotations of its configuration. As the game progresses, the boy, who personifies the "perfect victim" (Reay, 2020; Sjöblom, 2015), has to traverse various increasingly strange and hostile environments (a forest, a farm, a factory, and a lab) differentiated by sounds, in which the dangers that threaten only seem to point to a bigger threat, with philosophical implications for the individual who completes the game (Johnson, 2017).

Listening affects the reception of the video game in terms of both the experience of the game and the player's ability to complete it successfully

IN VIDEO GAMES, THE SOUND DISCOURSE DIRECTLY ENGAGES THE PLAYER WITH THE EVENTS ON THE SCREEN AND CREATES A HAPTIC EXPERIENCE, WITH THE JOYSTICK, THAT FEEDS BACK INTO THE PROCESS

(Collins, 2013). The sounds provide an impression of the game as an audiovisual construct, but also facilitate recognition of boundaries and goals, and the actions required to respond to them. Certain internal scenarios in *Inside* are thus constructed around a characteristic sound—the buzz of a light bulb, the whir of machines, etc.—whose rhythm and evolution are essential to the gameplay.

Listening and playing constitute two interactive actions that feed back into each other. In video games, the sound discourse directly engages the player with the events on the screen and creates a haptic experience, with the joystick, that feeds back into the process.

In addition to its narrative and functional qualities, the temporal nature of sound makes it particularly useful as a structural element in video games. *Inside* offers examples of this kind of use of sound to lend continuity to the action, even after death, when everything else disappears, or to identify the spatial location of threats. Along the same lines, Aghoro (2019) and Arnold

Inside

(2018) highlight the importance of shock waves in certain spaces whose temporal pattern, and the player's recognition of it, turns them into sound icons, or "earcons" (Friberg & Gärdenfors, 2004), that are essential for controlling the avatar-character. These "earcons" require a range of different modes of listening.

While Collins (2008, 2013) stresses a difference between "listening" and "interacting" with sound, every interaction involves active listening, as well as a relationship with the player's cognitive and physical activity, and with the game and its environment. The integration of the haptic perspective allows for the establishment of additional multimodal relations between viewing, listening, and touch. In this sense, Jørgensen (2007) refers to listening as a precise and complex cognitive activity that vests situations and events during the game with meaning, making it essential to narrative and gameplay.

The idea of listening as a complex practice that involves and affects the reception process has been a key concept in the emergence of sound studies. In his *Traité des objets musicaux* (1966), Pierre Schaeffer highlighted the value of listening for conceptualizing and structuring our relationship with the world, and identified four modes—listening (écouter), perceiving (*ouïr*), hearing (*entendre*), and understanding (*comprendre*)—based on the attention and cognitive intention of the recipient of the sonic stimulus. Listening, as an involuntary act, represents the most basic mode of auditory processing, while understanding, as a form of active-reactive listening, is the most complex. Schaeffer also differentiated natural listening from cultural listening, which entails the existence of culturally acquired codes and—as Rodríguez-Bravo (1998) suggests—levels of auditory specialization.
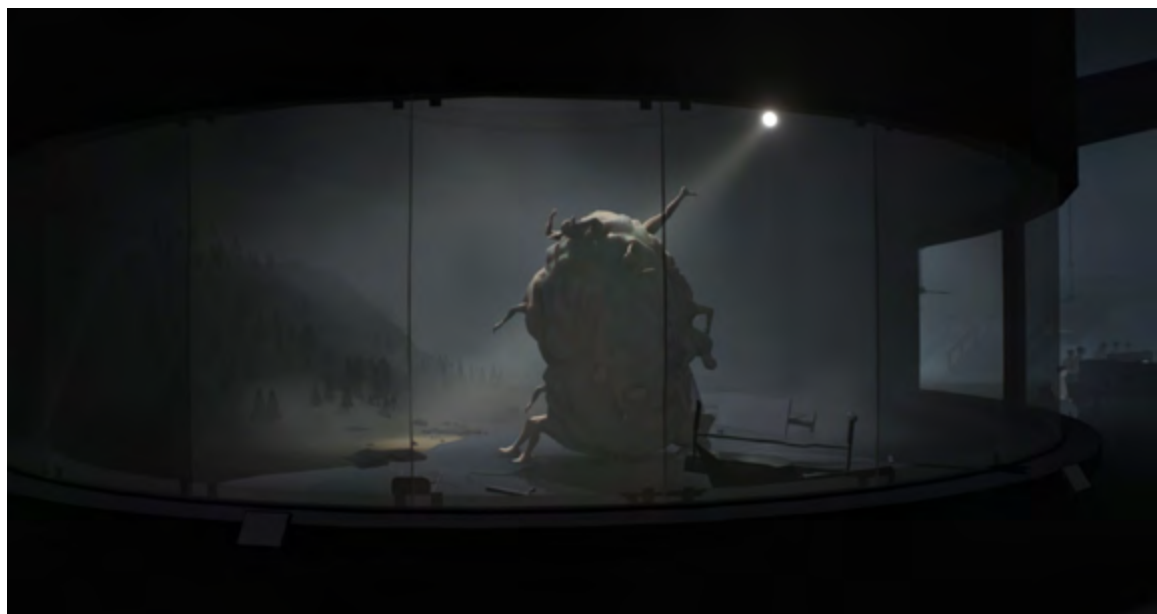
This multidimensional conception of listening would shape research on sound in audiovisual media through the work of Michel Chion (1993). Chion's proposition of three listening modes—causal (related to the sound-source), semantic (involving the use of sound codes), and reduced (focusing on the traits of the sound itself)—has informed studies by Collins (2008, 2013), Grimshaw & Garner (2015), and Arnold (2018), among others. More recently, Tuuri & Eerola (2012) considered various taxonomies to develop a classification of

listening modes as pre-attentive (reflexive and connotative), source-oriented (causal and empathetic), context-oriented (functional, semantic, or critical), and quality-oriented (reduced listening). Of interest from a musical perspective is the conception of listening proposed by Delalande (1989, 1998), whose typology involves different modes of cognition: taxonomic (related to comprehension based on structure), figurative (projection of mental images), and empathetic (associated with experiencing emotions and sensations).

As these modes of listening may overlap or complement one another, they constitute a useful tool in the area of sound design (Chion, 1993; Sonnenschein, 2001). As Tuuri & Eerola (2012) point out, while such taxonomies help differentiate between intentions and experiences perceived more than sounds themselves, some auditory stimuli display a greater potential for triggering certain listening modes. For example, reverberation in *Inside* encourages spatial listening, focusing on the cause and location of the sound, while the dissonant music or the heartbeat that accompanies the puzzle of the factory trigger empathetic listening.

This interaction between sound and listening mode is why Tuuri & Eerola (2012) stress the connection between perception and action, as cognition is intimately linked to the game environment and to embodied experiences of interaction with it, both natural and sociocultural. In his conception of auditory emotion, David Huron (2002) thus adopts a biocultural perspective that relates both to the emotions and to the creation of meanings through different triggering systems, ranging from the reflexive system, which elicits spontaneous physiological responses, to the critical system.

The sound design in *Inside* triggers a range of listening modes. As an audiovisual product that displays only part of the setting of the action, the game requires players to make use of causal listening. Recognition of sound sources is essential to gameplay, both to discover and locate the

dangers threatening the boy-avatar and to make decisions accordingly. This kind of causal listening, or listening for causal action (Payri, 2010), becomes essential in *Inside*, for the identification of information on the source and on the effect it produces—the barking of approaching hounds, the splashing of the *water girl* who chases him (signalling the start, speed, or direction of the pursuit), or the appearance of the scene through the avatar's interaction, the movement of props and their reverberations. In this video game, the sound generally precedes the image. A player who waits for the physical appearance of the source of the sound before reacting will probably succumb to the danger, and die as a result (Aghoro, 2019). To avoid this, the player needs to develop an agile type of listening, close to figurative listening (Delalande, 1998), that projects an image of the source based on an auditory stimulus.

THE ABSENCE OF ANY TEXT TO SERVE AS A GUIDE IN *INSIDE* AND THE ROLE OF SOUND IN THE GAMEPLAY NECESSITATES AN "AUDITORY SPECIALIZATION" ON THE PART OF THE PLAYER

The absence of any guide in *Inside* and the role of sound in the gameplay necessitates an *auditory specialization* on the part of the player. The information obtained during the game from the context and from previous errors, combined with the player's experience, functions as a *training* process for interpreting auditory stimuli, even arbitrary sounds like the music and its interaction with the game-story. This auditory specialization can be equated with a semantic listening mode, which is necessary for the adoption of game strategies based, for example, on the presence and rhythm of ambient noise.

But *Inside* also triggers reduced listening. The music, and the sound design of the game in gene-

ral, presents a palette of dark tones, rich in frequencies and dissonances, with an auditory impression that contributes to the creation of this dystopian world, and enhances the impact of the visual experience. Although this added value is essential for any horror ludonarrative (Tinwell, Grimshaw & Williams, 2010), the particular soundscape (recording and processing) created by Andersen (2016b), with its vibrations and resonances, elicits a series of perceptions and sensations that reinforce the vulnerability and solitude of the boy-avatar, and the player's identification with him. Reduced listening is essential to gameplay—tone, timbre, and intensity contribute to the identification of certain sound objects as threats—but also to the game experience, giving rise to a kind of empathetic listening (Delalande, 1998).

The heightened intensity and reverberation of the sounds of moving or falling objects used by the character to get past obstacles accentuates the fear of being discovered and captured. Similarly, the silence effect when the player is submerged after escaping dangers (with equivalent sound projection) creates a feeling of respite.

Irrespective of the implementation, overlapping or complementing of different listening modes, any sound in a video game appeals to the critical system (Huron, 2002), as it enables users, more or less consciously, to confirm the perception and attune their response to it.

A SPLIT BETWEEN VISUAL AND AUDIO

In his book *Story and Discourse* (1990), Seymour Chatman proposes three types of point of view, which shape the relationship between characters, audience, and narration: perceptual, conceptual, and interest point of view. In this classification, the perceptual-conceptual relationship is particularly interesting: the position from which we see—which we are culturally conditioned to view as natural—and our perspective (thoughts, beliefs, feelings, etc.) on what we see.

Genette (1983) introduced the idea of focalization to distinguish between *who* is speaking and *where* the focus of perception is located. In his conceptual framework, he posits three types of focalization or "field restriction": absence of focalization or zero focalization; internal focalization, with access to the character's inner world; and external focalization, where such access does not exist.

In video games, the most common type of focalization is external (Arjoranta, 2017). Despite the apparent relationship between the mode of viewing (or perceptual point of view) and focalization, especially in first-person games due to the identification with the avatar, there is a divergence between the sensory-behavioural perspective and access to the character's subjectivity. As Navarro-Remesal (2019) points out, control of a character does not necessarily entail access to that character's subjective perspective.

The description of *Inside* implicitly involves a particular mode of viewing. As a side-scrolling puzzle platformer, it presents a third-person point of view that follows the avatar's actions from a lateral camera angle. The game's sound design, however, does not conform to this distant visual perspective; instead, it stretches the conventions of the genre to offer the player a more immersive experience.

In *Inside*, Andersen (2016b) sought to recreate sounds as if they were being heard inside the avatar's head. To create this effect, he experimented with a human skull to enrich the soundtrack with the echoes and reverberations that generally affect human listening, achieving a vibrating sonic effect that is at once disturbing and familiar (Andersen, 2016b).

From a perceptual point of view, it could be inferred that *Inside* has external focalization. This assumption is supported by the absence of texts, dialogues, or cutscenes to allow the character to express himself (Arjoranta, 2017; Vella, 2015). Nevertheless, its sound design aims to have the

player identify with the avatar despite the distance imposed by the mode of viewing. A split thus occurs between visual and audio perspectives, with direct implications for focalization that make it necessary to reassess the aforementioned assumption.

Drawing on Genette's perception/focalization dichotomy, Jost (2002) proposes three different concepts for audiovisual narratology: ocularization (the relationship between what the camera shows and what the character sees), auricularization (the relationship between what the microphone captures and what the character hears), and focalization (the narrator's and character's level of knowledge) This taxonomy facilitates an analysis of the divergence between the visual and audio perspectives in *Inside*, both perceptually and conceptually. While the video game experience, as a ludonarrative, is multimodal, the contrast between ocularization and auricularization gives rise to a unique experience from both the sensory and emotional perspectives.

According to Cuadrado Méndez (2013), in auricularization processes, sound components elicit reactions from viewers which, based on their exposure to the audiovisual narrative and their experience, contribute to the establishment of their own auditory location. In the case of *Inside*, exposure—especially to visual information—and experience—auditory and audiovisual—are placed in opposition to each other, giving rise to a highly unique experience. Aspects like the camera angle, the minimalist design, or the colour do not hinder the player's immersion in the game world and identification with the avatar afforded by the sound.

WHILE THE VIDEO GAME EXPERIENCE, AS A LUDONARRATIVE, IS MULTIMODAL, THE CONTRAST BETWEEN OCULARIZATION AND AURICULARIZATION IN *INSIDE* GIVES RISE TO A UNIQUE EXPERIENCE FROM BOTH THE SENSORY AND EMOTIONAL PERSPECTIVES

The processing of sounds, the recording and treatment of the different effects and compositions, in order to simulate the experience of listening inside one's own head with all the attendant echoes and reverberations, reflects a subjective auricularization. The player seems to be hearing exactly what the boy hears, filtered by his own ears—Chion's internal-objective sound (1993). This is evident, for example, in the accompanying heartbeat that adds tension to the character's camouflage when he merges with the line of people in the factory. It could even be suggested that there is an internal auricularization of the music (Cuevas, 2001), given that its processing and its reactive nature facilitate its identification with the character's mental activity—Chion's internal-objective sound (1993). But suddenly, death comes: one of the various deaths to which the avatar succumbs during the game, and yet the sound continues.

This continuity places the character back in the same place, but this time a review of the listening perspective is necessary. The treatment of the audio places the player inside the game world, in a marked auricularization, although external to the character, given that the sound continues after the character's death. This positioning will be made clear when the boy-avatar disappears into the "Huddle".

The auricularization adapts to the gameplay and enhances it. In a listening video game, where the first information on a change of scene and of approaching dangers is always auditory, and where sound plays a crucial role in the development of the puzzles and the avatar's survival, Andersen's unique treatment of sound fosters an immersive sensation close to the idea of transportation

posited by Suruchi Sood (2002). Sood's notion of "transportation", refers to an imaginative experience with a high level of engagement that leads the audience to feel the characters' sensations as if they were inside the story themselves. The capacity for auditory stimuli to elicit mental images can favour this kind of transportation, while at the same time facilitating the player's identification with and proximity to the avatar, especially in terms of attention (to the different sounds, spatial relations, and movement) and emotion (Green, Garst & Brock, 2004).

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

Sound constitutes a fundamental component of the game *Inside*, and an integral part of its experience. The auditory contact it provides "paves the way for the upcoming acoustic definition of the social and environmental structures governing the game world and the aural involvement in non-player character interactions as well as player relations" (Aghoro, 2019: 260).

Despite the striking nature of its visual production, the game mechanics highlight and expand the importance of sound in the experience of playing *Inside*. Every player movement and action elicits an auditory response that contributes to the creation of the player's experience of the game world. While death constitutes a key feature of the video game, its sonic accompaniment, like a musical suture, forms an inherent part of that experience on a more or less conscious level.

This conception of sound, which has led to *Inside* being described as a "listening" game, requires the active participation of the player to decode it. The experience offered by *Inside* as a ludonarrative involves a multidimensional reception process in terms of the mode, the focus of attention—from the source to the intrinsic characteristics of the sound or its effects—and the cognitive process, allowing for a range of interpretations and meanings, although the critical system (Huron, 2002)

is needed to successfully complete the game as an ultimate aim (of gameplay).

From a narrative perspective, the sound design of *Inside* plays with the focalization of sound to offer an immersive experience. Although in this game the mode of viewing and the concept art seem to shun any attempt at visual realism, it is the sound design that contributes to the "granularity" of the video game, or the level of detail in the description of the game environment and the richness of the elements that comprise it (Bundgaard, 2010). If, as Arjoranta (2017) observes, there is a basic phenomenological level on which individuals are conscious of their environment, paying special attention to any stimulus, sound effects like the crunching leaves accompanying the steps of the boy-avatar, the snorting of the pig that he confronts, the sound of the rain or the barking of the dogs that hunt him down not only produce meaning effects, but also contribute greater granularity to the game, vesting the depiction of the environment with realism and the minimalism of the image with *added value*. As Oldemburg (2013: para. 20) suggests, "with audio, the player is relying on a time-based medium to convey what the eyes take in within a fraction of a second." ∎

NOTES

1   Despite their different implications (see, for example, Arjoranta, 2017), "game" and "video game" will be used in this article as analogous terms.

2   The "Huddle" is a large blob of human flesh, limbs and organs that the boy-avatar merges with towards the end of the game, which from that point on is controlled by the player.

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BETWEEN SENSATION AND CONTAINMENT. THE MULTIDIMENSIONALITY OF LISTENING IN *INSIDE* (PLAYDEAD, 2016)

ENTRE LA SENSACIÓN Y LA CONTENCIÓN. LA MULTIDIMENSIONALIDAD DE LA ESCUCHA EN *INSIDE* (PLAYDEAD, 2016)

Abstract

Sound is a critical element in the conception of video games as ludonarratives and in the gaming experience. Despite sharing features and functions of other audiovisual narratives, the non-linear and dynamic nature of the audio in video games gives it a key role in the gameplay that will require active reception on the part of the player because, as Collins points out, listening is not the same as interacting with sound. In this context, the purpose of this article is to conceptualize listening in video games as a complex, multidimensional act. Through an analysis of the sound design of *Inside* (Playdead, 2016) and its interaction with the other components of the game, I explore the nature of listening and its location from a functional and narrative perspective.

Key words

Listening; Sound Design; Auricularization; Video Games; Gameplay; Storytelling; *Inside.*

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Resumen

El sonido constituye un elemento esencial en la concepción de los videojuegos como ludonarrativas y en su experiencia. Pese a compartir rasgos y funciones de otros relatos audiovisuales, el carácter no-lineal y dinámico del audio en los videojuegos le otorga un papel fundamental en el *gameplay* que va a hacer precisa una recepción activa para su desarrollo y superación porque, como subraya Collins, no es lo mismo escuchar que interactuar con el sonido. En este sentido, el presente texto tiene por objeto efectuar una conceptualización de la escucha en los videojuegos como un acto complejo y multidimensional. Tomando como referencia el diseño sonoro de *Inside* (Playdead, 2016), y su interacción con los restantes componentes del juego, se aborda una aproximación a la escucha y a su emplazamiento desde una perspectiva funcional y narrativa.

Palabras clave

Escucha; Diseño sonoro; Auricularización; Videojuegos; Jugabilidad; Narrativa; *Inside.*

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THE PROMISED LAND IN CONTEMPORARY VIDEO GAMES: A MYTH ANALYSIS OF *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* AND *DEATH STRANDING**

ANTONIO JOSÉ PLANELLS DE LA MAZA

INTRODUCTION: MYTH, MYTHEMES AND MYTH ANALYSIS

The continuity of cultural traditions over the centuries has relied on storytelling—either oral or written—as one of their main vehicles for survival and consolidation. Motifs, symbols, and structures are often repeated in the stories of the different civilizations over the course of history, giving rise to a tendency towards cultural sedimentation around explanations of the origins of the world, the meaning of human existence, and eschatological speculations. This historical repetition that reaches us like an echo from the past is what we call "myth".

Myth has been a focus of interest in the 20th and 21st centuries, after a period of some neglect, thanks to research on the question from the perspectives of psychology (Freud, 2013; Jung, 2009; Rank, 1991), comparative religion (Campbell, 2014, 2015; Eliade, 1999, 2000), and (of special interest for this article) structuralism (Lévi-Strauss, 2009; Barthes, 2012).

The structuralist approaches to mythology taken by Lévi-Strauss and Barthes, albeit with notable differences between them, view myth as a system of relationships, an articulated network of different elements that combine to form a structure of meaning. However, such strictly formal approaches to myth soon gave way to what was known as figurative structuralism, and subsequently called myth criticism (Gutiérrez, 2012: 181).

Myth criticism has its origins in the work of Gilbert Durand, and specifically, his book *Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire* (1982). Drawing on the concept of material imagination posited by his mentor, Gaston Bachelard (1960), Durand (1993: 36) suggests that "myth is configured as a narrative (mythical discourse) that introduces characters, situations, and valued objects, that can be segmented into smaller sequences or

semantic units (mythemes)." Myth is thus viewed as the "matrix model for all storytelling, structured according to basic schemes and archetypes" (Durand, 2012: 106) and it can be analysed in myth criticism through its mythemes.

According to José Manuel Losada (2015: 35), two or three mythemes are needed in a specific configuration for a myth to be said to exist, and this raises another common problem in myth analysis: the confusion between mytheme and theme. The repetition of a theme does not automatically make it a mytheme; this only happens when "a relevant theme takes part in the basic configuration of a unique myth" (Losada, 2015: 35).

WHILE MYTH CRITICISM IS LIMITED TO THE STUDY OF A TEXT FROM A MYTHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE, MYTH ANALYSIS AIMS TO GO FURTHER

Having thus defined myth criticism as an analytical process focusing on mythemes, there is one final step to acknowledge that is central to this study: the step from myth criticism to myth analysis. While myth criticism is limited to the study of a text from a mythological perspective, myth analysis aims to go further. In the traditional text-context relationship, myth analysis broadens the field of action of the myth-critical approach to take an interest in "identifying the patent or latent myths that run through, 'work on', or underpin a given cultural moment" (Gutiérrez, 2012: 183). In this way, while myth criticism is limited to the textual analysis of a product (which may be literary, audiovisual, or interactive), myth analysis looks for the (explicit and/or latent) connections between the myths and the era to which that product belongs, in order to offer a sociological and cultural interpretation that goes beyond the object of study itself.

Apart from the analysis of video games with literally mythological subject matter (Cassar, 2013), there are as yet very few studies focusing specifically on the mythical nature of video games (Todor, 2010; Guyker, 2016; Galanina & Salin, 2017; Galanina & Baturin, 2019). Of the few studies that exist, it is the work of Manuel Garín (2009) that offers the most in-depth exploration of the specific features of the medium from a myth-critical perspective. Garín takes up Durand's variables of rite, story, and icon, redefining the first of these in connection with gameplay as "ritual action" (Garín, 2009: 99). In this sense, "the video game deconstructs and disseminates the idea of myth, beginning with its primordial powers—*rite*, execution—to constitute it as a narration—*story*, text—in sounds and images—*icon*, audiovisual" (Garín, 2009: 99). The origin of the idea of gameplay ritual is linked to the notion of sacred, repeated, and participatory action that Johan Huizinga labelled *dromenon*, but also to other essentially performative elements, such as Durand's notion of language as bodily expression or the idea of open and lived ritual fiction suggested by Eliade (Garín, 2009: 99-101).

While Garín's proposition is essentially introductory and myth-critical, the primacy attributed to performative action in video games by action theories (Galloway, 2006; Planells de la Maza, 2015a) is not enough to make the leap to the level of myth analysis. That leap requires the addition not only of a logic of interaction determined by the player's role and the "directed freedom" (Navarro Remesal, 2016) established by the system, but also of the configuration of the game's fictional world (Planells de la Maza, 2018) as a network of mythemes, and the identification of explicit or latent myths, with attention to the socio-historical circumstances of the moment.

This article offers an approach to the myth of the Promised Land and its connection with contemporary video games from the perspective of myth analysis. Like the origin myth, the Promised

Land myth provides a society with both an ethical framework for action and a moral legitimation of its structures and institutions. In this sense, it is a construct that is essential for understanding the various ideological discourses and hegemonies in the community that has created the mythical narrative. It is thus particularly interesting and pertinent to analyse how the video game medium, one of the most popular media in the world today, channels this cultural and ideological heritage in its own way (Planells de la Maza, 2015b), and which elements of the contemporary foundational myths it replicates. To this end, I will begin by analysing the mythemes present in two canonical versions of the myth (the stories of Moses and Aeneas), and then consider how two contemporary video games, *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2007) and *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions, 2019), make use of the classical mythemes, along with the specific mutations arising from the social and political context of their creation.

FOUNDATIONAL MYTHS: COMMON MYTHEMES

While in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and in Mesopotamian mythology in general, man is created out of clay moulded by a female divinity, in the Biblical tradition man is created by a male God in his image and likeness. In the first case, human beings are irrevocably imperfect, while in the second they are based on a model of perfection but fall from their perfect state into sin. According to David F. Noble (2005), this idea is what determines the difference between the finalistic acceptance of death as the natural end of life and the search for redemption and the restoration of perfection. Thus, "if the central message of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is 'go home', the central message of the Abraham saga is 'go forth'" (Noble, 2005: 23), just as God tells Abraham himself in Genesis 12:1: "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you."

The divine promise of a new land is associated with a set of elements that are essential to understand the mythical narratives that contain it. On the one hand, it is a supernatural, divine order, given not to all humanity but to a single lineage or leader, and it therefore involves an obvious exclusion, separating the "chosen people" from all those who are not worthy of the promise. On the other hand, it is a redemptive, purifying act that transcends the human narrative by virtue of its connection to inevitable eschatological processes that are beyond human control (Noble, 2005: 18-52).

The leader and the chosen people are the common features of the two foundational myths chosen for this study: the Hebrew Exodus led by Moses, and the search for a new land by Aeneas and the survivors of Troy. While the Biblical tale of Moses establishes the religious and moral origins of the people of Israel (Amado Lévy-Valensi, 1992), it would be Virgil, in the 1st century B.C., who would take on the task of establishing a national mythical narrative, commissioned by Caesar Augustus, to give political and social legitimacy to the emperor's new order. Leaving aside the myth of Romulus and Remus, which might have too readily reminded Romans of "the recent fratricidal war in which Augustus had finished off his brother-in-law and comrade Mark Anthony in a bloody fray" (García Gual, 2017: 169), the *Aeneid* turns its attention to a pre-existing mythical hero linked by ancestry to the new emperor. It is in the parallels and similarities between the two tales that we can find some of the common, central elements of the Promised Land myth. To do this, a good starting point is the study by Joaquín Mellado Rodríguez (2006), which compares Sargon, Moses, Romulus and Remus, and Habis, and establishes the following mythical structure:

A tyrant holds power or there is a situation of injustice or tragedy.

An extreme situation in which the hero is saved. This mytheme is generally expressed in the figure of a child or defenceless infant who,

by divine intervention, is saved from certain death, ironically being rescued by the enemy. Common features are wicker baskets made of reeds or papyrus and an important role for water, with the potential for the child to drown before being saved.

The hero becomes aware of his saviour role. Usually, it is a divine being that informs him of his holy mission (which is closely linked to his earlier salvation), and that gives him moral support and, sometimes, magical tools or special powers.

The people recognize the hero and he assumes his new position. This mytheme is generally associated with rebellion against the established power or open psychological and physical opposition. It also involves the assumption of the hegemonic role in the society of the time or the search for a new land where a separate settlement can be established.

The hero becomes a great lawmaker. The divinity gives the people laws and a moral framework that outlines both their internal organization and their external action.

Table 1. Mythological structure in Moses and Aeneas (based on Mellado Rodríguez, 2006)

Element	Moses	Aeneas
Tyranny or tragic situation	Pharaoh of Egypt	The fall of Troy
Extreme situation in which the hero is saved	The basket on the Nile	Intervention of Venus
Awareness of saviour role	The burning bush	The message from Creusa Anchises and the Underworld
Recognition and action	Rebellion and Exodus Journey across the desert	Search for the new land Wars with Turnus
The great lawmaker	Delegated, through the Ten Commandments	Direct, as leader of the exiles

In the stories of Moses and of Aeneas, this structure can be applied to the specific elements of each tale as we can see in table 1.

THE MYTH TODAY: FROM DIVINE PROMISE TO THE RELIGION OF TECHNOLOGY

José Manuel Losada suggests that the survival of any myth depends less on the challenges faced by individuals than on the evolution of each civilization, thereby placing myth within the sphere of cultural production. This necessarily entails a crisis for a myth when the inseparable connection between its mythemes and their combinations, the foundational element that identifies and differentiates a myth, is called into question (Losada, 2015: 42-43). In this sense, for Losada, there are different types of crises depending on the changes that the mythemes may undergo, ranging from the myth that is easily recognizable but with a slight distortion resulting from a change to one of its invariants, to the myth subverted by an inversion of elements that alters it in appearance only, and finally to a complete alteration, with numerous possible consequences such as making it difficult to identify, demystifying it, or erasing it altogether (Losada, 2015: 43-44).

The Promised Land myth, exemplified in the previous section by the mythemes of the Moses and Aeneas narratives, is no stranger to contemporary updates. One of its central elements is of course the divine origin of the promise, an element seems largely unsustainable in a modern rendering of the stories, given that contemporary positivism and rationalism would seem to question it openly. However, some studies have in fact shown that "modern technology and religion have evolved together and that, as a result, the technological enterprise has been and remains suffused with religious belief" (Noble, 1997: 5). According to Noble, it was in the 9th century that technology would begin to be perceived as an opportunity to overcome human weaknesses and, in turn,

to find salvation. Subsequently, technology as an expression of the divine in humankind and as a force for its self-betterment would be expressed in the Millenarianism of the 12th century, a trend that influences our society even today, which at that time predicted the imminent end of time and the coming of divine salvation. According to Noble, this quest for knowledge before the arrival of the glorious end-time can be seen in the writings of Francis Bacon and other founders of modern science, but also in the splitting of the atom and the development of the atomic bomb, where "the apocalyptic outlook of the weapons designers is, in essence, no different from that of the evangelist: the expectation of inevitable doom. And here too anticipation of annihilation is 'blended' with a belief in salvation" (Noble, 1997: 113). This religious-technological transcendence touches other fields, such as the moon mission, a literal departure from Earth in a quest for another promise, which President Nixon described as "the greatest week since the beginning of the world, the Creation" (Noble, 1997: 140), or the development of artificial intelligence and transhumanist visions, the latest great promise to move on from our imperfect bodies to an immortal digital system (Noble, 1997: 162).

The divine techno-religious promise took on a new dimension with digital culture. Following the elation brought by the advent of the telegraph, electricity, the telephone, radio and television (Mosco, 2004: 117-140), next it was the turn of digital technologies, especially the internet. Drawing on the ideas of Edmund Burke (1998), Vincent Mosco coined the term "technological sublime" to define the jubilant feeling inspired by a technological phenomenon that eradicates any rational perspective (Mosco, 2004: 23-24), an idea fully compatible with the expansionist policy referred to as the "silicolonization of the world" (Sadin, 2018). If technology can put us in a trance, the production model associated with technological sublimation should be Silicon Valley, the land of

successful start-ups, sunshine, and young visionaries. In this way,

> Entrepreneurs and especially engineers embody the force capable of contributing to the improvement of general living conditions and, more broadly, from a teleological perspective, working decisively for the "salvation of humanity". It is a crossover between theology and industry that has given rise to "technological messianism" (Sadin, 2018: 100).

BIOSHOCK INFINITE: MOSES AND AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Bioshock Infinite was produced by Irrational Games and distributed by 2K Games in 2013. It is one of the most widely studied titles in the field of Game Studies, from the perspectives of both neoliberal ideology (Pérez & Oliva, 2019) and religion (Wysocki, 2018). It is a first-person shooter game, characterized by a clash between the main game mechanics (combat) and the narrative focus (the character of Booker) (Pérez & Oliva, 2019: 3). The myth is thus located *in absentia*, i.e., as a background whereby the player can only perceive it in detail by paying attention to different objects distributed around the scene, such as signs, conversations, and audio recordings.

The game's mythical narrative begins in 1890 with the tragedy of Wounded Knee, where US soldiers massacred hundreds of Native Americans of the Lakota tribe. One of the soldiers, Booker DeWitt, has been emotionally traumatized by the brutality of his own acts, driving him to alcoholism and gambling. Overcome with remorse, DeWitt goes to be baptized in the hope of being absolved of his sins, but at the last minute he rejects the idea. In 1891, DeWitt gets married and has a daughter, Anna DeWitt, but his wife dies in labour, driving him back to his alcohol and gambling addictions. After being kicked out of Pinkerton's National Detective Agency because of his brutal methods, Booker goes into business

himself as a private investigator, but his gambling debts catch up with him. It is just at this moment that he decides to sell his daughter to a mysterious figure representing a man named Comstock, who offers to wipe out all his debts in exchange for the girl. Booker initially accepts, but then repents of his decision and chases the agent to a strange inter-dimensional portal, where he struggles unsuccessfully to take back his daughter. Desperate, Booker brands his daughter's initials on his hand and succumbs again to alcoholism. The game begins when the mysterious agent who had come to him to buy Anna hires Booker to break into Columbia, a city in the clouds, and rescue a girl named Elizabeth.

During the game, the player controlling Booker will discover that the moment when he rejected his baptism is a key to understanding the current situation. While in his world Booker rejected the act of atonement, in another possible world he accepted it and came out of the water not as the old Booker but as a new man, who took the name of Father Zachary Hale Comstock. This new, profoundly religious Booker claims that after his baptism he had a vision in which an archangel showed him the Promised Land in the form of a floating city. Nicknamed "The Prophet", Comstock created the cloud city of Columbia with support from the US government as part of the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, using technology that was extremely advanced for its time. The city was designed to travel around the world in order to showcase the wonders of American exceptionalism. However, Columbia's unauthorized military intervention in the Boxer Rebellion led to a break with the US government. As an independent city, Columbia was now controlled by Comstock and his religious and moral vision, resulting in a constant battle between two factions: Comstock's Founders, and the anarchist group Vox Populi.

At this point, *Bioshock Infinite* becomes a game of mirrors and counterfactual confusions. Booker's daughter Anna is adopted by Comstock, who gives her the name of Elizabeth. While Columbia's civil war rages, Booker will save Elizabeth and ultimately recognize that she is Anna. He will also realize that there is only one way to get rid of Comstock: by returning to the moment of his baptism and sacrificing himself to close the rift between worlds.

In *Bioshock* it is not Booker but Comstock who appears as a new Moses, and the foundational myth is constructed on the basis of his extremist vision.

The first mytheme is the tragic situation. The Battle of Wounded Knee represents a moral turning point for the hero, but it is also one of the most shameful moments in US history (Venegas, 2017: 198). The massacre would lead to the hero's fall and would set up the future consequences that unfold in the game.

THE TRAUMA OF THE MASSACRE LEADS THE CHARACTER TO BAPTISM AND ITS USE OF WATER AS A PURIFYING AND REGENERATIVE FORCE: BOOKER DIES AND IS REBORN AS COMSTOCK

Based on this tragic background, the second mytheme places the protagonist in the position of salvation. The trauma of the massacre leads the character to baptism and its use of water as a purifying and regenerative force: Booker dies and is reborn as Comstock. It is a process of transformation for one who seeks an answer in the comfort found in faith, a ritual that will establish a cyclical logic; at the end of the game, the transformative water and redemptive baptism will turn into drowning and conscious sacrifice.

The hero's salvation must be followed by the supernatural event that justifies his new mission

Baptism as rebirth

The wrath of God: Columbia attacks New York

and new role. In this case, Comstock, as he himself explains, is visited by an archangel. When he receives the promise, Comstock (like Moses) doubts his own abilities:

> And then, the archangel showed a vision: a city, lighter than air. I asked her: "Why do you show this to me, archangel? I am not a strong man. I am not a righteous man. I am not a holy man." And she told me the most remarkable thing: "You're right, Prophet. But if grace is within the grasp of one such as you, how can anyone else not see it in themselves?

Comstock's conviction about his new role links into the fourth mytheme: community recognition and causal action. In this case, Columbia constitutes the creation of a new society fuelled by sublime technology, a technological New Eden that quickly outdoes the United States with its tall buildings suspended in the air, its patriotic optimism, its advanced weaponry, and its *trans-humanist* biotechnology in the form of the energy drinks known as "Vigors". The creation of the new nation has an interesting historical parallel with the Mayflower pilgrims who left Britain to found Plymouth in the New World. Both Columbia and Plymouth received the blessing of powerful nations and both eventually broke away from those nations to follow their own path (Venegas, 2017: 193). However, lurking in the heart of the utopia is a dissent represented by Vox Populi and the Civil War that will plunge Columbia into chaos and bring about its doom.

At the same time, Columbia represents the mystification of technology, as reflected in

Booker's visions of New York being bombed by the floating city. Tying in with Millenarianism and its apocalyptic visions, Columbia is not only Eden but also Judgement Day, the ultimate weapon to purge all impurity from the human race. Comstock's point of view is clear: "Even God is entitled to a do-over. And what is Columbia, but another ark for another time" that can serve to eradicate "the Sodom below"?

The culmination of the mythological structure is the emergence of the great lawmaker. Columbia, the female personification of the United States, broke away from the motherland on the understanding that the end of the American Civil War constituted a betrayal of the fundamental values of the nation. Comstock builds a religious society that is fundamentalist, authoritarian, nationalistic (idolizing the Founding Fathers) and racist, which views the abolition of slavery as a mistake and Abraham Lincoln as a devil. Comstock's political legacy has two key pillars: the establishment of American exceptionalism as a blueprint for the future, and the alteration of history to legitimize it.

Exceptionalism is the American nationalist doctrine that claims that the United States is distinct from any other country, that it has a special civilizing mission and, therefore, is wholly superior to any other nation (Venegas, 2017: 184). All these ideas figure in Comstock's political vision and are sustained by a dramatic alteration to history. In this respect, it is telling that Columbia has a museum and centre for the interpretation of

Wounded Knee, the source of the original trauma but now transformed into a means of legitimizing the divine promise. The massacre becomes a battle, and the moral disgrace becomes a glorification.

DEATH STRANDING: A SCEPTICAL AENEAS BETWEEN THE PHYSICAL AND THE DIGITAL

In 2019, Sony launched *Death Stranding*, the long-awaited new title by the inimitable Hideo Kojima. In a bleak future, humankind has been decimated by the "Death Stranding", a phenomenon that has fused the worlds of the dead and of the living, thereby creating personal intermediate realms known as "Beaches". This catastrophe has led to the appearance of "Beached Things" (BTs), souls of the dead trapped in our world, who when coming into contact with the living cause what are known as "Voidouts", explosions resulting from the combination of matter and antimatter. It has also resulted in "Timefall", a kind of rain that speeds up the ageing process of whatever it touches because of the presence in the water of chiralium, a material from the world of the dead that has seeped into the world of the living. In this context, a cargo courier named Sam Porter receives a mission to reconnect the country by means of a network of "knot cities" from coast to coast. At the same time, he must rescue his sister Amelie, a potential successor to the presidency of the United Cities of America (UCA) following the death of its last president, Bridget Strand.

While reconnecting knot cities, Sam discovers two things. First, he experiences visions through his connection with a Bri-

dge Baby (BB) named Lou, a baby he takes with him that enables him to see BTs. These visions will ultimately reveal the truth that he was experimented on as a baby and that his father, Clifford Unger, tried to free him but died in the attempt, along with Sam himself. Sam came back to life because he was a "repatriate", an individual with the power of resurrection. Secondly, he discovers that the Death Stranding is actually an extinction process and that it is not the first but the sixth in a series of such processes. He also finds that Amelie is actually an Extinction Entity (a being that triggers the extinction), and that she is also Bridget, his adoptive mother (when he realizes he is Clifford and Lisa's son). Finally, Sam will convince Amelie not to destroy the world, and he will leave the UCA to start a new life with Lou.

Sam's adventures require him to carry heavy loads and to brave bandits, BTs, terrorists (from the group Homo Demens, led by Higgs), and even rough terrain. *Death Stranding* is a game in which the weight of every step is palpable for the player and every small advance is a major victory. Each reconnected knot in the digital world is also a step closer to the personal world, to little traumas, memories, and requests. It is this journey from one point to the next in a quest to rebuild the nation that makes Sam a kind of Aeneas, albeit with a

Sam takes the West

NUEVA CONEXIÓN ESTABLECIDA
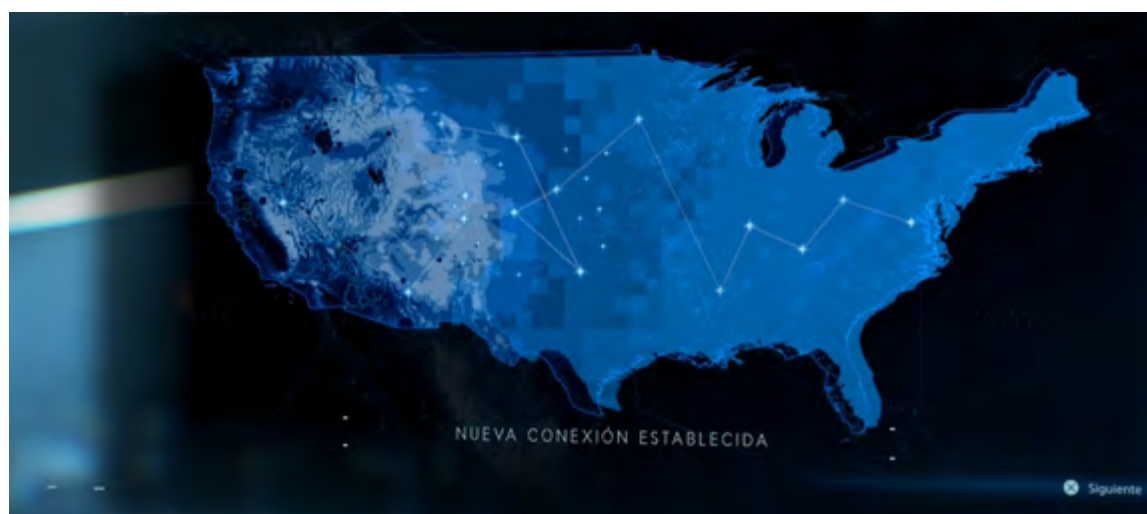
very contemporary twist.

The first mytheme is the Death Stranding, serving as the tragic situation that destroys society as we know it. This inexplicable and unforeseeable event wipes out most of humankind, leaving the Americans as the only survivors. This mass destruction scenario then moves onto the second mytheme: a

Clifford, Sam's Anchises

post-apocalyptic society governed by a weak new government that attempts to gain control over the chaos and the law of survival of the fittest. The voidouts and BTs are the remains of Troy in which Sam, an ordinary man in an extreme situation, is forced to transport cargo to survive. Although Sam is a member of the Strand family, he feels a profound aversion to the social and also to the physical, partly due to haphephobia, or fear of being touched. It is only when the holographic (ghostly) image of his sister Amelie asks him to rescue her that he takes on the saviour role, i.e., when the third mytheme appears.

The question of ghosts is another central element of the game. While the *Aeneid* presents the voyage to the underworld and back as a process exclusive to certain heroes, Kojima's game fuses the two worlds to turn them into a single world where the living and dead coexist. Added to the heroism of the average man is the threat of the underworld and its eschatological dimension: extinction will occur when the world of the dead definitively takes over the world of the living. Instead of being a place of knowledge (the next world in classical tradition), here it becomes a threatening place, where liquid evokes the finite duration of existence (the rain) and climate change (the black viscous liquid and the whale-like BTs).

The idea of the ghost also emerges in the intensive use of holograms as a means of communication, in the figure of Amelie as a supernatural being, and in the visions of Sam's father. This last point is very prominent in Virgil's poem, in which Aeneas has five warning dreams, one of which is with his father. Similarly, Sam reconstructs his history based on visions up to the moment of the final spectral encounter with his father, where the process of anagnorisis occurs.

The fourth mytheme is central to the game: the reunification of the UCA. Sam Porter adopts the surname Bridges, co-opted by the company that he delivers cargo for. A metaphorical confusion arises between the United States and Bridges, between public and private worlds, as the logo of Bridges is also the logo of the new nation. This nominal functionalism is common throughout the game: "Deadman" is so-called because he is a kind of modern Frankenstein's monster; "Die-Hardman" because he was hard to kill in the war (thanks to Clifford); "Mama" because of her BT link with her baby; "Fragile" because she is not fragile; and "Amelie" is a combination of *amé* ("soul" in French) and the English word "lie".

ELEMENT	MOSES	AENEAS	*BIOSHOCK INFINITE*	*DEATH STRANDING*
TYRANNY OR TRAGIC SITUATION	Pharaoh of Egypt	The fall of Troy	Wounded Knee	Death Stranding
EXTREME SITUATION IN WHICH THE HERO IS SAVED	The basket on the Nile	Intervention of Venus	Baptism	Post–apocalyptic society
AWARENESS OF SAVIOUR ROLE	The burning bush	The message from Creusa Anchises and the Underworld	Archangel	Amelie's request
RECOGNITION AND ACTION	Rebellion and Exodus Journey across the desert	Search for the new land Wars with Turnus	Creation of Columbia	National reconnection (UCA)
THE GREAT LAWMAKER	Delegated, through the Ten Commandments	Direct, as leader of the exiles	Exceptionalism	Departure from community

Table 2. Comparison of structures between stories and games (based on Mellado Rodríguez, 2006)

The relationship between the rebuilding of the nation and Sam's role resembles the situation described by Virgil in his poem, and also constitutes the structural foundation of the Western film genre: a new nation is possible through the regeneration of a past and the conquest of new territories in the West. However, while Aeneas (or the American settler) is convinced of his mission, Sam is depicted as a pawn, a man driven more by circumstances than by his faith in his nation. In a reflection of our times, Sam shifts from personal connection and empathy for unknown individuals on the physical level to invasion of privacy on the digital level. The more he helps his neighbour, the more he contributes to the creation of a company-government where he is merely one more cog in a systemic precariousness that dooms him to a cyclical existence of transporting cargo and being paid in likes.

Notwithstanding Sam's explicit intentions, the reality is that his human connection with the different knot cities effectively reunifies the territory and prevents extinction, but he will not be able to embrace this new social context. This leads to the fifth and final mytheme. Both Aeneas and Sam see the fruit of their civilizing action, but Sam, like Ethan in *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956),

cannot stay. The creation of his new society will not be in the UCA, but in Lou, the baby he decides to care for and with whom he closes the father-child cycle that underpins much of this Promised Land story.

CONCLUSIONS

The structural elements of the Promised Land myth—a tragic situation, the salvation of the hero, his acceptance of the saviour role, recognition by the community, and his emergence as a lawmaker—take on an interesting new expressive dimension in the contemporary video game, as can be seen in the synopsis shown in table 2.

The context of the current trend of digitalization, along with the *techno-religious* tradition associated with the sacralization of technology, has had a significant impact on the divine promise; from a transcendent manifestation (the burning bush in Moses' story; Venus in Aeneas') to a deification of human achievements as a sign of human redemption and perfection.

It is precisely this mutation of the myth that serves as the foundation for *Bioshock Infinite*, a ludic reflection that emerges in the context of the disconnect between an action game and the myth

used as its background. The references to American exceptionalism, accentuated in the Trump era, are mixed with the traditional divine promise by an archangel and the transcendent techno-religion of supremacy in war, an element that ties in with US paternalism in the 20th and 21st centuries.

On the other hand, *Death Stranding* evokes the Aeneas myth in its rebuilding of a nation with an echo of the myth of the American West, associating it with our contemporary society through the digital connection, neoliberalism, and social media. Kojima uses reunification to give meaning to the physical load of the journey and the importance of physical contact, but also to reflect on the impact of social media, digital culture and the precarious conditions produced by an increasing confusion between government and private enterprise.

In this way, the two video games analysed show how the Promised Land myth, far from having lost much of its transcendent meaning, serves as a basic structural model today for understanding both the future in the video game itself and the social, political, and economic contradictions of our times. For future research, it would be of interest not only to add to the catalogue of mythical narratives that find a place in contemporary video games (in terms of both their narrative expression and their mechanics), but also to analyse the extent to which these mythical discourses are perceived by the player and, in general, what appropriation strategies and processes players engage in during the gameplay experience. ∎

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THE PROMISED LAND IN CONTEMPORARY VIDEO GAMES: A MYTH ANALYSIS OF *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* AND *DEATH STRANDING*

Abstract

The traditional creation of nations and states has made use of the Promised Land myth as a means of political and religious legitimation. The purpose of this article is to compare how this myth has been reinterpreted in contemporary video games. To this end, the mythemes of the stories of Moses and Aeneas serve as the basis for a myth analysis of two games dealing with foundational experiences: *Bioshock Infinite* and *Death Stranding*. The findings reveal the persistence of the mytheme structure of the classical myth, although with mutations of its motifs to convey the promise of the techno-religion and the sceptical post-modern hero.

Key words

Video games; Myth; Promised Land; Fundation; Myth Analisys; Mythemes.

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Article reference

LA TIERRA PROMETIDA EN EL VIDEOJUEGO CONTEMPORÁNEO: MITOANÁLISIS DE *BIOSHOCK INFINITE* Y *DEATH STRANDING*

Resumen

La creación tradicional de naciones y estados encontró en el mito de la Tierra Prometida un sustento político-religioso clave para su legitimación. El objetivo del presente artículo es contrastar cómo se ha trasladado dicho mito al videojuego contemporáneo. Para ello, partimos de los mitemas de los relatos de Moisés y Eneas para realizar el mitoanálisis de dos juegos sobre experiencias fundacionales: *Bioshock Infinite* y *Death Stranding*. Los resultados muestran cómo la estructura de mitemas del mito clásico persiste, si bien algunos de sus motivos han mutado hacia la promesa de la tecnorreligión y el héroe posmoderno escéptico.

Palabras clave

Videojuegos; Mito; Tierra Prometida; Fundación; Mitoanálisis; Mitemas.

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Referencia de este artículo

THE THIRD PARTICIPANT

A dialogue with

SAM BARLOW

SAM BARLOW
THE THIRD PARTICIPANT*

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

Late Thursday night. You've had a *hard* day and the last thing you need is this: shopping. Luckily, the place is pretty empty and you're progressing rapidly.

On to the next aisle.

Interesting... fresh Gnocchi--you haven't had any of that since... *Rome*.

The aisle stretches to the north, and back to the south. The shelves on either side of you block your view of the rest of the supermarket, with only the brightly coloured aisle markers visible.

You have stopped your trolley next to the pasta section, bright plastic bags full of pale skin-tone shapes.

There is a brunette woman a few metres ahead, filling her trolley with sauces.

>laugh
You allow yourself a laugh--memories of holiday float up and tickle your cheeks. The two guitarists singing in pigeon-English by your table as you finished off your gnocchi. Clare thought they were quite good. But, for you, they were too close to embarrassing. And the bric-a-brac sellers with their lighters (naked statues--you push the nipple to light up) and brass colloseums. Not like in the films, really--but then real romance often isn't, right? I mean, there was the evening when you ate on the street where they filmed the Dolce Vita. You spent the meal being distracted by a beggar who was doing a mime-swim across the pavement. Real romance makes you laugh.

The end of another story. But then, there are others...

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
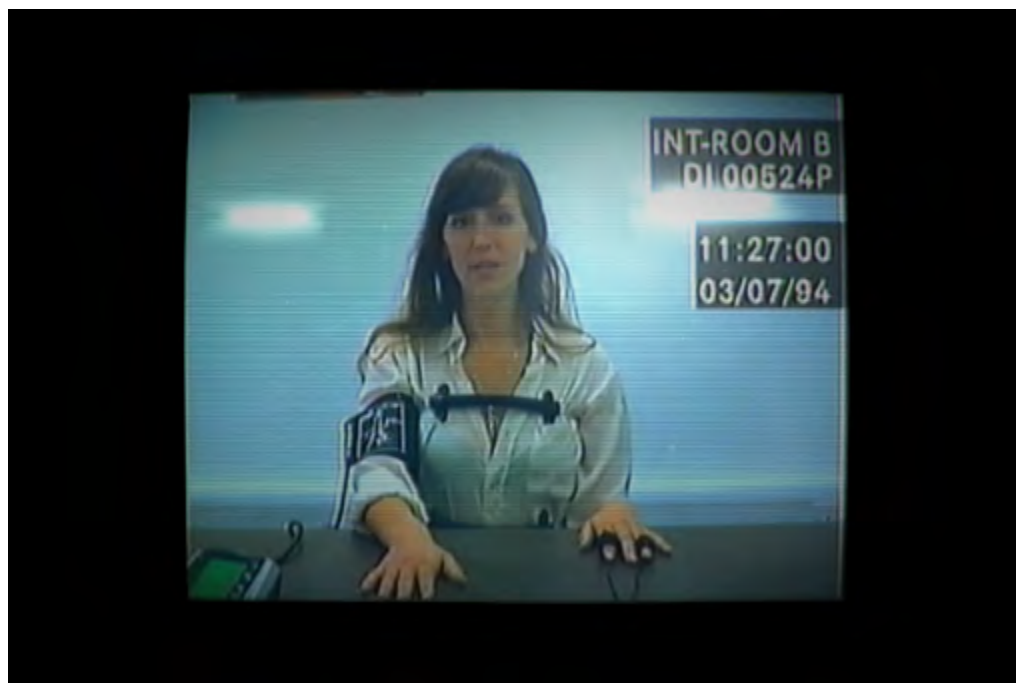
when I ask myself what is driving the emotion, for me, it was the voice acting. And there was a good anecdote. I think Steve Gaynor, at some point, said the original plan for that game was to be totally realistic—you would uncover a story just by going through the house, looking at objects, seeing the 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

Her Story

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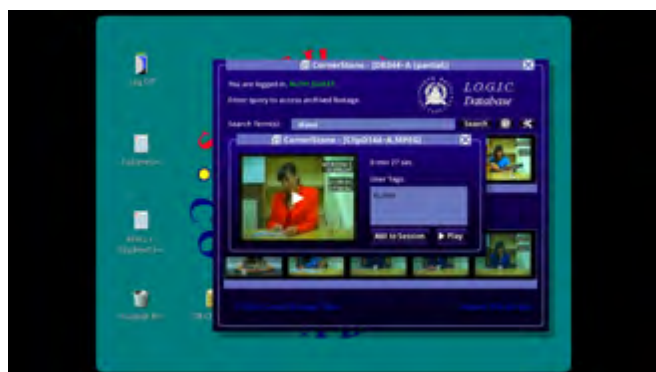
Telling Lies
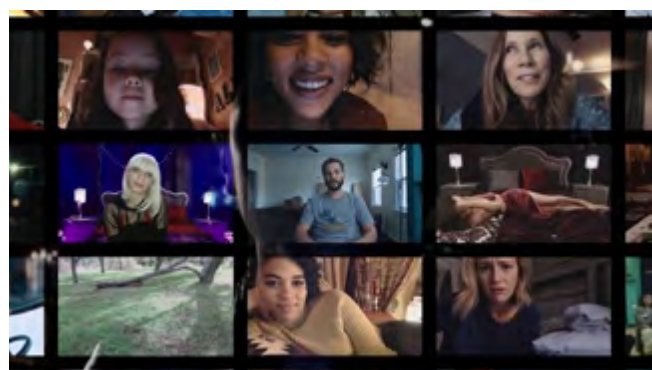
extra element of polish into the visuals with some of the post-processing, with the reflection in the screen, with some of the sound design… to really bed you into that and still have the kind of feedback, polish and the game feel that you might get in a normal game. I think those are important elements.

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.

Authors

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.

Autores

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

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(DIS)AGREEMENTS

DIGITAL ILLUSIONISTS: NARRATIVE DESIGN IN THE SPANISH VIDEO GAME

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introduction*

MARTA MARTÍN NÚÑEZ
VÍCTOR NAVARRO REMESAL

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 games, 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 conversation[2] 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,
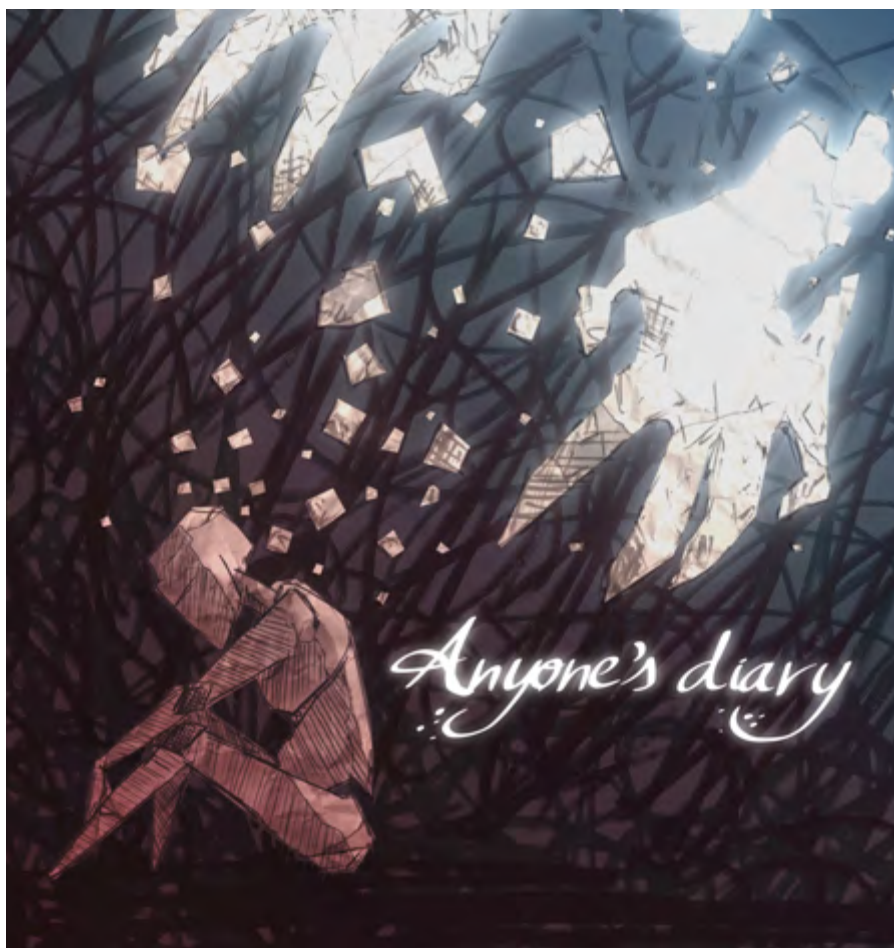
Anyone's Diary

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 before, 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 understood 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 mindful 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 moments, 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 gi-ving the character a whole heap of traits before I do. As a re-sult, I base the cha-racter 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 discrepan-cies. 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-

Yesterday

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 sic-kness, 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 fo-cus on it. We needed to ensure that nothing was annoying; everything had to be integrated and encourage you to continue in that mood. While

you all had those problems with props, we had the problem, with the role-playing, that each ob-ject had its own texture and its own little details. For example, if you have a look around the grave-yard you can find my name on a tombstone—dead from exhaustion after doing all the textures [lau-ghs]. 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 cor-ner. 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 atta-ched to the space and the character and we nee-ded 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 inappro-priately named game jams, because they're really playgrounds for developers. And as for customi-zation and taking the utmost care with the detai-ls, 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 dialogue 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.

Authors

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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the games *Papers, Please* (Lucas Pope, 2013), *Shovel Knight* (Yacht Club Games, 2014), *The Red Strings Club* (Deconstructeam, 2018), and *Return of the Obra Dinn* (Lucas Pope, 2018), and he has taught at Spanish universities including UCM, UFV and UVigo. His most recent game, *Blacksad: Under the Skin* (Pendulo Studios, 2019), which adapts Guarnido and Díaz Canales' award-winning comic series to the video-game medium, won Best Action-Adventure Game at Germany's Gamescom trade fair. Contact: info@revistaatalante.com.

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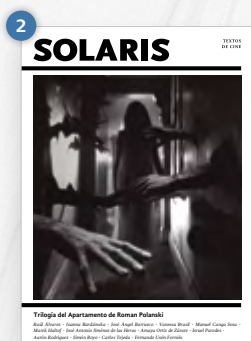
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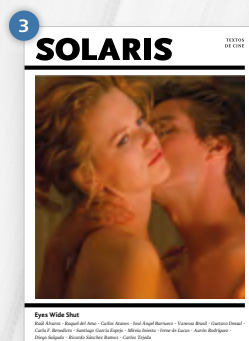
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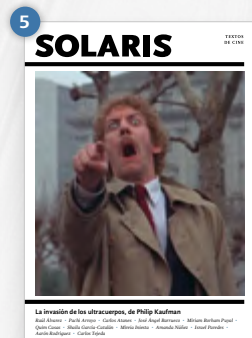
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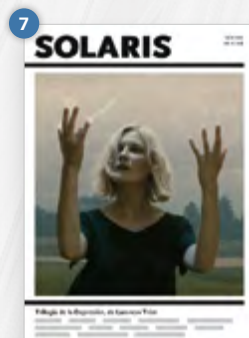
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VANISHING POINTS

ON THIEVES AND HEARTTHROBS: VARIATIONS ON *FILM NOIR* IN THE BARCELONA TRILOGY BY ARTURO FERNÁNDEZ AND JULIO COLL (1956-1959)

IGNACIO GAZTAKA EGUSKIZA
VÍCTOR ITURREGUI-MOTILOA

INTRODUCTION

As a homage to the late Arturo Fernández (1929-2019), we decided to carry out a study of his work and the impact that the *film noir* genre had on the beginning of his career. This research has two basic objectives. The first is to attempt to rescue from oblivion one of the most enriching moments in Spanish cinema: the period of Barcelona *film noir*. The second is to recall the man who became its most recognisable face (Fernández) and to celebrate one of the genre's greatest auteurs: Julio Coll.

In view of the lack of in-depth studies on the work that this pair did together, this research will consist of a cinematographic analysis that elucidates the thematic, narrative and formal features of Barcelona *film noir*, based on a study of the three films that resulted from their partnership back in the 1950s: *Nunca es demasiado tarde* [It's Never Too Late] (Julio Coll , 1956)*, Distrito quinto* [Fifth District]

(Julio Coll, 1957), and *Un vaso de whisky* [A Glass of Whiskey] (Julio Coll, 1959).[1] In pursuit of our two stated objectives, the methodology applied will serve, firstly, to chart the exponential evolution of narrative responsibility that Fernández acquired from film to film, starting as a supporting character, then becoming a co-star, and culminating as the protagonist around whom the whole story revolves; and secondly, to reveal how Coll's directorial style has been characterised, among other aspects, by the proliferation of characters tormented by guilt, with complicated psychological conditions[2] and a complete inability to escape an urban environment that leads them down the path of crime.

BARCELONA, CINEMA AND SPAIN IN THE 1950S

"Cheese is rotten everywhere, and there is no way to eat it anymore without swallowing a maggot."

These are among the last words that Arturo Fernández blurts out at Alfredo Landa in *El crack dos* [The Crack II] (José Luis Garci, 1983), the sequel to the film that roused a genre that had been idle in Spain for years from its lethargy. In this tense sequence, which lasts about ten minutes, Germán Areta goes to the mansion of the despicable Don Gregorio to get information out of him about the murder of a colleague. The villain tells him that he is late, that they must settle the matter quickly. This insistence brings to mind the impatience and violent urgency that plagued Fernández's characters in his first important roles with Coll. This quality, and the obvious features of the archetypal figure of the swindler, seem to suggest that the character of Victor in *Un vaso de whisky* has taken his scams and thefts to the extreme.

Fernández's role in *El crack dos* was his last in a *film noir* picture, after many years away from the genre, and one of the few films he worked on in his later years. The famous Asturian actor would dedicate his last artistic period almost entirely to the stage; his heyday in the 1950s was now far behind him. This fleeting appearance, in the last moments of the film and with all the trappings of an easily identifiable profile, could be taken as a small tribute by Garci to Fernández's *noir* years under Coll's tutelage. As if that were not enough, the villain Don Gregorio completes the arc charted by the men the Asturian actor played in those years, in an ascending line in terms of narrative importance: the small-time criminal in *Nunca es demasiado tarde*; the suspicious thief locked up in his own home in *Distrito quinto*; and finally, the manipulative rogue in *Un vaso de whisky*.

It is worth pointing out the meaning that lies beneath the surface of Don Gregorio's metaphor. Taking into account both the intradiegetic context of the statement (the high-level conspiracy that Areta is trying to uncover) and the sociocultural context of Garci's film (shortly after Spain's attempted coup d'état in 1981 and with a rocky transition to democracy still in its fledgling stages), the

image of being gnawed at by parasites is at least familiar. Leaving other aspects of the film aside, the oppressive, inescapable environment of a society manipulated by politicians and businessmen in *El crack dos* evokes the death throes of early Francoist repression.

Although until the 1950s Spanish film production was oriented more towards entertainment than reflection, in the decade between 1951 and 1962, the Spanish dictatorship's furtive first steps towards social and economic openness allowed some filmmakers to broaden the spectrum of aesthetic and narrative possibilities. Furthermore, during these years there was a massive exodus from the countryside to the cities. Julio Coll's films dealt with this social issue with slight variations. Broadly speaking, his *noir* trilogy portrays the hardships of life in the concrete jungle and the impossibility (or difficulty) of escaping it; likewise, it illustrates the complicated nature of returning to the country, embodied in the multifaceted figure of the thief. All under the aegis of the genre in vogue at the time both in Europe and in the United States.

DEGREES OF BLACK: NOIR IN SPAIN

Although there are various studies that focus historiographically on the singular decade of the 1950s in Spanish filmmaking and the Spanish film industry, the figure of Julio Coll, and his inseparable partnership with Arturo Fernández, is another piece that must be added to the puzzle. While it is true that their films are interchangeable with others of similar characteristics, this does not reduce their relevance and value, as we will seek to show in this article. The Coll-Fernández *film noir* trilogy ties in with the work of a particular group of filmmakers who "gave the impression of pursuing a style or at least of seeking to uphold a respectable position within Spain's officially sanctioned cinema" (Monterde, 1995: 266). In this respect, Monterde points out that these

directors ultimately threw in the towel under the pressure of Francoist censorship. This, however, should not dissuade us from analysing their work, both in close-up (their individual films) and with a broader view (the *noir* genre).

In any case, it is an undeniable fact that "Spanish cinema of the Francoist era was influenced by Hollywood to a much greater extent than it was by Italian neorealism" (Talens et al., 2015: 78). The conditions discussed above would have made a Spanish neorealism impossible, with films of quiet protest like those being made in Italy. It is therefore curious that, faced with this obstacle, Spanish filmmakers turned to another movement that was difficult to adapt. How could characteristics of foreign filmmaking styles be integrated into the genetic material of Spanish cinema?

It is important to make clear that "certain filmmakers and films inherit, assimilate, transform and revitalise a whole range of unique aesthetic forms in which the Spanish community has historically expressed itself" (Zunzunegui, 2018: 22). This is what makes it particularly interesting to analyse the formula adopted by Julio Coll: *film noir* as a common denominator and Spanish censorship as a variable. Although there seem to be no traces of national popular traditions in these films (except perhaps for the flamenco in *Distrito quinto*), their Spanish character is imprinted on the extra-filmic surface. In other words, "the censoring obstacles related exclusively to the content extended into economic obstacles" (Arocena, 2006: 83), and these in turn conditioned the form the films took; it was Francoist Spain that influenced the material (and the work) of the film and not its customs and traditions that were represented.

Following this logic, if these films are considered *film noir*, we should take for granted the moral ambiguity, expressed in the lighting decisions and the use of black and white, that characterises the stories told in the *noir* genre. Such moral ambiguity clashes head-on with an inflexible regime that had an especially big interest in artistic expression.

In 1952, the Board of Classification and Censorship of Cinematographic Films was created, a body dependent on the General Directorate of Cinematography and Theatre (headed by José María García Escudero). Contradictions aside, "if the stylistic landscape is populated with elliptical resources, double meanings, indirect allusions, expressive ambivalences and subterranean tensions, then narrative ambiguity and the heavy turbulence of the atmosphere become the natural food and the immediate aesthetic consequence of these stories" (Heredero and Santamarina, 1998: 27).

CRIME FILMS WITHOUT OFFICERS OF THE LAW

Going one step further, it is worth noting here those specific directorial details of Julio Coll's three films that represent a departure from *film noir* in general, and Spanish *film noir* in particular. In his study of the Spanish police cinema of the 1950s, Medina indicates the essential characteristics of the subgenre: "violence", "crime always present", "a strong influence of realism", and "the increasing anxiety of the spectator" (Medina, 2000: 15-16). First and foremost, the *noir* or police film is characterised by a basic level of realism given that this type of film was generally shot in recognisable natural locations, portrayed characters closely linked to the corruption of the real world, and represented the harshness of everyday society, in an effort to respond to "how urban life infects and contaminates a theoretically pure world" (Sánchez, 2001: 1081).

Based on these elements, Coll would limit the story to highly localised and interchangeable settings, especially in *Distrito quinto*. This film could therefore be considered his boldest and, if you will, most *auteurial* film, and the one that departs most from the general line of his 1950s trilogy, since it is located at the opposite extreme of some of the stylistic and production decisions noted above, while at the same time its status as a cri-

me film is fully identifiable. But this idea should not be overstated: while the anxiety and suspense that mark the viewer's experience are palpable, the narrator of *Distrito quinto* does not show the robbery on which the story pivots. For this reason, critics have come to call it "the Spanish *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1992)" (Sánchez and Ocaña, 2016), although in fairness, Quentin Tarantino's film would be more aptly described as "the American *Distrito quinto*."

Secondly, "the figure of the private detective is absent (since) it would imply a questioning of the work of the police force" (Medina, 2017: 22). Except in *Un vaso de whisky*, police officers are practically omitted, accentuating the marginal and clandestine nature of the events. Coll contradicts this assertion: "our crime films in this decade are marked by the obligation to offer a heroic image of law enforcement officers and institutions of justice" (Medina, 2017: 29). This is evident in *Distrito quinto,* where the only officers who enter the scene are criminals posing as policemen.

Finally, although the crime film (or *film noir*) stories of the period were heavily moralising and had a clear tendency to "represent their problems thoughtlessly and blindly" (Arocena, 2006: 102), in Coll-Fernández's *noir* trilogy we can discern efforts to broaden the limited aesthetic and ideological vision of Spanish art that characterised the early years of the Franco regime. As will be shown below, the conclusions to these stories push past the limits of the officially endorsed ideal ending in various ways and leave the door open to multiple interpretations.

IMPOSSIBILITY OF ESCAPE

Classical *film noir* was not possible in 1950s Spain because the ambiguity of the boundary between right and wrong could not be played with in Francoist society, nor could extreme realism be used to explore thorny social and cultural issues (realistic in the sense of the reality of poverty and hardship concealed behind the "official reality" that the regime sought to project to the world). These constraints resulted in stories that were little more than an uneven reflection of the reality to which they referred. Essentially, in Spain, the gloominess of these narratives and their mises-en-scene reflected one obvious, direct influence: the political environment.

Coll and Fernández's work documents that tentative step towards openness—or beyond the boundaries of genre and censorship—in an effort to take a more socially committed and critical approach to filmmaking. They also document the thwarted evolution of that effort: the excessive weight of bureaucracy, censorship, and Catholic morality led both Coll's film career, and Fernández's characters, into an open ending on a dead-end street.

NUNCA ES DEMASIADO TARDE

This film tells the story of Jorge, a criminal who flees to his birthplace after a robbery at a factory results in one of his partners in the crime needlessly killing a man. He seeks refuge outside the city to give himself time to decide whether to turn himself in to the police and return the money he has stolen. In the meantime, he must deal with the resentment and rejection of his brothers, and his responsibility towards Isabel, the mother of his (illegitimate) son, whom he abandoned years earlier. And added to these worries is the threat of imminent arrival of his vengeful henchmen. After reconciling with his family and regaining the love of Isabel and their son, he confronts the thieves. Finally, just before giving himself up, he decides to get married to secure himself a less tragic future; in other words, he seeks the protection and stability provided by the traditional Catholic family model, as a step away from the crime that has marked his life up to that time.

There are three themes that underpin the story in Coll's first feature film: repentance of a

crime committed, family rejection, and the weight of morality. These elements on the level of content will be reflected on the formal level. At the same time, in each of the three acts that make up the story there is a dilemma that Jorge will have to decide to (or not to) resolve. Pervading all this is an atmosphere of mistrust and apprehension that is highly typical of the *film noir* genre.

The first theme—the redemption of the criminal—is in turn conditioned by two basic factors: time and space. The time factor relates to the fact that Jorge cannot wait forever to admit his guilt: he has to make a decision urgently. This thematic principle is accompanied by various formal representations, the most obvious in Coll's films being the use of clocks. In fact, the story begins with a shot of a clock striking two o'clock in the morning. This idea is not restricted to visual expressions: sound and music also contribute to build this tension, with a constant ticking that is heard in the most suspenseful situations. The faint rhythm marked by the hands of the clock will evolve into the clamour of the bells of the local chapel announcing the moment of Jorge and Isabel's wedding and the end of the film.

In the same way, space exerts its influence on the development of the characters, because the story's setting quickly shifts to Jorge's town, where the rest of the dramatic events will take place. In this sense, the motif of the train, a means of transport used by various characters during the film, underscores the importance of the location and the urban-rural dichotomy. In the scene of Jorge's return, the camera initiates the idea of a pan shot, of a progression or a (supposed) forward movement, but it stops just beneath the train tracks, at a town halfway between here and there; Jorge can get no further away for the moment. The railway appears again when he is about to give himself up, but he doesn't get on the train because his son has disappeared and he stays to look for him. In short, just as his little brother tries to follow his lead, the thieves arrive at the station on the same train he was about to board. The environment and his sense of powerlessness prevent José from realising his desire to leave town and seek his fortune like his brother, but the train that brings him back with more problems symbolises his irremediable confinement in the countryside. This is where Coll's treatment of a major issue in the Spain of his time is located: the return to the town from the city in the face of the rural exodus to the metropolis.

It should be noted that the train's movement in the first case is shown on screen from left to right, and in the second from right to left. This is another brief but significant expression of the city-country dialectic: a movement warns the viewer that Jorge's destiny will tip towards the traditional side of the balance, to the detriment of his modern life. In the scene where the thieves visit a friend of Jorge's in the city to get information out of her about his whereabouts, she is shown replacing a Miró-style canvas with a figurative, realistic and kitsch still life: a shift from new to old, from progress to backwardness, from the abstract to the straight; and ultimately, from escapism through art to the confinement imposed by censorship and tradition. This artistic decision suggests much more than a simple decorative choice could denote at first glance.

The rejection of rural society and family is worthy of a closer look here. Coll uses the narratological concept of the gift to establish Jorge's rapprochement with his son (who does not yet know that Jorge is his father). This challenge is aggravated by the relationship of convenience that his brother Antonio started with Isabel as a kind of consolation for Jorge's departure. When they first meet, the boy believes that Jorge is a thief (which in fact he is). From there, the narrative begins to hint at the terms on which their relationship can be forged: if Jorge recovers his son, it will be at the cost of falling into the hands of justice. This first dilemma is encapsulated in the image of Jorge Jr. pointing his toy gun at Jorge Sr. on the other side

Images 1 and 2. *Nunca es demasiado tarde*

dations of the institution of the family, and the hasty marriage as a provisional solution to Jorge's presumed imprisonment. In this respect, the protagonist must resolve a second dilemma: return the money and get a reduced sentence or keep it but serve a longer one. It is a choice between living humbly and with a clear conscience or having riches and its consequent spiritual decay. As if that were not enough, the shadow of the deceased father looms over the three brothers: his absence is underscored by the empty armchair that dominates the living room of the house. To his older brother, Antonio, Jorge is a dead man, as if the prodigal brother (the biblical resonances of this plot are obvious) were a ghost. Coll resolves this conflict by bringing the brothers together in the confrontation with the pair of thieves (one of whom is played by Arturo Fernández). This redemptive alliance crystallises in the shot where Jorge sits in his father's rocking chair, the true family throne. The fake pistol, which Jorge Jr. pointed at his father earlier, looks like the same one that is now aimed at Jorge Sr. The difference is that, in this case, the death threat is for real.

Coll closes the film with a more negative resolution, but he leaves the dramatic denouement of the story open. This fatalistic suspension is distinct from the closed endings that typify the genre: there is no hint of the death or arrest of the

Image 3. *Nunca es demasiado tarde*

of the gate of his farmhouse, as if they were the bars of the prison he is doomed to be sent to. In one of their many interactions before revealing the secret, young Jorge tells him that he wants to be a policeman and shows him the sheriff's badge he acts out his fantasy with. Thus, in the exchange of objects that marks his recognition of Jorge as his father, the son gives him this fake badge, foreshadowing his surrender to the law. Jorge, for his part, gives him his razor blade, a symbol of both the transfer of responsibility that the child must assume in the absence of the father figure, and of his abandonment of the criminal world at the end of the film.

In continuity with these two themes is the theme of religion as the only path to forgiveness. Our analysis of this theme focuses on two events: the search for a person to balance the worn foun-

Image 4. *Nunca es demasiado tarde*

antihero at the hands of the police to celebrate the efficacy of the law. At the same time, these variations, together with the usual symbolic charge of objects and the asphyxiating mise-en-scene, identify the film with that national strain of *film noir*, or "Iberian *noir*", halfway between tradition and revision, as Martín (2018) suggests. Although the brothers may leave their real father behind on Jorge's suggestion, on a higher level they remain under the yoke of another master: the Francoist State, with its stringently Catholic faith, the representative of God in Spain. The film ends at the doors of the village church, Jorge's only moral way out. At least it is for the moment, because the narrator does not want it to be known which of the two paths the protagonist will take; in other words, whether the last dilemma, accepting the redemption offered by the religious solution, resolves or suspends the first two.

DISTRITO QUINTO

This is the second movie in Coll's *film noir* trilogy and the first by Juro Films (Castro de Paz, 1997: 421), as announced in the first frame, and it also co-stars Arturo Fernández (in the role of Gerardo, the leader of a gang of amateur criminals) and Alberto Closas (Juan Alcover, a high-class thief). This feature film was effectively "the only corner

of Spanish production where outsiders can become the protagonists" (Heredero, 1993: 219). *Distrito quinto* reflects the increased importance and responsibility assumed by Fernández compared to the previous film, while Coll himself takes a qualitative leap by assuming responsibility for the film on three different levels, writing the screen adaptation of a comedy written for the stage by José María Espinas, while also directing and producing the film. This demonstration of professional versatility makes this film the most illustrative of his *auteurial* style.

The film tells the story of a gang of thieves who meet up at a dance academy owned by Miguel and Tina. They all want to leave their criminal lives behind, but they need one last big job before they do. Their leader, Gerardo, seems very confident. However, they need a thief of greater stature, Juan, who is the last to arrive. After the robbery, David, Andrés (an employee at the company and the one responsible for leaving the safe open) and Marta meet at the academy. Everyone is waiting for Juan, who is carrying the loot. However, his delay makes them suspect that he has run away with the money. They therefore alert the police that a certain Juan Alcover is going to try to cross the border. In response, Juan decides that if he cannot escape, they will not do so either, and he ensures they all suffer the same fate.

Distrito quinto presents a parallel narration of the events before and after the robbery (which is omitted). In this way, the narrative progresses as the characters reconstruct what happened—through shared recollections—up to the moment when Juan seems to have abandoned them. And it is around Juan that all the memories of the characters revolve. Like the structure of the story itself, Juan is divided, split between his sordid past and his upright present. This split, which is never fully reconciled, enables him, after his transformation into his present self, to morally regress so that he can take part in the job. A reflection of this internal division is the fact that the cha-

racter is given two names. Now he calls himself Juan, an honest citizen who wants the chance to start anew, but previously he was known as Mario, a favourite disciple of the infamous criminal *"El Marquesito"*.

A serious dilemma brings this character into confrontation with his alter ego. To escape from the criminal world, he must, at the same time, leave Spain. Ironically, his native country is like a prison for him in two different ways. On the one hand, the authorities are after him; on the other hand, the totalitarian regime under which the country lives would be enough to want to flee the country anyway. The dilemma is that going into exile will mean that Juan will have to commit another crime for the last time to obtain a false passport.

However, both sides of his personality have one trait in common: they detest the figure of the *femme fatale*, because she is capable of emotionally and physically destroying any man. In *Distrito quinto*, in fact, two such women interact with Juan: María and Marta. In the past, he himself was María's victim, whom he protects and curses, chases and rejects, besieged by ambivalence. María came to the academy before him, fleeing from the police due to her involvement in the *"El Marquesito"* case, which is why he ends up there. Similarly, in the present, Juan also hates Marta, because he sees what María did to him reflected in her: she is only pretending to be in love with Andrés to involve him in the robbery. Thus, the *femme fatale* archetype does not vary in its content, only in its form.

Juan perceives what others are not able to see; he understands the rhythm of footsteps (a motif echoed in the affected sequence in which Miguel tap dances in private), senses the breathing of his victims and participates in their thoughts, as he confesses to Marta. In short, he possesses the gift of observation, which has allowed him to master the art of lying. For this reason, others fear him. The criminal destiny that stalks and ensnares

them makes an appearance when he tries to buy the false passport to get out of the country. This situation is cathartic for him: from that moment he ceases to be Juan and becomes the cold and ruthless Mario, who takes control of the gang. His past wins out over his present; as Gerardo remarks: "In our profession, like bullfighters, we never completely retire."

At the same time, the story depicts a Barcelona where suspicion and lies dictate social (dis)harmony. All the members of the gang share with Juan his desperate quest for a better future, far away from the city. The materialistic Gerardo wants a sports car to escape in, while the cynical Marta dreams of starting a family in the countryside. Andrés, in love with the *femme fatale*, has been persuaded by her to believe that he wants to be her husband. On the other hand, the narrative also explores more metaphorical escape routes. Miguel and Tina share the goal of putting on a ballet show. David, who also seeks to escape from reality through art, wants to immerse himself in the world of literature and publish his absurd poems.

Despite their (futile) attempts, Coll's characters have no way of escaping the concrete jungle. The dance academy symbolises the setting for a struggle for survival that Westerns placed out on the frontier and *film noir* moved to within city limits. On a formal level, the wildness of nature is expressed in the floral motifs that decorate the prints on the walls. Iconographically, these flowers resemble a tangled web which, combined with the formal strategies, add to the feeling of

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THE DANCE ACADEMY SYMBOLISES THE SETTING FOR A STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL THAT WESTERNS PLACED OUT ON THE FRONTIER AND *FILM NOIR* MOVED TO WITHIN CITY LIMITS

Images 5, 6, 7 and 8. *Distrito quinto*

confinement and suffocation that Coll's Barcelona imposes on them.

Other images include the brick wall outside the only window in Juan's room, the wicker rocking chair that David gets trapped in, the banister on the landing that imprisons a naive Andrés when Marta gets closer to him, or the shadows cast by the moonlight on a window frame that look like prison bars. Even the stifling summer heat in the city, which makes them sweaty and desperate, draws out the time waiting for Juan, configuring a two-way metaphor in which the meaning of time takes two semantic directions.

In such a situation, it seems that freedom does not appear around any corner. It is, in fact, outside the academy, but without leaving it, where the only moment of relief in the oppressive Barcelona atmosphere takes place. David is fussing over a dovecote on the balcony. He has previously released all but one of the birds he was looking after. When he sees Andrés reporting Juan to the police

on the phone (their only means of contact with the outside world), he realises that he has no right to restrict the freedom of any (human) being. In the absence of a superior being to free them from their prison, David releases the last of the birds that he cared for but which, at the same time, he had been imprisoning. The moment of relief as he watches it disappear into the sky is interrupted by the appearance of Juan on his way to the academy.

As he climbs the spiral stairs (of crime) to the landing, the whole gang realises the fatal mistake they have made. Their fear of one another has ended up betraying them. Juan's delay was due to his efforts to shake the police off his trail. Andrés seems to realise at that moment that while a thief has his hand cut off (hence the poetic nature of the hand injury he suffered in the robbery), a traitor is punished even more severely. The second hand on the clock on the wall—which almost seems like another member of the gang—appears to tick fas-

ter now that they don't want Juan to reach his destination. The sweat that drenched them now seems to freeze them. However, it is worth remembering here that Coll will not allow the individual to escape the city. For Juan, the passport represented his access to freedom, but as a forged document, its meaning is also fake. For this reason, the freedom he aspired to was a mere mirage.

In the end, the *MacGuffin* of the loot serves Coll to present a story that brings together all the features of *film noir* in a dance academy where the limits of (dis)trust between partners (not friends) are explored. Gerardo and his gang do not seem to have any qualms about attacking innocent people, but they do about betraying the man they fear and admire. While they are all nursing their suspicions about Juan (in the second act), Marta suggests that "either he is a policeman or the total opposite," equating officers of the law at that time with the worst criminals. The film opens with a caption declaring that "the strongest barriers that God has placed between man and crime are Conscience and Religion"—exactly what this group of misfits lacks.

As usual with Coll, the ending is left open: the police do not appear to arrest the thieves, and there is no clear conclusion to their criminal activities or to the story that frames them. For this reason, as with the other films discussed here, describing *Distrito quinto* as a "crime film" (Medina, 2017: 20) may be a stretch. In any case, this film laid the foundations for the presence of Barcelona on the big screen, while preparing the springboard for the leap to consolidate that presence in *Un vaso de whisky*.

UN VASO DE WHISKY

The last entry in the Spanish encyclopaedia of *film noir*, co-written by Julio Coll and Arturo Fernández, presents the latter, the face of the trilogy, in all his splendour as an actor, playing the archetype that he would perfect over the course of his

career. Meanwhile, Coll, the ideas man behind these productions, would culminate his *film noir* period before abandoning the genre and making the drama *Los Cuervos* [The Crows] (1961), also with Fernández as the protagonist.

Un vaso de whisky is the story of Victor, an out-of-work freeloader always looking for a good time. After suffering another of his many abuses, his lover, Laura, descends into a strong depression that drives her to drink. Meanwhile, he drags some friends to the beach, where they vandalise hotel property. María, the hotel owner, has them detained until they pay for the damages. Victor manages to avoid conflict by seducing her, only to abandon her immediately afterwards. On his return to the city, his own debauchery will prove his undoing: Laura, in a whirlwind of alcohol and desolation, is killed in an accident. Raúl, a boxer who was in love with Laura, places all the blame for her death on Victor, for which he gives him a beating that leaves him half dead. Fortunately, María finds him lying in the street, and takes pity on him. However, nobody responds to her cries for help.

Coll makes use of a number narrative and formal strategies to convey a basic idea: the irresponsible nature of vice and its correlation with disappointment or deception in love. The director shifts away from stories of thieves to focus on the

Image 9. *Un vaso de whisky*

consequences of a life of hedonism for the hedonist's loved ones. In this sense, Victor is considered here to be a "thief" of emotions. His only difference from the criminals of the previous two films is that his "thefts" are committed in full view of everyone and with a mocking smile on his lips, a trait of the rogue that characterise so many of Arturo Fernández's future roles. Right from the beginning of the film, with the rolling titles against a black background that follow the images of dominoes, Coll makes explicit his intention to critique, from the perspective of Christian morality, "the unexpected repercussions of human acts". To this end, he uses the concept of the domino effect to build the film's narrative structure. One by one, Victor lines up a long row of deceptions, abuses, and little scams. What he does not know is that he is the last piece, the one that will feel the full weight of all those that have been falling behind him.

Like *Distrito quinto*, this film is set in an atmosphere that wears down the individual: once again, an oppressive heat that is turned into a protagonist: for example, Víctor's stifling sensation during his soiree with a group of English girls, or the bonfire on the beach and their dip into the sea. In this sense, the location of the action in Barcelona is of great importance: Victor moves back and forth between the coast and inland, between the humid air and the cool breeze. He is in constant, exhausting movement, yet he is confined within a limited space. Another of the recurring themes mentioned in the previous sections is that of time. Coll's characters exist in the story in chronological terms: either a lack or an excess of time conditions the actions of the protagonists in this trilogy, thanks mainly to the narrative iteration of events, specifically Victor's flings and visits to the cabaret where many of the characters meet.

Based on the temporal logic we can conclude that Coll understands and represents time in a complementary relationship with the weather: while the latter is conveyed through the torpor that weighs down the characters, the chronologi-

Image 10. *Un vaso de whisky*

cal dimension of causes and consequences serves as a true driving force of the narrative. An eloquent image illustrates this argument: after the beating, we see a half-dead Victor, barely able to sit up, leaning on the frame of a clock-shaped window, thus suggesting the last moments of his life and of the story.

The final moments express the meaning of this shot in narrative form. Another feature common to all three films analysed here is that each one closes with an abrupt open ending that does not clear up the doubts raised over the course of the story. Formally, this image ties up the film with a bleak, empty depth of field, with María's head out of focus, as she props up a dying Victor. A street bereft of people extends towards a vanishing point that is nothing more than the black hole of an alley. The girl, still in love, finally tries to help him, but perhaps this time it is too late. The columns of the building on the left side of the frame are in view, arranged rather like the row of dominoes that opened the film. Lined up in a row, they look as if they are about to fall, one after the other, to collapse at last on top of a dying Victor.

To conclude our analysis of *Un vaso de whisky*, we will focus on the presence of the police, which is more prominent in this case than in the other two films, as here they are embodied in a specific character, while in the previous cases they exert

Images 11 and 12. *Un vaso de whisky*

pressure on the characters without the need to appear on screen. Specifically, a police inspector named Rigaud lurks around throughout the film, observing rather than intervening. He determines that Fernández's character "steals faith in life", meaning that "there is no crime, but there is a criminal." The agent's passive attitude implicitly suggests, more than anything else, the practically total absence of the police. All in all, this is the most tragic and mannerist film of the trilogy, expressed in the sordid settings, such as the cabaret or the boxing rings in the underworld. The mist that bathes the atmosphere of Coll's Barcelona allows the Catalan filmmaker to represent, through an overlapping of frames, the false love that will never be consummated by means of a lap dissolve that shows a resigned Laura together with the image that is causing her grief: María and Víctor embracing in an illusion.

CONCLUSIONS

In essence, in their Barcelona *film noir* trilogy Coll and Fernández tried to give cinematographic expression to various social concerns affecting Spain in the late 1950s. What is truly interesting in studying these three films together, apart from commemorating the collaboration between this director and performer, lies in the identification of a style—or trend—resulting from the context of their production. Along these lines, each film in its own way clearly exhibits the same blend of respect and subversion of the stylistic features of *film noir*.

In *Nunca es demasiado tarde*, despite being his directorial debut, Coll delves deeply into the psychological dilemmas of the characters. Taking into account his variations on the basic features of the *film noir* genre, it can be argued that this debut fits in, more than any other work, to that particular brand of "Iberian *film noir*" that at the same time remains faithful to and modifies the sources on which it draws. In the case of *Distrito quinto*, this unique quality lies in the refinement of the tense crime story, the archetypal depictions of the characters and the failure of their crimes, and in its adaptation of the themes of the genre to the historical moment in Spain. *Un vaso de whisky*, which closes the series with the reflections on the opposition between country and city initiated in his first film, the sordid settings and rhetorical-narrative strategies associated with *film noir* are also visibly evident.

Coll's narrative approach for his Barcelona trilogy on the forces of justice is of great interest because, despite appearing on the screen for just a few minutes, the pressure that the law exerts on the characters in this troubled city is constant. Coll does not show what oppresses his characters, but he does show the mark it leaves on them, both

in thematic and formal ways. For example, in that menacing power that seems to be condensed (literally) in the sweat that stifles the characters in *Distrito quinto*, in the stress that pushes them to make hasty decisions, such as killing an innocent security guard in *Nunca es demasiado tarde*, or in the harm inflicted on a loved one in *Un vaso de whisky*.

Although *film noir* has been well-known in the cinematographic tradition for its incessant playing with light and shadow as a visual element that generates meaning, the trilogy studied here uses them to construct a dialectic between the visible and the invisible. The symbolic and literal presence of shadows draws attention to what is there, what cannot be shown, and what refers to the political and moral constraints of Francoism hidden outside the frame: the religious imperatives, the poverty, the urban violence, and the traditional way of life. These three films also make use of isolation and entrapment in a stressful Barcelona as a metaphor for the social reality of the 1950s and the stifling censorship that constrained filmmakers' artistic expression. Precisely for these reasons, the Coll-Fernández partnership clearly falls within the thematic and formal parameters of the so-called Iberian *noir*.

Arturo Fernández's presence in this trilogy is certainly not insignificant. The dramatic evolution of his image offers a snapshot of three of the cinematic archetypes of the Franco period: the petty criminal, the distrustful man, and the immoral freeloader. Indeed, thanks to Julio Coll, the fatal gunshot that his character fires at the beginning of *Nunca es demasiado tarde* could be interpreted as a starting gun for his race towards stardom in Spanish cinema. ∎

NOTES

1 It should be pointed out that, after this *film noir* trilogy, Fernández worked under Coll's direction in three more films in the 1960s: *Los cuervos* [The Crows]

(1962), *Jandro* (1965), and *Las viudas* [The Widows] (1966), the last of which was co-directed by José María Forqué and Pedro Lazaga.

2 In fact, 1940s the director from Barcelona founded one of Spain's first centres for applied psychology (Comas Puente, 2018).

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ON THIEVES AND HEARTTHROBS: VARIATIONS ON *FILM NOIR* IN THE BARCELONA TRILOGY BY ARTURO FERNÁNDEZ AND JULIO COLL (1956-1959)

Abstract

Due to the recent death of Arturo Fernández, this work seeks to study the figure of filmmaker Julio Coll, through their collaboration in three pivotal films of the Spanish cinema of the 50s: *Nunca es demasiado tarde* (1956), *Distrito quinto* (1957) and *Un vaso de whisky* (1959). This «noir trilogy» sets two parallel lines of analysis: the first one traces the representation of social issues in Spain; the second one focuses on the dramatic evolution of Fernández's early roles. The aim is to identify the thematic, narrative and formal key points of an almost forgotten artist and remember that the beginnings of the famous actor went hand in hand with a very particular genre of our national cinematography. Thus, we will define the *collian* poetic and its correlation with both Franco censorship and morality and the codes of film noir.

Key words

Julio Coll; Arturo Fernández; Film noir; Crime drama; Censorship; Francoism.

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DE LADRONES Y GALANES. VARIACIONES DEL CINE NEGRO EN LA TRILOGÍA BARCELONESA DE ARTURO FERNÁNDEZ Y JULIO COLL (1956-1959)

Resumen

A causa del reciente fallecimiento del actor Arturo Fernández (1929-2019), este estudio recupera la figura del cineasta Julio Coll, a través de la colaboración de ambos en tres films decisivos del cine barcelonés de los años cincuenta: *Nunca es demasiado tarde* (1956), *Distrito quinto* (1957) y *Un vaso de whisky* (1959). Esta «trilogía negra» traza dos líneas para el análisis: una rastrea la representación de los problemas sociales en la España previa al aperturismo; la segunda se centra en la evolución dramática de los primeros personajes de Fernández. El objetivo es identificar las claves temáticas, narrativas y formales de un autor casi olvidado y, a la vez, recordar que los inicios del célebre intérprete estuvieron asociados a un género muy particular en la cinematografía nacional. En este sentido, definiremos la poética *colliana* y su correlación tanto con la censura y moral franquista como con los códigos del cine negro.

Palabras clave

Julio Coll; Arturo Fernández; Cine negro; Cine policiaco; Censura; Franquismo.

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ON THE TRAIL OF BILLY BUDD: AN ANALYSIS OF *BEAU TRAVAIL*

MIGUEL OLEA ROMACHO

1. INTRODUCTION

Beau travail (Claire Denis, 1999) is probably the most acclaimed film by French director Claire Denis. The story, based on Herman Melville's novella *Billy Budd, Sailor*, is set in a French Foreign Legion outpost in Djibouti, which serves as the setting for a peculiar relationship between three men. Sergeant Galoup (Denis Lavant) is devoted to his commandant, Bruno Forestier (Michel Subor), and enjoys the respect and admiration of the soldiers of his regiment. When a new recruit named Sentain (Grégoire Colin) catches Forestier's attention after he takes part in a dangerous rescue operation, Galoup perceives him as a threat, fearing he has become the regiment's new apparent leader.

Denis grafts the widely discussed central motif of jealousy and homoeroticism in Melville's novella onto this plotline, albeit under conditions of narrativity and with a directorial approach that ensure that *Beau travail* is a completely different work and not merely an expository adaptation. Indeed, its connection to Melville's story is not explicitly stated in the title credits, and the film was rarely promoted as a film version of *Billy Budd*, which had already had several canonical adaptations by the time *Beau travail* was released: Benjamin Britten's opera *Billy Budd* (1951), with libretto by E. M. Forster and Eric Crozier; Robert Chapman and Louis Coxe's play *Billy Budd* (1952); and the film *Billy Budd* (Peter Ustinov, 1962). In contrast with these more conventional hypertexts, the source text is not immediately recognisable in Denis's film, and its relationship with Melville's classic should be understood in terms of a complex trans-semiotising process resulting in what is commonly referred to as a "free adaptation".

For the purposes of this study, the phenomenon of adaptation is understood as an interpretative procedure that can never be reduced to the

FREE ADAPTATIONS ARE NOT EXCEPTIONS IN THE PRACTICE OF ADAPTATION, BUT THE CLEAREST EVIDENCE OF THE INHERENTLY TRANSFORMATIVE QUALITY OF THE ADAPTATION PROCESS

mere transposition of fictional material from one medium to another. In this respect, it is useful to consider François Vanoye's definition of adaptation as a "process of integration, of assimilation of the work (or certain aspects thereof), adapted to the vision, the aesthetic, and the ideology of the context of the adaptation and of the adapters" (qtd. in Pérez Bowie, 2010: 7), or Domingo Sánchez-Mesa's description of it as "a decision-making process involving successive choices" that results in "a cultural text vested with the status of a 'complete and autonomous work'" (Sánchez-Mesa, 2009: 134). Robert Stam also rejects the idea of adaptations as mere copies, viewing them instead as "transfers of creative energy" (Stam, 2005: 46) acting on the original work. Along the same lines, Marie-Claire Ropars suggests that the ultimate aim of the adaptation is not to "transpose or remodel the story, but to enhance the text, outshining it, thereby inscribing the trace of what was written in the original text" (Ropars, 1998: 148-149), while Linda Hutcheon observes that "adapters are first interpreters and then creators" (Hutcheon, 2006: 18), since every adaptation involves the appropriation of the material adapted. Free adaptations are thus not exceptions in the practice of adaptation, but the clearest evidence of the inherently transformative quality of the adaptation process. José Luis Sánchez Noriega has developed a taxonomy that distinguishes between various types of adaptations based on one of the most common criteria for assessing them: the "fidelity/creativity" dialectic. Although I would argue that the idea of fidelity is not valid for a complex study of rewritings, it is hard to overlook this conceptual

opposition in any analysis of the relationship between a work and its hypotext. Quoting Gianfranco Bettetini, Noriega defines free adaptation as a practice "that does not ordinarily operate on the text as a whole—which, in any case, is relegated to the background—but that responds to different interests and acts on different levels: the dramatic framework, onto which a story is rewritten, the ambient atmosphere of the text, the thematic or ideological values, a narrative pretext, etc." (Sánchez Noriega, 2000: 65). My study will explore the extent to which *Beau travail* responds to the transformations listed in this definition, in order to prove that it constitutes a valuable example for studying alternative ways of adapting canonical literary texts. To this end, I will analyse the transtextual complexity of the film and the network of interferences articulated around Melville's novella, as well as its transfer to filmic discourse in dialogue with other expressive systems, since any understanding of the "film-literature" relationship is meaningful only in the broader context of the relationships established between a plurality of media.

2. CONTEXT OF RECEPTION

In general, it is not common for the recognition of a work as an adaptation to entail an interpretative analysis merely to identify the text on which it is based. With *Beau travail,* the challenge begins with the title itself, which is of course not the same as that of Melville's story, as the titles of the other adaptations mentioned above are. Stam notes that keeping the title of the source text allows adaptations to "take advantage of a pre-existing market" (Stam, 2000: 65) and the cultural capital of the work being adapted. Conversely, the use of a new title suggests a particular transfiguration of certain aspects of the original, such as its ideological stance or narrative perspective and spatio-temporal location.[1] As Catherine Grant (2002: 58) points out in her brilliant article on Denis's film, free

adaptations allow auteurs to reconfigure classic literary texts in their own style and in connection with other intertexts. Sánchez Noriega considers "auteurial genius" to be the main factor behind this type of adaptation, which is not presented as a "visual expression of the fictional tale" (Sánchez Noriega, 2000: 66), but as an autonomous object that transforms the literary source material based on the filmmaker's own creative consciousness. These kinds of films attract both fans of the director and spectators curious to see the changes that the original has been subjected to in the rewriting process.

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Although the status of *Beau travail* as an adaptation is initially difficult to recognise, it was one of the most widely discussed aspects of the film among critics after its release. Grant's description of the context of reception can shed some light on this point. Before the film's screening at the Venice Biennale, there were only two elements that identified an explicit connection with *Billy Budd*: the music listed in the final credits of the film, which includes excerpts from Britten's opera, and the website of the producer, Pyramid Films, which featured Melville's poem "The Night March" to promote the film (Grant, 2002: 67).[2] Otherwise, there is nothing in any paratextual elements that point to Melville's original story, although the poster clearly depicts the same hostility between the two main characters.

However, as Grant points out, the Biennale festival programs included a new credit that explicitly linked the two texts: "Soggetto dalla nove-

lla *Billy Budd, Sailor* di Herman Melville" (Grant, 2002: 67). This could be considered the moment of a fundamental shift in the promotion of the film as an adaptation. One month after its screening in Venice, the program for the New York Film Festival also included a brief description of *Beau travail* under the title "A note from Claire Denis", that included two Melville poems headed by the words "Inspired by Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*".

Grant thus links this explicit reference to the source text to the circulation of the film on the international festival circuit and its promotion outside France. Denis was already a recognised filmmaker in her homeland, and the film's leading actors were also well known there. Moreover, interest in *Beau travail* had extended beyond the art-house circles of the director's traditional fan-base, as its story about the French Foreign Legion made it appealing to a wider audience. However, these factors did not prove decisive for the film's reception in other countries[3], where its relationship with a canonical American literary text like *Billy Budd* was deemed of more importance. As a result, despite the substantial changes made to the story, the different title, setting and chronotope, the profusion of intertexts and the film's formal abstraction, everyone seemed to know that *Beau travail* was an adaptation of the Melville classic.

3. ON THE TRAIL OF BILLY BUDD

Despite the obscure nature of the intertextual relationship between the book and the film, we are given a few hints of the presence of Melville's story right from the beginning of *Beau travail*. The opening credits are accompanied by an instrumental excerpt from the opera that Benjamin Britten based on *Billy Budd*, but the sound mix and the absence of vocals hinder our ability to make an intuitive connection between this music and the novella. After a series of images that help establish the context with an impressionistic touch—including a sequence shot that pans over

a mural showing the outlines of soldiers, scenes of women dancing in a nightclub, a man yelling "Djibouti, Djibouti" into a phone, and a crowded train racing across a desert landscape—we hear Britten's music again in a different context. The chorus "O heave! O heave away, heave! O heave!" from Act Two, Scene Three of the opera accompanies the regiment's morning exercises, which look more like meditation or classical dance than a military drill. Britten's score is heard again in similar sequences, where Denis suspends any narrative intention in order simply to revel in the male figure and the radical nature of the gestures and movements. It is in these scenes that the music acts more obviously as a "quotation used to evoke another narrative," which Anahid Kassabian identifies as an example of "allusive music" in film (Kassabian, 2001: 50). The reference does not indicate a relationship of continuity between Britten's opera and *Beau travail* as far as the story is concerned, given that its function is mainly emphatic, aimed at underscoring the beauty of the male body, which constitutes one of the central motifs of Melville's novella. It makes sense that Denis would choose Britten's opera as accompaniment for the solders' solemn, choreographed exercises, as they reflect the attention to male physiques that pervades *Billy Budd*. The director makes use of natural light and the positioning of the human figure in the landscape to highlight the expressive value of the actors' physicality, in a sculptural depiction of the body that also recalls the story: "Cast in a mold peculiar to the finest physical examples [...], he showed in face that humane look of reposeful good nature which the Greek sculptor in some instances gave to his heroic strong man, Hercules" (Melville, 2012b: 10). *Beau travail* could thus be described as a kind of commentary on or paraphrase of such descriptive moments in the original story, constituting a clear example of "cinema of the body", in which, to quote Gilles Deleuze, the character must "be reduced to his own bodily attitudes" (Deleuze, 1987: 255).

To this end, the psychological realism of Melville's characterisation of his characters stands in opposition to a portrait mediated by the concept of "embodiment", a notion that Erika Fischer-Lichte (2017: 176) uses in the context of theatre studies to designate the way that a character is determined by his or her performative acts that bring out a particular bodily presence. Master-at-arms Claggart's obsession with the foretopman Billy Budd is thus expressed in the film in bodily terms, as in the encounters between their cinematic versions, Galoup and Sentain, the rivalry between the two men is always reflected in their physical presence. This is the case, for example, of the scene where Galoup provokes the new recruit by demonstrating that he can do faster push-ups, or when the two men circle each other defiantly in another sequence with an operatic solemnity in which Britten's music again plays a pivotal role. It is specifically in this scene that another constant of Melville's story is evoked: the confrontation between Claggart and Budd through the gaze. In both the literary text and the film, the dialogues between these two characters are few and far between, as they communicate their rivalry mainly through the looks they exchange—a motif that is also foreshadowed in the film's promotional poster. In *Billy Budd,* the direct and definitive confrontation between the two sailors doesn't take place until the nineteenth chapter, near the end of the novella. Until then, the "Handsome Sailor" is only the object of his superior's spite from a distance: "Yes, and sometimes the melancholy expression would have a soft touch of longing, as if Claggart could

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even have loved Billy [...]. But this was an evanescence, and quickly repented of, as it were, by an immitigable look, pinching and shrivelling the visage into the momentary semblance of a wrinkled walnut" (Melville, 2012b: 47). The importance of the gaze in Melville's book is also reflected in the construction of the sequence in which Galoup and Sentain are introduced for the first time, on board a motorboat. The camera shows close-ups of the faces, still anonymous, of some of the regiment's soldiers. The actors have their eyes fixed on some place off screen, and the shots cut quickly to show the faces of the boat's crew members indistinctly in rapid succession. The last of the recruits to be shown is Sentain, on whom the shot lingers longer after an eloquent camera movement. Immediately thereafter we see a reverse shot of Galoup, the only one of the passengers who is not staring out to space, as his eyes are fixed on Sentain, thereby initiating his relationship of fascination and hatred for the new recruit.

3.1. Changes in focalisation

Right after this scene, we are introduced to the second timeline in the film, where Galoup is in Marseilles, reflecting in a diary on what happened in Djibouti when he was still with the Foreign Legion (we will not discover until the end that Galoup was discharged for his culpability in Sentain's disappearance, after abandoning him in the desert with a broken compass). From this moment, the film's location and time frame change constantly, switching between Marseilles, where we hear Galoup's voice-over while we watch him

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carrying out his everyday activities as a civilian in France, and his last days in Djibouti. In any case, despite the difficulty entailed in distinguishing between the two timelines and identifying the supporting characters in these first sequences, the nature of the central triangle is soon made clear, quickly establishing the basic dramatic structure that *Beau travail* takes from *Billy Budd*. In the first fifteen minutes, Galoup explains the jealousy he felt towards Sentain from the day he enlisted, and also recalls his feelings for Commandant Forestier: "Bruno Forestier. I feel so alone when I think of my superior. I respected him a lot. I liked him. My commandant. A rumour dogged him after the Algerian War. He never confided in me. He said he was a man without ideals, a soldier without ambition. I admired him without knowing why." It is worth recalling at this point how the relationship triangle is structured in Melville's story. Galoup, Sentain, and Forestier are the film versions of Master-of-arms Claggart, Billy Budd and Captain Vere, respectively. The intrigues between the three, driven by the desire, envy and paranoia of Claggart/Galoup, are very similar in the novella and the film, although the final outcome is different. After Claggart reports Billy to the captain in order to undermine his trust in him, Vere calls both men to his cabin. In reaction to Claggart's unjust accusations, Billy suddenly knocks down the master-at-arms, who dies when he hits his head. Vere, the sole witness to the accident, organises a summary trial that concludes with the sailor being sentenced to death and hanged from the yardarm of the H.M.S. Indomitable. The narrator tells how Captain Vere was tormented by the sailor's execution to his last days, and on his deathbed, after being injured in a battle with a French ship, his last words were "Billy Budd".

Beau travail also features a confrontation between Claggart/Galoup and Billy/Sentain. The incident occurs after the recruit goes out to help a fellow legionnaire who had been punished harshly by Galoup for abandoning his post in order

to attend prayer at the mosque. The sergeant responds by striking Sentain, who hits Galoup back, knocking him to the ground in a sequence that uses slow motion to mark a turning point in the story that is also present in the novella. However, Galoup does not die, and in the next scene we see him abandon Sentain to an almost certain death in the desert. The last thing we see of Vere/Forestier is when he discharges Galoup for his abandonment of Sentain, who is ultimately found and revived by a local tribe. Thus, the character who survives the events to express regret over Billy/Sentain's fate is Galoup himself, and not Vere/Forestier as in the original story.

This conclusion to the story underpins some of the most important transformations of the narrative in *Beau travail*. First of all, the omniscient narrator in *Billy Budd* is replaced by an internal focalisation from Galoup's point of view, placing him at the centre of the story. The diary and voice-over elements allow the fundamental relationship between guilt and desire so central to the novella to be conveyed in the film, expressed through Galoup's personal reflections. At the same time, the first-person narration has direct repercussions on the truth value of the original story. While Melville's narrator is keen to stress that the events recounted really occurred, even using their reality to justify the uneven development of the story ("The symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction cannot so readily be achieved in a narration essentially having less to do with fable than with fact", Melville, 2012b: 85), exactly how much of the story as told by Galoup, plagued by remorse and suicidal thoughts, reflects what actually happened is always ambiguous. In this sense, the codes of verisimilitude that characterise Melville's external narrator could be said to contrast with the potentially falsifiable quality of the time-image in *Beau travail*.

It is worth recalling here that the basic shift that Deleuze identifies in the evolution towards modern cinema is a new understanding of time.

While in the movement-image of classical cinema, time was viewed as a totality depending on the organic whole of sequences resulting from the editing, in "time-image cinema" it becomes a structure of visuality, so that the image is now a representation not only of the object but also of its duration. Although its narration is openly digressive, Melville's novella still conforms to the Aristotelian conception of time structure that Deleuze associates with the movement-image, ordered according to the tripartite division of set-up, confrontation, and resolution. On the other hand, the unreliable narration in Denis's film and the way it lingers on images and sequences that do nothing to further the narrative make *Beau travail* easily identifiable with the features that Deleuze attributes to the new understanding of time in modern cinema. This results in a constant bifurcation of time in the image itself, which ceases to be truthful to become "fundamentally falsifying" instead, as now it is marked by a "power of the false" that proposes the coexistence of not-necessarily true pasts and presents[4] (Deleuze, 1987: 177-178).

THE CODES OF VERISIMILITUDE THAT CHARACTERISE MELVILLE'S EXTERNAL NARRATOR COULD BE SAID TO CONTRAST WITH THE POTENTIALLY FALSIFIABLE QUALITY OF THE TIME-IMAGE IN *BEAU TRAVAIL*

Nevertheless, Grant (2002: 66) suggests that *Beau travail* may be the adaptation that best transfers Melville's digressive tone and the constant interruptions to the progress of the narrative in *Billy Budd*, as well as its ambiguous rhetoric and connotative power: "In this matter of writing, resolve as one may to keep to the main road, some by-paths have an enticement not readily to be withstood. I am going to err into such a by-path. If

the reader will keep me company I shall be glad. At the least we can promise ourselves that pleasure which is wickedly said to be in sinning, for a literary sin the divergence will be" (Melville, 2012b: 16). Denis's film appropriates the preterition and paraphrase of Melville's narrator, who diverges from the story to comment on the historical context of the period, to offer his opinion on certain naval battles, or to share personal anecdotes. The adoption of many of the narrative conventions of art films and essay films in *Beau travail* has a similar effect, as it allows the film to tell its story through "ellipses, redundancies, and a consistent preference for the connotation of potential meanings through the juxtaposition of images and sounds, without always providing a clear, explanatory or causal framework" (Grant, 2002: 65-66). In analogous terms, as Elizabeth Alsop (2014: 16) observes, *Billy Budd* progresses in a constant tension between duty, obligation, and decorum and the threat of their disruption, as becomes clear in the narrator's evasive narration but also in moments in the story like Billy's attacking Claggart and the latter's accidental death ("The next instant, quick as the flame from a cannon discharged at night, his right arm shot out..." [Melville, 2012b: 57]). The duality between desire and discipline in Melville's book is dramatised by Denis through the depiction of the body, evident in the contrast between the rhythmic choreographies of the legionnaires in their exercise routine and Galoup's solitary dance that ends the film. To the sound of the Eurodance classic "The Rhythm of the Night", the character is shown doing a wild, acrobatic dance that continues even after the final credits begin. In this way, the character's use of his body inverts the expected course of events in the final scenes, where Galoup is shown in his bedroom holding a gun in a suicidal pose. Considering these final sequences, Judith Mayne notes that Galoup's body, "whether throbbing slightly in the contemplation of suicide or performing frenetically on the dance floor, cannot escape the dualities of re-

gimentation and desire, duty and passion" (Mayne, 2005: 101). This final scene seems inevitably to evoke Melville's description of Claggart: "though the man's even temper and discreet bearing would seem to intimate a mind peculiarly subject to the law of reason, not the less in his heart he would seem to riot in complete exemption of that law..." (Melville, 2012b: 35). Alsop identifies the opposition between reason and desire not only in the film's bodily attitudes, but also in its narrative construction. Although the narration is focalised through Galoup, *Beau travail* is marked by a series of images that do not seem to belong "to any particular subjectivity or chronology" (Alsop, 2014: 17). An example of this can be found in the scenes where the women of Djibouti[5] appear going about their daily lives, shopping, travelling or working in the fields, generally engaged in activities very different from those of the legionnaires.

THE DUALITY BETWEEN DESIRE AND DISCIPLINE IN MELVILLE'S BOOK IS DRAMATISED BY DENIS THROUGH THE DEPICTION OF THE BOD

On the other hand, the changes to the narration can also be explained in terms of the intertextual relationship that *Beau travail* maintains with *Le petit soldat* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1963). The connection with this film has been described by Mayne (2005: 95) as a strategy for constructing meaning that reflects Denis's intention to film Melville's story as if it were a work of the French New Wave. The references to Godard's film begin with the first words spoken by Galoup in a voice-over: "Marseilles, end of February. I have time ahead of me now." This last sentence is the same one spoken by Bruno Forestier at the end of *Le petit soldat*. Forestier, the protagonist in Godard's film (also played by Michel Subor), is appropriated by Denis in *Beau travail* for a strange kind of cros-

sover. In an interview, Denis has explained that she was imagining a future for Godard's character, where "after killing the Algerian FLN agent, Forestier enlisted in the French Foreign Legion" (Lalanne & Larcher, 2000: 51) and rose to the rank of commandant. Subor's character is not the only tribute that *Beau travail* makes to *Le petit soldat*, as the film also uses the same voice-over narrative device employed in Godard's picture (Mayne, 2005: 94).

The change to the context of the story from Melville's original can be explained in this intertextual relationship, which once again places Forestier on the African continent. This also allows Denis to explore the post-colonial theme that has so interested her, beginning with her first film, *Chocolat* (1988), and continuing right up to more recent pictures like *White Material* (2009).

3.2. The Rhythm of the Night: queer discourse in *Beau travail*

The Royal Navy that serves as the context in *Billy Budd* is replaced in the film with the French Foreign Legion, as it was also still an entirely male environment in the 1990s. As noted above, the motif of homoeroticism has been one of the most widely discussed points of the novella among literary critics. Billy's physical beauty plays a central role in the story, and Claggart's hostility is due basically to his repressed desire for the "Handsome Sailor", as the narrator nicknames him. When the master-at-arms warns Captain Vere that Billy Budd is dangerous, a warning borne of jealousy once again betrays his admiration for the foretopman's beauty ("You have but noted his fair cheek. A man-trap may be under his ruddy-tipped daisies" [Melville, 2012b: 52]). Similarly, the eroticism in Melville's descriptions is impossible to ignore, as the sailor's Apollonian appearance is described as attracting all the men on the H.M.S. Indomitable like "hornets to treacle" (Melville, 2012: 215). *Beau travail* could be considered an openly queer adaptation of *Billy Budd*, where the emphasis on the

soldiers' bodies foregrounds the tension existing in the army between the feelings of camaraderie, solidarity and love between men and the taboo of homosexuality.

Grant (2002: 65) finds it plausible that the triangle should be structured differently in the film in order to reflect the ambiguity that some critics have identified in Claggart's and Vere's motivations in the novella. Galoup's survival and his role in providing the voice-over narration posits a similarity in the portrait of the characters of the master-at-arms and the captain in the hypotext. Although the reader may identify Claggart as the only character attracted to Billy, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests (1990: 109), both Claggart and Vere desire the sailor, even if the rhetoric of the story reveals this in different ways: while the repressed desire of the former could be described as *private*, the attraction felt by the latter, expressed through his authority as ship's captain and the preferential treatment he gives Billy Budd, is legitimised in a *public* context.

On the other hand, one of the most effective ways that Denis's film makes use of the queer potential of the story is its exploration of new forms of representation for eroticism in cinema. In his review of *Beau travail*, Kent Jones celebrates the discovery of a cinema "without a strict sexual orientation" (Jones, 2000: 26), which has abandoned the monolithic nature of the heterosexual couple as a basic element consolidated by the directors of the New Wave. Along these same lines, Elena del Río has studied how Denis's films transgress the ideological structure of the *male gaze* to formulate a new conception of desire and eroticism that bears no relation at all to the binary codes with which they have usually been represented in the medium. Denis's filmmaking displaces the sensuality from the sex scenes and their normative representations towards the filmic language itself, and "onto the unlimited series of perceptions, sensations and affects" that comprise it (Del Río, 2008: 149), injecting eroticism into situations

INSTEAD OF ASSOCIATING SEXUALITY EXCLUSIVELY WITH THE INTERACTION BETWEEN BODIES, THE SPECTATOR IS SEDUCED BY A SHIFT OF ATTENTION TOWARDS PURELY PERFORMATIVE MOMENTS

that are generally not treated as erotic in the vocabulary of classical cinema. In this way, instead of associating sexuality exclusively with the interaction between bodies, in *Beau travail* the spectator is seduced by a shift of attention towards purely performative moments. It is worth noting that Del Rio describes Denis's work as seductive not in a metaphorical sense, but in the literal sense of seduction as an "act that leads a person away from proper conduct or duty" (Del Río, 2008: 148). The spectator is thus led away from the usual modes of viewing and the traditional narrative conventions of the film medium to embrace the chance and randomness of a new type of story that moves completely beyond such conventions.

Moreover, the repeated focus on the image of these men's bodies represents a completely subversive feature from a gender perspective if we consider that the film medium has been characterised since its origins by a phobia of the male figure, as Laura Mulvey pointed out in a recent interview for *Sofilm*. Mulvey goes further still and asserts that Hollywood cinema "had a phobia of homosexuality" (qtd. in Leroy & Ganzo, 2020: 84), given that it has rejected the male body insofar as it could be offered as a spectacle or turned into a sexualised image. To compensate for this taboo, the female body was spectacularised to the extreme, always with a cisgender heterosexual male target audience in mind.

Many have argued that *Beau travail* offers an eroticisation of the male body and, therefore, a direct inversion of the patriarchal codes of the medium that effectively subscribes to the same dua-

listic logic that underpins those codes. The reality is more complex, as Denis's gaze is never fetishistic. When asked in an interview about this supposed sexualisation, the director remarked that it was an issue that had concerned her during filming and that she had shared her concerns with the actors. Denis commented that her intention to "de-objectify" the bodies is evident in scenes like the one showing the soldiers' exercise clothes drying on a washing line (in Mayne, 2005: 97), which follows a shot in which some recruits are hanging from ropes during training, functioning as a trope that frees the sequence from any sexual charge.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In a discussion of his film version of Jean Genet's *Querelle* (1982), Rainer Werner Fassbinder, another great *free* adapter, listed the steps for rewriting any literary text. Notable among these were the need for an unequivocal questioning of the source text and its language, the development of an imagination immediately recognisable as unique, and "the abandonment of any futile attempt to 'complete' the literary work" (Fassbinder, 1992: 168-169).

My analysis of *Beau travail* offers evidence that Claire Denis has adopted this approach, as her adaptation of *Billy Budd* frees itself of subsidiary status to constitute a very personal reading of Melville's classic. That reading is not limited to reconstructing the original story under different coordinates, like those adaptations whose inventiveness lies solely in transporting the events and characters of a literary text to a different era and context. Instead, the transformations in Denis's film can be identified in a fruitful interpretative relationship that affects all of its discursive elements. These include the establishment of a complex network of intertextual relationships (linking Melville's novella to the French New Wave and to opera, along with a certain performative or theatrical understanding of the medium), a

narrative structure that engages with the focalisation of Melville's story in formal terms, attention to the male body, and also the expansion of the queer interpretation of *Billy Budd* through a counter-hegemonic discourse that questions the gender conventions that have characterised the institutionalisation of the film medium. ∎

NOTES

1   Elizabeth Alsop recognises such changes as characteristic of the type of adaptation examined in this study. By abandoning some of the more common narrative features of rewritings, such as the use of the same title, character names, and sequence of events as the original work, Denis challenges spectators who are "more accustomed to spotting disparity than detecting equivalence" (Alsop, 2014: 16) when watching an adaptation. In this way, it is up to the spectators to detect the connections that will enable them to reconstruct the intertextual relationship between the two texts—connections that are made explicit from the outset in more conventional adaptations.

2   Grant highlights the fact that another French art film released that same year was also an adaptation of one of Melville's stories: *Pola X* (1999), Léos Carax's interpretation of the novel *Pierre; or, the Ambiguities*. Carax's film won the Palme d'Or at Cannes, and it is possible that the promoters of *Beau travail* chose not to define Denis's film as another Melville adaptation to avoid it being overshadowed by Carax, who at the time had a higher profile than Denis both in France and internationally (Grant, 2002: 68).

3   The international press also made a particular point of highlighting how unprecedented it was for a woman filmmaker to direct a film focusing on the male world and set in a post-colonial context. In this respect, right from the beginning the production of the film was surrounded by controversy and all kinds of rumours that Denis was making "a film criticising the French army, a porno flick about legionnaires and Ethiopian girls, or a movie about homosexuality in the Foreign Legion" (Renouard & Wajeman, 2001: 5).

4   The subjective nature of Galoup's narration is suggested at the beginning through the editing: a close-up of the water of the sea in Djibouti gradually changes to the diary in which the character is writing, in a cross-fade that briefly holds the double exposure of both images on the screen. In this way, the synthetic appearance of the fade establishes a continuity between the scenes in Djibouti and Galoup's diary entries.

5   Jonathan Rosenbaum argues that one of the best qualities of *Beau travail* as a feminist film is the way it uses African women as witnesses to the action, imposing an ironic frame around the story in the form of "a kind of mainly mute Greek chorus" (Rosenbaum, 2000).

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ON THE TRAIL OF BILLY BUDD: AN ANALYSIS OF *BEAU TRAVAIL*

Abstract

This article offers an analysis of Claire Denis's film *Beau travail* (1999) as a free adaptation of Herman Melville's classic *Billy Budd*. A comparative perspective is adopted to identify the specific transformations in the rewriting process, with attention to changes in focalisation and plot, as well as the film's potential as a queer adaptation of Melville's novella. Central to these relationships is the use of bodies, which creates a narrative that challenges both our expectations of a literary adaptation and the gender conventions of the film medium. In this way, the study finds that *Beau travail* is a benchmark case for defining transformative potential of adaptations.

Key words

Adaptation; Claire Denis; Melville; Rewriting; Performativity; Queer; Cinema of the Body.

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Article reference

TRAS LAS HUELLAS DE BILLY BUDD: UN ANÁLISIS DE *BUEN TRABAJO*

Resumen

El presente artículo aborda el estudio de la película de Claire Denis *Buen trabajo* (Beau travail, 1999) como una adaptación libre del clásico de Herman Melville *Billy Budd*. Para ello, adoptamos una perspectiva comparatista que permite advertir las transformaciones concretas del proceso de reescritura, atendiendo a los cambios en la focalización y la fábula, así como a su potencial como adaptación *queer* de la novela corta de Melville. En el centro de estas relaciones está la preponderancia del cuerpo, responsable de una narrativa que desafía tanto el horizonte de expectativas sobre las adaptaciones literarias como las convenciones de género del medio fílmico. En última instancia, comprobamos que *Buen trabajo* es un caso referencial para definir la práctica de la adaptación en su naturaleza transformadora.

Palabras clave

Adaptación; Claire Denis; Melville; reescritura; performatividad; *queer;* cine del cuerpo.

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Referencia de este artículo

EN TIEMPOS DE LAS ATADURAS (HISTORIA ET CONSUETUDINES FRANCORUM FEUDORUM) BY JOSÉ ANTONIO "FER" FERNÁNDEZ: FRANCO'S DEATH IN ANIMATION*

MERCEDES ÁLVAREZ SAN ROMÁN

NANCY BERTHIER

Franco's death on the 20th of November 1975 was the pretext for a massive propaganda campaign to carefully construct a "final image" that would be engraved in the minds of Spaniards forever, after weeks of grisly death throes whose real details were kept a secret. While the entire Spanish media industry came together as one the very next day to take part in this mission, the sector that truly excelled in the task was the audiovisual sector, which turned the event into a grandiose spectacle, both on television (which was enjoying a golden age in Spain at the time) and in cinemas (reflected in a special edition of the Spanish government's NO-DO newsreel). Added to the extensive coverage on public TV networks were a number of audiovisual projects intended to present a final image of the dictator and thus contribute to his legacy. One of these was *El último caído* [The Last of the Fallen] (1975) by José Luis Sáenz de Heredia, who sought to exalt the figure of Franco in

a filmic testament that was to be released on the first anniversary of the dictator's death. A series of obstacles prevented it from being completed as planned, a fact that effectively confirmed the end of an era and of the propagandistic discourse that had defined it. But in those first months after Franco's demise, there was no room in the national public sphere for perspectives that did not contribute to the solemn apotheosis.

Nevertheless, alternative narratives that dared to offer dissenting perspectives soon began to emerge, even if they could not gain access to the mainstream platforms of mass culture. In the documentary genre, the filmmakers Basilio Martín Patino and Gonzalo Herralde contributed to demythologising Franco's image with *Caudillo* (1977) and *Raza, el espíritu de Franco* [Race, the Spirit of Franco] (1977), respectively. After Spain's transition to democracy, fiction films along the same lines would also appear: *Dragon rapide* (Jaime

Camino, 1985), *Wait for Me in Heaven* (Espérame en el cielo, Antonio Mercero, 1988), *Madregilda* (Francisco Regueiro, 1993), and *¡Buen viaje Excelencia!* [Have a Good Trip, Your Excellency!] (Albert Boadella, 2003).[1]

The most extreme cases, however, can be found in the realm of comedy (black comedy, obviously), which aimed to deconstruct the lofty tone of the propaganda surrounding the event. In particular, in the early years of the transition in Catalonia several films were made that depicted Franco's death with markedly carnivalesque tones. *Testamento* (Joan Martí, 1977), a short documentary shot on 16 mm film, attempts to "spew up" (*vomitar*) the dictator's death through a sacrilegious montage related to the reading of the dictator's will on the day of his death by his last prime minister, Carlos Arias Navarro. *Hic digitur dei* (Antoni Martí, 1976), a feature-length picture on 8 mm film, offers an outlandish take on the dictator's death in the form of a grotesque tale. In *En tiempos de las ataduras (Historia et consuetudines francorum feudorum)* (José Antonio "Fer" Fernández, 1978), an animated short included in the anthology film *Historias de amor y masacre* [Stories of Love and Slaughter] (Jordi "Ja" Amorós, 1978), the demythologising objective is supported by a highly original device for the representation of Franco's death on-screen, founded on the grand tradition of cartoon humour.

This article offers an exploration of how José Antonio Fernández's animated short for adults reconstructs the story of the final moments of Francoism through a cartoon image of the dictator with a unique use of political satire.

HISTORIAS DE AMOR Y MASACRE, A PROJECT IN THE TRADITION OF THE GRAPHIC HUMOUR OF THE 1970S

The first animated feature film for adults in Spanish history, *Historias de amor y masacre*, was a project directed by Jordi Amorós, a cartoonist who worked under the pseudonym "Ja". The film was supported by one of the most subversive satirical magazines of the time, *El Papus*. According to Amorós himself, *"Historias de amor y masacre* was a by-product of *El Papus"* (J. "Ja" Amorós, personal communication, 20 September 2016), and so to properly understand "En tiempos de las ataduras..." by José Antonio Fernández (referred to below by his pseudonym "Fer"), it is essential to clarify the context of the film's relationship with the magazine.

According to Vílchez de Arribas, the last years of Francoism and the first years of democracy constituted "the brightest period in the history of the satirical press in Spain" (Vílchez de Arribas, 2015). Indeed, as his studies confirm, it was a highly productive sector at this time, with six different publications available nationally in 1974 and 1975.[2] The rise of cartoon humour for adults took its cue from the children's comic book (or *tebeo*), which had enjoyed a golden age in Spain during the post-war period, and was influenced by the French magazine *Hara-Kiri*, which years later would also inspire *Charlie Hebdo*. Freedom of the press, restricted in Spain under the Press and Printing Act (*Ley de Prensa e Imprenta*) of 1966, was established on the 1st of April 1977 with a Royal Decree enshrining freedom of expression. This change allowed these magazines to publish humorous content on anything related to Francoism, including the Catholic church and the Spanish military (Vílchez de Arribas, 2015). Nevertheless, although the law now allowed it on paper, in reality there remained a *de facto* control of the press that aimed to restrict freedom of expression in Spain.

As Antonio Altarriba explains, the comic book "ceased to be the mouthpiece (a little rebellious perhaps, but ultimately well-behaved) for official thought and acquired an image of 'marginal avant-gardism', a 'cool' product connected to the concerns of youth" (Altarriba, 2001: 17). In other words, the new generations of democrats appro-

priated this effective medium to reshape an official reality that until then had been distorted in accordance with the whims of the Franco regime. The press played a cathartic role, helping the public to digest the intensity of current events and offering an alternative discourse to that of the State. According to Vílchez de Arribas, publications of this kind turned into "another instrument to bring an end to General Franco's dictatorship and achieve the long-awaited democracy" (Vílchez de Arribas, 2015).

THE PRESS PLAYED A CATHARTIC ROLE, HELPING THE PUBLIC TO DIGEST THE INTENSITY OF CURRENT EVENTS AND OFFERING AN ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSE TO THAT OF THE STATE

El Papus was a Barcelona-based weekly magazine founded in 1973. It was sponsored by Javier de Godó, son of the Count of Godó, and the main shareholder in Elf Editores, a subsidiary of Tisa, the group that owned the national newspaper *La Vanguardia*. With the decline of *Bocaccio 70*, a publication targeting Barcelona's *gauche divine*, Javier de Godó lobbied the editors of his satirical sports magazine *Barrabás* to create a similar weekly publication, but with a socio-political focus (Iranzo Cabrera, 2014: 275-286). Its founders included Xavier de Echarri, Carlos Navarro and the cartoonists Ivà, Oscar, and Gin. As Iranzo Cabrera explains, "Ivà's dream was to intimidate the forces of Francoism, and this was the purpose behind the magazine's title and icon: the *papu*, a monster in Catalan folklore that terrorises children" (Iranzo Cabrera, 2014: 280). From its earliest days, the magazine thus displayed a political commitment that would be made clear in *Historias de amor y masacre*. The magazine had an average print run of around 230,000, reaching a peak of 400,000 copies at one point (Iranzo Cabrera, 2013). In ad-

dition to its founders, some of the most renowned cartoonists of the era contributed to it, including "Perich", "Fer", "Ja", "Chumy-Chúmez", and "Gila". Each issue offered a mixture of panels and images that dealt with different aspects of Spanish society, ranging from political affairs to pseudo-pornographic touches.

During the first years of Spain's transition to democracy, despite the greater freedom resulting from the repeal of the aforementioned *Ley de Prensa*, it was not yet possible to adopt an openly satirical discourse on political issues, as the transition was being managed on the terms of the governing Francoists in an atmosphere of extreme repression (Baby, 2018). The publication of *El Papus* proved particularly uncomfortable for a regime—now with king Juan Carlos as its figurehead—that was moving towards democracy but still maintained some of the machinery of a dictatorship. Indeed, humorous takes on the events unfolding during the transition were not welcomed by certain sectors of society. Already in the twilight of Francoism, the magazine *El Papus* had been suspended for four months by order of the Council of Ministers in June 1975, and it suffered a similar fate a year later (Vílchez de Arribas, 2015). In addition to being directly sanctioned by the authorities with fines, the editors' office received constant threats from right-wing extremist groups that sought to silence it.

On the 20th of September 1977, one of these threats was carried out and the *El Papus* editorial team suffered an attack at its headquarters. The attack, which resulted in the death of the building's porter, Juan Peñalver, was attributed to a right-wing extremist youth group named Juventud Española en Pie. Those responsible were given the minimum sentence of six months and one day for possession of explosives, a decision that even the Supreme Court recognised was extremely mild when the magazine's publisher Ediciones Amaika appealed against it.[3] The documentary *El Papus, anatomía de un atentado* [El Papus, Anat-

omy of an Attack] (David Fernández de Castro, 2010), broadcast for the first time on Spanish public television in February 2011, attempts to clarify the details of an incident that continues to be shrouded in mystery. Ernesto Milá, a writer with fascist sympathies who was arrested on several occasions in relation to right-wing extremist activities during the transition, asserts in this documentary: "In my opinion, the attack on *El Papus*, and not only the attack on *El Papus* but a lot of other attacks that took place in those days, reeks of the cesspools of the State."

It was in this context that Jordi Amorós made *Historias de amor y masacre*. In effect, "taking advantage of the moment of prosperity that *El Papus* was enjoying, he proposed to the publisher the idea of financing an animated film that would feature eight of the best-known cartoonists at that time" (Manzanera, 1992: 123). In addition to his activity as a cartoon humourist, Amorós, who learned about animation at the Buch-Sanjuán studios (Manzanera, 1992: 123), founded the advertising studio Equip in Barcelona with Víctor Luna in 1975. It was there that most of the sketches for the film were animated. Each cartoonist provided him with the script and some drawings, and a team led by Amorós and his partner used these to make the film. "Fer" was the only contributor who had to make his own film himself, as will be discussed below. The project, which began in 1975, took three years to complete, as progress was affected by the workload of the advertising jobs received by the studio.

According to Amorós, it was a largely self-financed film, although it benefited from an investment from the magazine's publisher. *"El Papus* financed it; I asked them for three million pesetas and it cost around 30 million. I paid for it myself with what I earned from the advertising" (J. "Ja" Amorós, personal communication, 20 September 2016). However, he admits that he is unsure of the exact amounts, and in fact Manzanera lists the budget as 5 million. "Ja" also states that the

publishing house holds the rights to the film. In the database of the Institute of Cinematography and Audiovisual Arts, Ediciones Amaika is listed as the film's producer, which, added to the fact that it was to be distributed to commercial theatres, would have disqualified it as an underground work if it were not for the fact that "Ja" was not a mainstream figure in the film industry and the film itself was not associated with any other names in the sector.

THE IRREVERENT AND SUBVERSIVE TONE, PROPELLED BY THE CREATIVE FREEDOM OF ANIMATION, TAKES THE TRADITION OF SPANISH MAINSTREAM CINEMA OF THE 1960S AND 1970S TO A WHOLE NEW, WILD DIMENSION

Historias de amor y masacre is made up of six shorts, authored by "Oscar", "Fer", "Ja", "Chumy-Chúmez", "Gila", and "Ivà", with transitions in the form of little gags by "Perich". Despite its nature as an anthology, certain elements give the film a kind of unifed cohesion. The title, to which was added the subtitle *"Un filme de gran aparato"* ["a well-endowed film"], constitutes a somewhat provocative announcement of the general tone and establishes a common thread vague enough to connect a series of stories that are highly diverse in both style and theme. In a kind of prologue, whose form parodies Walt Disney's typical greetings in his short productions, the strip cartoonist Manuel Vázquez Gallego, like a master of ceremonies, announces the program to the spectator: "Cojoncio Cabretas presenta: The fantastic world of Cojonland" (the second part of the title appearing this way, in English). The irreverent and subversive tone, propelled by the creative freedom of animation, takes the tradition of Spanish mainstream cinema of the 1960s and 1970s to a whole new, wild dimension. According to Jordi Amorós,

his film introduced a brand of humour that would become popular in the 1990s with hits like *Torrente, el brazo tonto de la ley* [Torrente, the Dumb Arm of the Law] (Santiago Segura, 1997) (J. "Ja" Amorós, personal communication, 20 September 2016). The explicit sex and full frontal nudity, the use of disability and divinity as objects of humour, and the distancing strategies of fable and of the historical film to comment on contemporary society are some of the characteristic features of this forgotten work of Spanish cinema.

EN TIEMPOS DE LAS ATADURAS (HISTORIA ET CONSUETUDINES FRANCORUM FEUDORUM): FRANCO'S DEATH TRANSPOSED TO THE MIDDLE AGES

En tiempos de las ataduras (Historia et consuetudines francorum feudorum) is the second of the six stories included in this anthology film (located in the film at minutes 00:17:28 to 00:23:18[4]). Seven shorts were originally planned, but due to time constraints it was decided to leave out José María Vallés' contribution. "Fer's"'and Vallés' shorts are

the only ones that caricature the dictator and offer their own version of his death. The fact that "Fer's" story was chosen for inclusion and not Vallés' apparently had nothing to do with the content, according to Amorós, but was due to a question of the personal preferences of the magazine's editorial team. It was Jorge "Gin" Ginés, a well-known cartoonist with influence at the magazine, who suggested that "Fer" participate in the film. "Fer's" cartoon was the only one that was not animated in the Equip studio, a fact that the cartoonist attributed to his lack of experience with the medium at the time. "They made the film for all the cartoonists. Four drawings were delivered, and [they did] the rest. But because I didn't have as much of a name, I had to do it myself," recalls "Fer" (J. A. "Fer" Fernández, personal communication, 21 September 2016). To draw all the transitions and poses, "Fer" had the help of his brother-in-law, Josep Maria Rius i Ortigosa ("Joma"), another well-known humorist.

Born in 1949 in Mansilla de las Mulas in the Spanish province of León and based in Catalonia, José Antonio Fernández was appointed artistic

Fig. 1. *El Papus*, no. 188, 24 December 1977. Excerpt from a comic by "Fer"
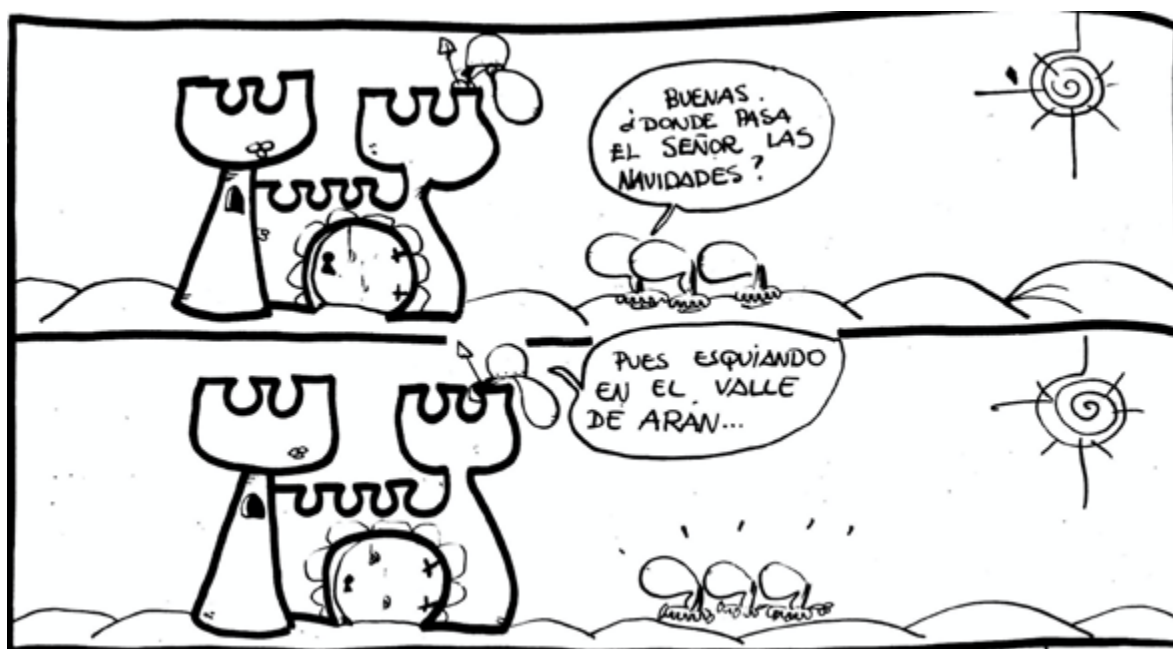
director for *El Papus* and also for the magazine that replaced it, *El Jueves*, which is still in print today. In those days, "Fer" combined his journalistic work with his job as a high school history teacher. The series he published in *El Papus* were *Historias fermosas* and *El castillo* (fig. 1), and his content often had political themes, rather than the sexual overtones typical of other contributors to the magazine.

By setting his comic strips in the Middle Ages, "Fer" was able to address contemporary issues more freely. The site of connection between sender and receiver is located here in the transposition of supposedly medieval characters and situations to the present. "Fer" describes this process, which made him feel less exposed: "If soldiers were shown beating people, well, it was the Middle Ages... but it was perfectly clear that it was now" (J. A. "Fer" Fernández, personal communication, 21 September 2016). Despite this precaution, both "Fer" and "Ja" acknowledge that the upheavals of the period had them running risks that they could not foresee. "We were unaware," explains "Fer" (J. A. "Fer" Fernández, personal communication, 21 September 2016), while "Ja" observes: "We weren't afraid; it was a party" (J. "Ja" Amorós, personal communication, 20 September 2016). Although the passage of time may have affected their perspective, it was clearly that naivety that gave them the courage to challenge the censors with an innovative language.

When "Fer" was invited to take part in the film, he thought of adapting the historical universe of *El castillo* and *Historias fermosas*, which he and the audience were already familiar with, to film format: "Franco was dead. The Middle Ages, little soldiers... 'I'm going to do Franco's death, transposed to the Middle Ages'" (J. A. "Fer" Fernández, personal communication, 21 September 2016), With a duration of 5 minutes and 49 seconds, the film could be considered a kind of expansion of his comic strip stories, with sound and moving pictures. It uses the same protagonist, a feudal lord living in a medieval castle, surrounded by his faithful troops. Aesthetically, the cartoon takes up some of the elements used by United Productions of America (UPA) to revolutionise animation in the 1950s (clearly defined contours, simple shapes, basic backgrounds, a limited chromatic palette), while also establishing a certain continuity with the Spanish comic book tradition. This formal austerity contributed to the reinforcement of the symbolic dimension of the film.

In *En tiempos de las ataduras...*, the story begins *in medias res* with the depiction of the cruelty of a ruler at the end of his reign. The ruler orders the execution of his subjects, whose severed heads fill him with evident delight, until he suddenly falls ill. This leads to a second sequence, in which the tyrant is literally kept alive by the blood of his people, which is injected into him with a giant syringe. Finally, the lord dies, and the final sequence of the short covers his funeral and resurrection by means of an injection of pig's blood. The soundtrack is minimalist: simple music marks out the pacing of the story, and pig squeals made by the feudal lord serve for what could be deemed to resemble dialogue.

Román Gubern points out that the term "caricature" (the raw material of the cartoon humour in *El Papus* and *Historias de amor y masacre*) comes from the Italian *caricare*, meaning to fill, accentuate, or exaggerate the features (Gubern, 1994: 215). Altarriba (2001) compares caricature to the reflection of the mirrors on Callejón del Gato in Ramón María del Valle-Inclán's *Bohemian Lights*, as it turns reality into an *esperpento*.[5] The low level of iconicity of the caricature, i.e., the lack of similarity to the individual represented, leaves room for the sender's and the receiver's imagination. It is in this space that the artist acts. The interpretation of the message by the reader/spectator thus requires an intimate understanding of the context. This is the strength of the medium, and at the same time it is what triggers furious reactions that other art forms rarely manage to arouse.

Fig. 2. A soldier salutes his lord with his arm held high. *En tiempos de las ataduras…*

Although the world portrayed in "Fer's" film is explicitly medieval, many elements invite us to identify parallels with Franco's dictatorship. The first is the title itself, whose Latin subtitle, "Historia et consuetudines francorum feudorum" alludes to the set of feudal laws compiled in the *Consuetudines feudorum* (lit. "feudal customs"). But by including in this expression the genitive form *francorum*, the ironic allusion to the "kingdom" of Franco leaves no room for doubt as to the parallels the spectator will be invited to make.

In this universe, Franco holds the highest rank in the hierarchy, and thus assumes the role of a feudal lord. Various elements enable us to identify him, beginning with how he is dressed: a showy uniform that mimics the style of the *Generalísimo*. An anachronistic element introduced at the beginning of the film, the feudal lord's sunglasses, serves to evoke what in the 1970s had become a kind of identifying sign of dictators throughout the Spanish-speaking world. Moreover, several of the characters who address him—and the feudal lord himself at the moment of his death—raise their hands in imitation of the fascist salute (fig. 2). In relation to the background, the presence of a crucifix and a bishop at the ruler's sickbed serve as clear allusions to one of the major pillars of the defunct regime:

the Catholic church. The army, represented by a line of soldiers at the feudal lord's beck and call, also plays a prominent role in the film. At one point, one of the soldiers removes his helmet—grey in colour like his uniform—in order to approach a dissenter incognito and thus quell him more easily, an image that seems to allude to Franco's secret police.

At the end of the film, the appearance of a stylised map of Spain contextualises the story even more clearly. "Fer" says he had planned to include more identifying elements, but the censors forced him to make changes. The day he went to the Equip studio to make the required cuts was the very same day that the bomb exploded at the offices of *El Papus*, in September 1977. He was unhappy about being forced to cut out some of the more obvious elements identifying the dictator. "I never wanted to cover up the fact that the film was about Franco. They made me cut the hand of Saint Teresa and the cloak of the Virgin of Pilar [both sacred Catholic relics], which appear so briefly you hardly see them" (J. A. "Fer" Fernández, personal communication, 24 September 2016) (fig. 3). This suppression of information effectively broadens the range of interpretations and requires more effort and contextual knowledge on the part of the receiver.

Fig. 3. The bishop waves the relic of the Hand of Saint Teresa at the dying man. *En tiempos de las ataduras…*

Some critics avoided explicitly identifying the feudal lord and limited their reviews to general statements. Among these was the reviewer for *La Vanguardia*, who wrote: ""Fer" continues with his castles and offers a fierce and surrealistic parody of historical dictators" (Bonet Mojica, 1980: 55). However, the satire of Franco was not limited to these visual elements, as it was also (and especially) expressed in the story, which is very clearly related to the last moments of the dictator's life in the autumn of 1975.

The short begins with one of the most important events of Franco's last days: the execution of five political prisoners in 1975 that triggered an international campaign to call for their sentences to be commuted. Neither the protests nor the intervention of the Pope and of Spain's future king managed to convince Franco to relent, and the executions, carried out on 27 September, were seen as a final cruel and gratuitous act of an ageing dictator whose senility was becoming increasingly obvious, as revealed by the images of his last public appearance on the balcony of the Royal Palace of Madrid on 1 October 1975. In "Fer's" film, the first minute of the story (00:00:00–00:01:08) offers an extremely grotesque allusion to the executions, depicting the excitement that the spectacle of the beheading of innocent victims elicits in the gesticulating ruler, whose pig squeals express his joy to a crowd gathered around the foot of one of the towers of the castle (fig. 4). Power is exercised graphically by means of a whip, a symbol of violence and oppression, used by one

THE SATIRE OF FRANCO WAS NOT LIMITED TO THESE VISUAL ELEMENTS, AS IT WAS ALSO (AND ESPECIALLY) EXPRESSED IN THE STORY, WHICH IS VERY CLEARLY RELATED TO THE LAST MOMENTS OF THE DICTATOR'S LIFE IN THE AUTUMN OF 1975

Fig. 4. The feudal lord attends the public executions. *En tiempos de las ataduras...*

of his henchmen to incite the audience to cheer the feudal lord, who during the executions first waves a white handkerchief (in a clear allusion to bullfighting), and then makes a thumbs-down gesture like a Roman emperor. Put simply, he watches the executions like a spectator at a circus show or a bullfight, reflecting his lack of concern for human life and the individual importance accorded to him. As noted above, the only sounds he is capable of articulating are pig noises, and from the outset it is clearly the author's intention to identify the dictator with this animal, which in the Spanish lexicon carries a connotation of filthiness, rudeness and savagery. George Orwell drew on the same metaphor in his novella *Animal Farm* (1945), in which a pig named Napoleon represents Josef Stalin and, of course, Napoleon Bonaparte; in 1954, John Halas and Joy Batchelor introduced this dictator-pig to the world of animation in their film adaptation of Orwell's book.

The second part of the film alludes to the period from the onset of Franco's fatal illness around mid-October up to his death on 20 November 1975. This period, ironically labelled by Manuel Vázquez Montalbán as the "survival ceremony" (Vázquez Montalbán, 2005: 89), was a period of media silence. The reality of Franco's condition, after initially being denied, was effectively concealed so that the public could never be certain of what was really happening. In a therapeutic frenzy to keep him alive at any cost, from one

week to the next the Caudillo turned from a man into a kind of cyborg. His condition was revealed years later with the release of pictures taken by his son-in-law, the Marquis of Villaverde, who as a physician followed the operations closely.[6] However, at the time no images were made public and Franco's illness was kept off-camera. Given that the Spanish people had become accustomed to the constant media presence of the *Generalísimo* for nearly forty years, his sudden absence created the sensation of a gaping void.

"En tiempos de las ataduras..." depicts this moment when the dictator's illness was rendered invisible in its own grotesque and ludicrous way. When the film was made, the details of the intensive therapy that Franco was subjected to were still unknown. However, the numerous press releases by the "usual medical team",[7] despite the use of scientific terminology that "pasteurise[d] the language of death" (Vázquez Montalbán, 2005:

89), particularly the final report announcing his passing, offered a glimpse into a grisly reality, quite apart from the numerous rumours that had begun circulating at the time: "Parkinson's disease. Coronary heart disease with acute anteroseptal myocardial and diaphragmatic infarction. Recurrent acute digestive ulcers with repeated massive haemorrhaging. Bacterial peritonitis. Acute renal failure. Left íleofemoral thrombophlebitis. Bilateral aspiration bronchopneumonia. Endotoxic shock. Cardiac arrest."[8]

"Fer" represents the period of the macabre intensive therapy at the end of October and early November through a series of scenes in which the Caudillo's underlings go in search of fresh blood to keep the dying man alive. The magic fluid is taken from the subjects, sowing terror among the people, especially dissidents, who are embodied in particular in the anachronistic form of a character painting political graffiti on a wall (*"Pan y tra..."*

Fig. 5. A dissenter is held down to extract his blood. *En tiempos de las ataduras...*
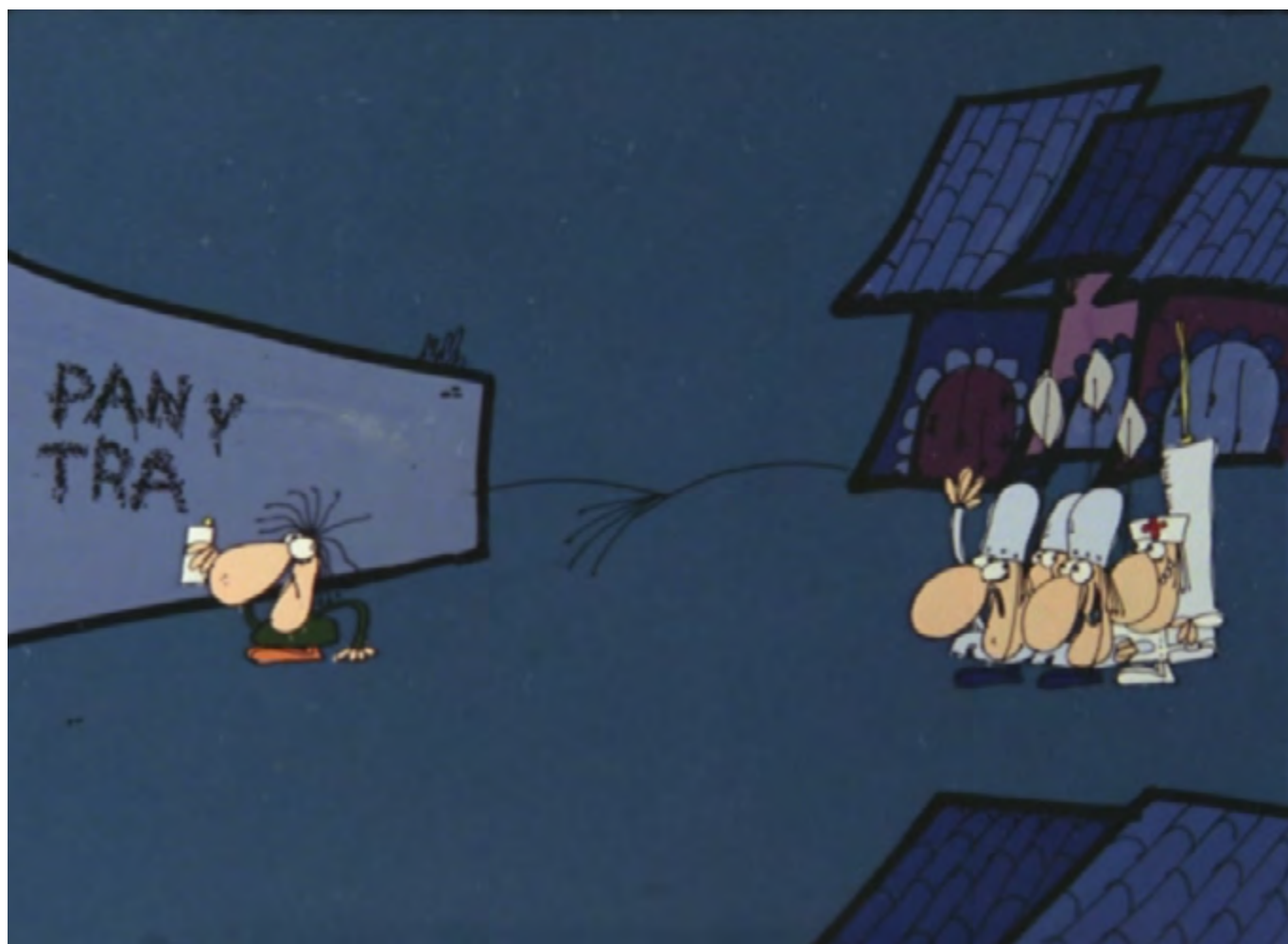
meaning "bread and work") (fig. 5). The deteriorating health of the feudal lord, who has now turned into a kind of vampire, is reflected in the increasing rate of the blood infusions, until at last there is not a single living soul left in his fiefdom. The blood is injected using syringes as big as the characters' bodies, their disproportionate size serving as a metaphor for the magnitude of the repression and abuses of power. The dictator is kept alive thanks only to a band of minions who bleed the population dry, in a campaign of terror that is depicted graphically in the film. The sky grows darker as the landscape fills with bloodless corpses. The image turns blue to underscore the twilight of a dark age. "Fer's" imagination has filled the void left by the forbidden image of Franco's dying moments with this grisly depiction.

The last part of the film, dealing with the feudal lord's funeral, is presented as a parody of the parade of propaganda that followed Franco's death. Given the Caudillo's condition after so many weeks of intensive therapy, the "final image" in reality was not that of the traditional *belle mort* showing the man on his deathbed. Instead, it was transferred to a moment *post mortem*, with the spectacle of the body on display on the 21st and 23rd of November in the Royal Palace's Hall of Columns.

THE LAST PART OF THE FILM, DEALING WITH THE FEUDAL LORD'S FUNERAL, IS PRESENTED AS A PARODY OF THE PARADE OF PROPAGANDA THAT FOLLOWED FRANCO'S DEATH

"Fer" portrays the moment of death (00:04:08–00:04:25) with some traditional, generally placid medieval representations, which tend to include a representative of the Church who can ensure that the deceased will obtain his passport to paradise. The most significant elements of this cliché are

parodied here. A simple shot with a green background shows a canopied bed decorated with a crucifix in which the dying man, still dressed in his uniform and sunglasses, covered with a red and yellow cloth (the colours of the Spanish flag), succumbs to his pain with his uniquely pig-like squeals. His final gesture is a military salute. A caricatured bishop watches over him and makes the sign of the cross while three guards and a nurse bear witness to the supposedly tragic event. A fade out ends the scene.

In the next shot, a funeral procession made up of representatives of the church and the army makes its way through hilly terrain that serves as a stylised image of the landscape of Cuelgamuros, where the Caudillo was buried on 23rd November (00:04:26–00:04:50). The propaganda pronounced at his memorial ceremonies emphasised Franco's place in history for all eternity. The discourse reached a fever pitch at the time of his interment behind the high altar of the basilica at the Valley of the Fallen, particularly evident in the special edition of the NO-DO newsreel (Sánchez-Biosca & Tranche, 2005: 370). The newsreel's final scene is revealing in this sense: a shot of the heavy (and supposedly unmovable) granite slab that covered the grave, which only bears the name Francisco Franco, is linked through the editing to an image of Christ on the cross, serving to conclude the report, while the gloomy voice-over remarks solemnly: "Francisco Franco, a name for history." The suggestion is thus that although Franco's "natural body" has succumbed, his "political body" would go on living, in a kind of symbolic resurrection.

The last part of "Fer"'s film parodies this idea in its unique style by concluding with an image of an unholy resurrection. Along the road taken by the procession towards the gravesite, the presence of an innocent pig (00:04:50) gives one solider the idea to draw its blood with a syringe and inject it directly into the coffin. The pig was the only creature still alive, apart from the feudal

Fig. 6. The feudal lord's resurrection. *En tiempos de las ataduras...*

CONCLUSION

The audiovisual appropriation of Franco's last days in "Fer's" short film, and more generally in the context of the Catalan counterculture of the period, reflects Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque; on both the critical and subversive levels, founded on the principle of abasement and the world upside down, and on the level of its joyfully regenerative nature, representing "the popular corrective applied to the narrow-minded seriousness of the spiritual pretence" of the dominant order (Bakhtin, 2003: 22). Against the solemnity of the official images of Franco's death condensed into an idealised "final portrait", "Fer" offers us a form of counter-factual history that acts as a kind of felicitous albeit fictitious "corrective". "En tiempos de las ataduras..." ties in with what the historian Jacques Le Goff refers to as *enjeu-mémoire*[9] to designate the democratic role played by alternative and marginal memories by virtue of the liberation they offer from the official, dominant memory (Le Goff, 1988: 175-177). Against the narrow-mindedness of the official images and the symbolic repression of anyone who does not subscribe to their discourse and is unable to express it, "Fer's" short offers a different vision, which, given its limited circulation on the margins of the film industry, has no objective other than to deconstruct (or "untie") the official narrative, overwhelming it with ludicrous fantasies.

lord's faithful servants, who harbour no doubts as to the animal's compatibility with their master. And the injection does indeed revive the dead man, who rises out of his coffin like a macabre and terrifying Snow White. His servants welcome his resurrection joyfully, in a clear allusion to those Francoists nostalgic for a dying regime; in this counter-history, their wishes are fulfilled. The vampire-lord raises his hand in a victory sign, wearing a disturbing smile and making his usual squeals, reinforcing the pig-like nature of the character revived by the blood of the unfortunate animal. The final shot (00:05:30) affirms this victory over death by porcine resurrection with a map of Spain, upon which the character descends, landing in the very middle and stepping firmly on Spanish soil (fig. 6). In the context of its creation, prior to the advent of democracy, this last sequence, offering a carnivalesque depiction of the historical reality with an absurd happy ending for the character (albeit unhappy for his subjects), reflects the apprehension felt by many over a political situation that was still uncertain, seemingly founded on the continuity of the dictatorship with a project for a future that was "tied up and well tied up", as one of Franco's well-known sayings goes.

Through its intrinsic materiality, animation can contribute to the expression of political concerns and enrich the language of the printed comic strip, thanks to the addition of sound and movement. The leap made to the big screen by the worlds of the cartoonists of *El Papus* could have enhanced their visibility, but its delayed release (due to the precarious production conditions) robbed *Historias de amor y masacre* of its timeliness. Indeed, both "Fer's" short and the film as a whole went largely unnoticed at the time of

its release—1978 according to the ICAA database, and 16 April 1979 in the Peñalver and Rosales theatres in Madrid, according to Manzanera. Its distribution was impacted by the lack of support for a project made on the margins of the film industry.[10]

After the advent of democracy marked by the adoption of the Constitution of 1978, Franco's death seemed a thing of the past, and it would be some time before interest in it would be rekindled. Moreover, in the time it took to complete the film, the room for freedom of expression had expanded, and what might have seemed provocative three years earlier seemed tame in the context of subversive artistic movements like the *Movida*. The effect of the film's political satire, whose success always depends on its relevance to current affairs, had lost its power. Despite these circumstances, this atypical production in the context of the transition to democracy and of the history of animated film in Spain is extremely valuable for the new perspectives it offers on this historical period, which explains why it has been arousing a resurgence of interest in recent years. ∎

NOTES

1 For further information, see Berthier (2003, 2012, 2020, 2012).

2 Vílchez de Arribas mentions *La Codorniz, Barrabás, El Papus, Por Favor, Hermano Lobo,* and *El Cocodrilo Leopoldo*.

3 See "Rechazada la querella" (1981).

4 For this article, we have referred to the edited version of the film on the compilation DVD *Del trazo al píxel. Un recorrido por la animación española* (2015).

5 "Some have wanted to see cartoons as the most obvious expression of those concave mirrors on Callejón del Gato described by Valle-Inclán to define *esperpento*. And it is true that in the comic strip the drawing tends towards stylisation or distortion, or in any case towards exaggerations of the characteristic features" (Altarriba, 2001: 12).

6 See *La Revista*, 29 October 1984.

7 56 reports and 115 press releases.

8 Reproduced in *Arriba*, 20 November 1975.

9 The French term *enjeu* has no exact translation in English. Its closest equivalent would be "what's at stake".

10 As Manzanera points out: "The film had no publicity campaign organised by its distributor, Filmax, which would go bankrupt sometime later, and it was screened in only a few Spanish cities. On the other hand, the producer, Editorial Amaika S.A., which owned *El Papus*, continued to take an interest exclusively in its publications, which were what it was making a profit out of, and it did not concern itself with the commercial exploitation of the film" (Manzanera, 1992: 125).

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VANISHING POINTS

EN TIEMPOS DE LAS ATADURAS (HISTORIA ET CONSUETUDINES FRANCORUM FEUDORUM) BY JOSÉ ANTONIO "FER" FERNÁNDEZ: FRANCO'S DEATH IN ANIMATION

Abstract

This paper presents the animated short film *En tiempos de las ataduras (Historia et consuetudines francorum feudorum)*, made during the early years of the Spanish transition to democracy by the cartoonist José Antonio "Fer" Fernández, and included in *Historias de amor y masacre* (Jordi Amorós, 1978), the first animated feature film for adults in Spanish history, produced with the support of the satirical magazine *El Papus*. Inspired by a series that "Fer" published in *El Papus*, which made use of a medieval imaginary to talk about current events, the short film depicts Franco's death in the form of a tale about a feudal lord with recognisable allusions to the Caudillo. This humorous satire forms part of a series of stories about Franco's death created in the context of the Catalan counterculture of this period, taking a carnivalesque view of the event ("world upside down").

Key words

Spanish Cinema; Franco; Transition to Democracy; Animation; Satirical Press; Humour.

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EN TIEMPOS DE LAS ATADURAS (HISTORIA ET CONSUETUDINES FRANCORUM FEUDORUM), DE JOSÉ ANTONIO FERNÁNDEZ «FER»: LA MUERTE DE FRANCO EN ANIMACIÓN

Resumen

Este texto presenta el cortometraje de animación realizado durante la primera Transición por el humorista gráfico José Antonio Fernández «Fer», al amparo de la revista satírica *El Papus*, «En tiempos de las ataduras (Historia et consuetudines francorum feudorum)», incluido en *Historias de amor y masacre* (Jordi Amorós, 1978), primera película de animación para adultos del cine español. Inspirado en unas series que «Fer» publicaba en *El Papus* y que se inscribían en un imaginario medieval para hablar de la actualidad, el corto narra la muerte de Franco en forma de un cuento protagonizado por un señor feudal con reconocibles alusiones al Caudillo. Esta jocosa sátira forma parte de un conjunto de relatos de la muerte de Franco en el ámbito de la contracultura catalana de la época, desde una visión carnavalesca del evento ("mundo al revés").

Palabras clave

Cine español; Franco; Transición; Animación; Prensa satírica; Humor.

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"IT'S IMPOSSIBLE FOR ME TO BE THAT WOMAN AGAIN": EMBODIMENT AND IDENTITY IN *QUIÉN TE CANTARÁ*

MERCEDES ONTORIA-PEÑA

I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to analyse how the film *Quién te cantará* [Who Will Sing to You] (Carlos Vermut, 2018) explores the relationship between celebrity culture and the construction of female identity through an aesthetic of sensation. By focusing on the materiality of the subjects on the screen, Vermut offers a type of image that connects with the viewer's sensations, rather than occurring as a mere cognitive act. The framework for this analysis is based on haptic film theory, a field of study related to film phenomenology. This theory has attracted considerable interest since the 1990s, when theoretical studies of cinema first began adopting a perspective that reflected on the question of corporeality.

Film phenomenology is concerned with the act of perception, focusing on how a film's materiality, the subjects and objects on the screen, and even the audience act as sensorial bodies. The corporeality of the cinematic medium, the mate-riality of the projected images, and the spectator's body are constituent elements of a theory of cinematic perception that have interested scholars such as Vivian Sobchack (*The Address of the Eye*, 1992), Laura Marks (*The Skin of the Film*, 2000), and Jennifer Barker (*The Tactile Eye*, 2009). These authors describe a type of image capable of conveying a tactile or sensorial impression that connects with the viewer's body and triggers haptic visuality, as opposed to traditional optical visuality: "Haptic *perception* is usually defined by psychologists as the combination of tactile, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive functions, the way we experience touch both on the surface of and inside our bodies [...]. In haptic *visuality*, the eyes themselves function like organs of touch" (Marks, 2000: 162). Citing Dudley Andrew, a pioneer in introducing phenomenology to film studies, Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich (2016: 24) define film phenomenology as an alternative to structuralist and poststructuralist approaches. Sobchack refers to phenomenological semiotics as a practice that

characterizes watching a film as an existential experience, which can therefore respond to the need to address cinema "as life expressing life, as experience expressing experience" (Sobchack, 1992: 5). This is an especially interesting approach if we consider that the cinematic experience is built upon sensory perceptions that lead to conscious knowledge: "It [the film experience] entails the visible, audible, kinetic aspects of sensible experience to make sense visibly, audibly, and haptically" (Sobchack, 1992: 9).

In the case of Spanish cinema, recent studies by authors like Belén Vidal (2019) and Katarzyna Paszkiewicz (2020) adopt this analytical framework to explore different films. In *A Somatic Poetics of Crisis Cinema*, Vidal traces a connection between the experiences of vulnerability of the female protagonists in three films: *Wounded* (La herida, Fernando Franco, 2013), *Stockholm* (Rodrigo Sorogoyen, 2013) and *Magical Girl* (Carlos Vermut, 2014). This vulnerability is expressed through the anxiety the women suffer and the physical harm they inflict on themselves. In this way, the films expose a malaise that can no longer be attributed to the somatization of the Spanish economic crisis, but instead is the product of the neoliberal structures that brought about that crisis, which subjugate the body. Through this reading, Vidal reveals how Spanish films have absorbed the emotional breakdown of society and turned it into an aesthetic of crisis. In *Touch as Proximate Distance*, Katarzyna Paszkiewicz presents a study of Isabel Coixet's films *The Secret Life of Words* (La vida secreta de las palabras, 2005), *Yesterday Never Ends* (Ayer no termina nunca, 2013), and *Endless Night* (Nadie quiere la noche, 2015), considering physical contact and tactile relations as forms that juxtapose intimacy and co-existence with fragmentation and difference, i.e., with the impossibility of a genuine understanding of otherness. Also in her study, Paszkiewicz brings haptic images into dialogue with social problems such as the Balkan Wars, the economic crisis, and colonization.

Both Laura Marks' study of intercultural cinema (2000: 131-132) and Katarzyna Paszkiewicz's analysis of Coixet's filmography (2020: 29) observe that the haptic gaze eschews the relationship of dominance and submission between subject/viewer and object/image. For Paszkiewicz, "the scopophilic pleasure is replaced by other senses: hearing, taste, smell and finally touch" (2020: 29). The aim of this study is to analyze how *Quién te cantará*, in contrast to what might be expected from a film about a celebrity, abandons the paradigm of the fetishistic/scopophilic gaze that turns the woman-image into an object of fascination for the viewer, subordinating her in a hierarchical relationship (Mulvey, 1999: 840), to draw instead on multisensorial aspects that help create an intimate experience with the viewer.

The research methodology adopted for this analysis is haptic film theory. Martine Beugnet defines the haptic film as a kind of film that is considered an event in itself, offering "an aesthetic of sensation, where the audiovisual force of the cinematic work tends to be given precedence over plot dialogue and conventional narrative progression" (Beugnet, 2008: 175). The study will also draw on explorations of celebrity culture. A textual and content analysis is the main focus of the article, with occasional intertextual references where relevant.

II. INSIDE VERMUT'S UNIVERSE

Quién te cantará could be described as a postmodern film noir with eerie atmospheres, dark pasts, psychological blackmail, and moral ambiguity—all elements that the filmmaker has included in his previous films. Carlos Vermut began his career in a context of economic cutbacks and the cancellation of funding for the film industry as a result of the crisis. This situation affected his first film, *Diamond Flash* (2011), which was filmed on a tight budget and distributed on alternative circuits (Albatás Fernández, 2014: 394). After *Diamond Flash*,

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Vermut shot *Magical Girl*, which won the Golden Shell at the San Sebastian Film Festival.

This economy of means dictated the home movie aesthetic of *Diamond Flash* and established the filmmaker's personal style: the depiction of a fragmented cosmos, situations left unexplained, and lives that unfold in a kind of limbo, but with room for the portrayal of the habits of contemporary society. At the centre of the story, or more precisely, at the centre of several stories—as the film interweaves different stories that converge—we find women. Vermut builds his film around the question of female empowerment, but he gives this theme some unexpected nuances by combining realism, fantasy, suspense, elements of pop culture, and black humour in an atmosphere somewhere between magical and perverse. The film offers a portrait of the different forms of violence against women while depicting her as a dreamer, a provocateur, or an avenger.

Magical Girl is a film work in which some of the themes of *Diamond Flash* reappear, in a more polished form and reduced to a visual minimalism made of long static shots. Although the story seems less cluttered (thanks to the distilled dialogues, the pervasive use of silence, and the physical restraint of the characters, who relate to one another through an emotional void), Vermut plays again with defamiliarization through the use of the off-screen space and narrative ellipses, drawing the tale into a centre that points back to the veiled beginning of the film. Once again, and despite its marked aesthetic focus, this film

clearly revolves around everyday issues such as unemployment, misogynist violence, and object worship. For Maureen Tobin Stanley (2018), *Magical Girl* shifts between images of Spanish cultural stereotypes, flamenco, and bullfighting in its portrayal of a society in crisis that dehumanizes its citizens and transforms them into consumers or consumed. In Barbara, the main character, Tobin Stanley sees the internalization of the patriarchal, phallocentric system as a formula for identity construction (2018: 89).

Vermut's films offer a critique of capitalist practices by introducing products of pop culture that ultimately subjugate consumers or transform the social fabric and locking it into a cycle of violence. In his films, the female characters are the ones who suffer most from this oppression, which is rendered visible on their bodies. In *Diamond Flash*, the image of a character from a comic book (which gives the film its name) converges with the theme of physical abuse: in the first scene, a woman covered in bruises lies in a hospital bed while her daughter immerses herself in the adventures of a superhero. Captivated by the character, when she grows to her adulthood she will also endure abuse in the hope that a masked hero will come save her.

In *Magical Girl*, to escape the psychological stress that her husband subjects her to, Barbara seeks affection by having sex with a stranger, Luis. This encounter, which is limited to a physical involvement between the two strangers, becomes the motivation for blackmail, which she will decided to pay in exchange for acts of sadomasochism that mangle her body. With the money that Luis gets from Barbara, he expects to dress another body: that of his sick daughter, who dreams of owning an anime costume. Thus the narrative weaves between the body of a woman wounded almost to the point of death and the body of a girl suffering from a terminal illness.

In *Quién te cantará*, violence is depicted with less angst than in Vermut's previous films, but

the physical attitudes of the characters still serve as powerful representations of their inner conflicts. The film tells the story of a famous singer, Lila Cassen, who is working to rebuild her life after being struck with amnesia. With the aim of getting her back on the stage, her manager finds her a coach, Violeta, a middle-class woman who makes a living imitating Lila at a karaoke bar. The women will rehearse Lila's songs together and work on her personality so that she can regain her public image. In the film, Lila is portrayed as a human being who has lost the connection with her inner self as well as with the world around her. Her physical appearance (a meticulously coiffured mop-top hairstyle and a solemn face with barely any eyebrows), her peculiar way of moving, and her unnatural interactions with others construct a portrait of a dehumanized woman. According to Vermut himself, his intention in this film was to communicate his own experience of fame (Bas, 2018). As the filmmaker explains, his success, as modest as it may have been, had produced in him a feeling of unease that he wanted to explore, transferring it to the experience of a pop star. He thus created a character whose identity is inextricably tied to her public image, so that the restoration of her human condition necessitates the recovery of an invented appearance. Lila Cassen has been devoured by her own icon in an extreme expression of what Guy Debord was referring to when he suggested that spectacle has taken the place of reality, so that now spectacle is *reality*. Reduced to her star qualities, Lila is an example of Debord's suggestion that "where the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings, efficient motivations of a hypnotic behaviour"[1] (Debord, 1995: 13). This submission of the human being to the spectacle reflects the domination of a system that turns individuals into objects. In *Heavenly Bodies*, Richard Dyer, referring to the film industry, explains how stars contribute to the production of a film while they themselves become a product through a psychological and physical transformation supported by a whole team, including the press, publicists and photographers, among others (Dyer, 2004: 5). Along with these contributors, audiences play an important role in the creation of the star: "[a]udiences cannot make media images mean anything they want to, but they can select from the complexity of the image the meanings and feelings, the variations, inflections and contradictions, that work for them" (Dyer, 2004: 4). Vermut's film problematizes these questions: on the one hand, the identity crisis suffered by a star when she is faced with the product she has become; and on the other, the way a fan assimilates the star in accordance with her own affective needs and deficiencies. To explore these ideas, Vermut prioritizes the aesthetics of movements and the presence of the body over the word.

III. *QUIÉN TE CANTARÁ* AND THE CINEMA OF THE BODY

In *The Time-Image*, Gilles Deleuze (1989: 251-270) considers gestures and human postures essential to the cinematic image. The author discusses a kind of cinema that defines itself in the development and transformation of bodily attitudes, where the characters' gestures drive the film forward and where the intrigue can be reduced to behaviours (Deleuze, 1989: 255). The philosopher identifies the French New Wave and post-New Wave films as the main proponents of this kind of cinema of bodies, to which he attributes not only an aesthetic but also political, social, and metaphysical significance. Although Deleuze has criticized the phenomenological approach to cinema,[2] his work has been an inspiration for prominent scholars in the field, such as Laura Marks. In *The Address of the Eye*, a study of the connections between memory and sensations in intercultural cinema, Marks bases her analysis on Deleuze's Image-Movement theory (Marks, 2000: XIV). Elena Del Río (2008) also draws on the philosopher's

ideas to move beyond the paradigm of representation in film analysis and consider bodies in cinema as generators, performers and bearers of emotions and sensations in a study that is in fact titled *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance.*

The paradigm shift from film as visual representation to film as sensorial fragmentation assumes a different relationship between film and viewer. In *Quién te cantará,* as in *Magical Girl,* dialogues are reduced to provide just the right amount of information. On this point, in *Introduction: Gesture in Film,* Nicholas Chare and Liz Watkins observe how the use of body language can underscore the lack of dialogue, resulting in a sense of defamiliarization with everyday life and a questioning of representation (Chare & Watkins, 2015: 3). The opening to *Quién te cantará* seems to do just this. After the first sequence at the beach, the next scene, which takes place in a hospital, shows Lila run her hand across her body over the bedsheets until she reaches her neck, then her chin and finally her lips. Her hand acts here like a consciousness exploring an unknown being, as the way it is filmed—a close-up tracking shot of the hand—highlights the character's lack of familiarity with her own body. At the same time, the image involves us as spectators in

the film experience, as "[w]e do not 'lose ourselves' in the film, so much as we exist—emerge, really—in the contact between our body and the film's body. [...] We are in a relationship of intimate, tactile, reversible contact with the film's body—a complex relationship that is marked as often by tension as by alignment, by repulsion as often as by attraction" (Barker, 2009: 19). This tactile journey with no explicit verbal or narrative support disorients the viewer, who experiences the same defamiliarization as the protagonist herself.

Vermut creates an intimate relationship between the film and the viewer, who will discover that *Quién te cantará* offers a great deal of narrative information in this way. An example of this can be found in three consecutive scenes that highlight the expressive nature of gestures, the materiality of the body, and the body's physiological manifestations, respectively, to convey Lila's amnesia. The first scene is a close-up of a hand marking a test while a voice-over asks Lila her name; the reverse shot shows Lila looking down in silence [Image 1]. The scene fades to black, and then the darkness is broken by a beam of light moving over the skin of someone's face [Image 2]. In the next scene, Lila's manager, Blanca, is seated in front of two doctors

Image 1. *Quién te cantará*

Image 2. *Quién te cantará*

imposition of a totalizing picture of reality as structured meaning carried out by the representational approach left little, if anything, to the unstructured sensations that are likewise set in motion in the film-viewing experience" (Del Río, 2008: 2). Vermut dismisses the stylistic conventions of suspense and drama and rewrites his own codes with a contemplative style. It could be argued that the suspense that Vermut creates is not triggered so much by the internal pacing of the film as it is by the viewer, i.e., by the viewer's curiosity about the *film's form*.

Mise-en-scène, as Carlos Vermut points out, is a fundamental element for creating a perspective that allows the viewer to *feel* what happens to the characters (José Antonio Pérez Guevara, 2018). In *Quién te cantará*, the way the characters are positioned in the different scenes tells us about their psychological condition. Lila's internal fragmentation is reflected in the confusion she experiences in her own home, a luxurious house whose great size underscores her vulnerability and whose large windows evoke the drama of her exposed condition as a popular figure. Lila's unease is emphasized by the appearance of a ghost that haunts the house at night; the ghost resembles Lila, and the singer follows it and imitates it, constituting

while she knocks back a glass of water in one gulp [Image 3]. These three moments portray Lila's two diagnostic tests (a medical examination and diagnostic imaging) and their results (the doctors' meeting with Blanca). Lila's downcast gaze in the first scene tells us that she has lost her memory, while the shaft of light in the second shows us the examination of her body in an MRI scan, and finally Blanca's gulping down the water conveys the impact of the news of Lila's condition. Of these three shots, the most difficult for the viewer to decipher is the fade-to-black and the thread of light moving over a surface. Vermut reduces Lila's body to an illuminated relief image. This decision draws the viewer inside the cinematic event, rather than maintaining the distance typically offered by a fully decoded shot, i.e., a shot based on the representational paradigm. As Elena Del Río suggests, "[t]he

Imagen 3. *Quién te cantará*

a metaphor for her quest to reclaim a past identity that has now become merely spectral. In the case of Violeta, the insignificance of her existence is also defined in spatial terms: her life in her apartment is portrayed as a kind of imprisonment in a hostile place due to her daughter's constant bullying. Close-up shots cut down the mother's and the daughter's figures, and the depth of field is minimized by placing them in doorways or near thresholds. Marta's domination over her mother is conveyed by the physical power she exercises over her, not just through her positioning in the space, but also in her threats of suicide. To get what she wants, Marta often threatens to cut her own throat; every time she does, her body is shown from behind as a blurred image that partially conceals her mother and encloses her in the frame. Their troubled relationship is highlighted for the first time by means of a sound change and the slowed-down movement when Marta challenges her mother by walking barefoot around broken glass. The power dynamics are depicted here on a perceptual level through the dissonance of the music, the slow motion, and a close-up of Marta's foot on the point of injury.

Marta's desires exemplify consumer habits in the globalization era (a new cell phone, TV fame and easy money). The threat of self-harm is the

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WHILE IN THE PROTOTYPICAL STAR-FAN RELATIONSHIP THE FAN MAY PERSONALLY IDENTIFY WITH THE CELEBRITY AND PROJECT HERSELF ONTO HER (TUDOR, QUOTED BY DYER, 1998: 17-18), VERMUT PROPOSES A TWIST IN THIS RELATIONSHIP, WHERE ALTHOUGH VIOLETA IS PRESENTED AS LILA'S ADMIRER AND IMITATOR, IT IS LILA WHO WILL END UP IDENTIFYING HERSELF WITH VIOLETA AND ASSIMILATING HER FAN'S PERSONALITY INTO HER NEW PUBLIC IMAGE

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ploy she uses as blackmail. The only physical contact between Marta and her mother—a hug that Violeta warmly receives—is the clearest sign of Marta's emotional detachment, because what it is acknowledging is not her mother's personal success, but the material gains she herself can enjoy as a result of that success. Violeta is oppressed by the capitalist dynamics that subjugate her daughter, which are personified and imposed in the film by Blanca and by the only male characters: a merchandise salesman and a man who tries to bribe Violeta in order to test her loyalty to Lila.

While in the prototypical star-fan relationship the fan may personally identify with the celebrity and project herself onto her (Tudor, quoted by Dyer, 1998: 17-18), Vermut proposes a twist in this relationship, where although Violeta is presented as Lila's admirer and imitator, it is Lila who will end up identifying herself with Violeta and assimilating her fan's personality into her new public image. This transformation is conveyed throughout the film, beginning with their first encounter, a scene presented in a series of shots and reverse shots between the two women. Lila's face appears on one side of the frame while the other half of the shot is filled up with a white partition (behind which she peeks at Violeta) [Image 4]. When Blanca appears behind Lila and calls Violeta, Lila, caught by surprise, turns her face towards her manager [Image 5], while Violeta makes the same gesture towards both women [Imagen 6]. This parallel in their body movements continues the symmetry of the framing of Lila's face, visually cut by the vertical line of the partition (showing her as incomplete). At the same time, it suggests the mirrored identities of the two women, which thematically alludes to the bond of subordination they share in their subjugation to a system of production and consumption that objectifies them.

In this context, the choreography that Lila and Violeta perform together to the song whose title gives the film its name seems to signal a

Images 4 (above) and 5 (below). *Quién te cantará*

with harmony, where the two women appear absorbed by a rhythm to their movements that contrasts with the confusion of their lives. However, the two women are connected by mimetic gestures that transform them into imitators of an image tailor-made for the requirements of the spectacle. For Violeta, performing at the karaoke bar provides a space of fictitious freedom where she constructs herself as a simulacrum—now the simulacrum of an original that has disappeared. This possibility of freeing herself through acting and the ultimate failure to achieve it are represented in her body language when she performs the song *Como un animal*, where her clawing gestures with her hands and the forceful turns of her head and torso simulate a body struggling for liberation. The attempt is thwarted in the following shot, when we see Violeta now without her wig cleaning the floor of the nightclub in silence, her body bent over a mop.

The different forms of oppression to which Lila, Violeta, and Marta are subjected are also represented by screams, both voiced and mimed. Violeta articulates a silent scream after an altercation with her daughter; Lila tries some vocal warm-up exercises that end in a shriek, and Marta lets out a long, inaudible wail while at a rave party. The purpose of a scream is, among others, to express pain or release tension. In this sense, it is interesting to observe how both screaming and crying are actions that often end films where the female lead has been dealing with growing anxie-

chance at salvation for both women. Redemption is suggested in the agency that the body has in identity construction, a point that Elena Del Río explains in her analysis of *The Tango Lesson* (Sally Potter, 1997) from a gender perspective: "In its engagement with corporeality, *The Tango Lesson* makes us think of the body as an active site of self-determination rather than simply as the reactive target of male objectifying operations. The possibility of this conceptual shift lies in the belief that the body's capacity to dance/move coincides with its powers of affection and expression. [...] In sum, movement enables the body to escape the categories that keep it locked within a static notion of identity" (Del Río, 2008: 133). The rehearsal scene showing Violeta and Lila dance together is presented as a moment suspended in time filled

Image 6. *Quién te cantará*

ty throughout the story. Films like *Rosetta* (Jean Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne, 1999), *Wounded* (La herida, Fernando Franco, 2013; a Spanish film that absorbs Dardenne brothers' aesthetic), and *Summer 1993* (Estiu 1993, Carla Simón, 2017) all use a documentary-realist style that follows the character in her emotional collapse and end with scenes in which she finally breaks down in tears. In analysis of the hope and resilience of exhausted bodies in *Rosetta* and *Wendy and Lucy* (Kelly Reichardt, 2008), Elena Gorfinkel cites Adrian Martin's reflection on violent endings in slow cinema: "As Adrian Martin notes, a particular tendency in slow or contemplative cinema juxtaposes a glacial pacing of profilmic action with endings of incredibly violent or energetically jarring explosiveness" (Gorfinkel, 2012: 328). Although Gorfinkel uses this quote to point out that, contrary to Martin's theory, the Dardenne brothers' film actually presents Rosetta's tireless body in a motionless state in the final scene, it is nevertheless clear that violent explosiveness is present in her weeping, which constitutes an outburst or bodily release by a character who until that moment had only ever performed strictly utilitarian actions. This kind of energy is not released in *Quién te cantará,*

as the screams in this film constitute physiological attempts at expulsion made throughout the story by women who never succeed in achieving their liberation. Significantly, Marta will end up cutting her throat at the same moment that Lila wakes up with a jolt and gasps for air. The only one of the three women who actually lets out a full-throated scream, Lila will end up resuming her role as a cog in the machinery of the entertainment industry, offering her voice with a new fake personality, as Violeta Cassen.

IV. CONCLUSION

Su Holmes and Sean Redmond see a growing interest in today's society in stripping off fame's disguise to reveal the truth behind it, arguing that "[t]his game of star and celebrity hide-and-seek seems to be an increasingly important one given the amount of 'extra' artifice and simulation in the modern world" (Holmes & Redmond, 2006: 4). *Quién te cantará* explores celebrity culture with a focus on its implications for identity, while also offering a broader reflection on contemporary consumer practices (represented especially in the figures of Violeta as a fan and of Marta as a

consumer). These are issues that matter to the filmmaker, as he makes clear in his description of the genesis of the film, and in his criticism of the mercantile objectives of audiovisual products like animated TV series (Bas, 2018). On the other hand, the film's exploration of the individual's relationship with pop culture products constitutes an affirmation of the universe that the filmmaker established in his previous films. The story of Lila and Violeta also builds on the foundations of Vermut's cinematic language, previously characterized by the portrayal of aesthetically stylized precarious existences in *Magical Girl*.

This formal and content analysis of *Quién te cantará* has shown how the film constructs a relationship between film form and female emotions to offer an examination of celebrity culture. The images of illuminated or blurred body shapes; the close-ups of hands, feet, and faces that move or are moved through sensitive territory; the dance and the choreographed movements in the performances or rehearsals, all come together in a kind of haptic cinema of dissonances, drawn-out moments and slowed-down movements. In this way, *Quién te cantará* enacts a powerful discourse from an organic and affective perspective that points towards a theory on female corporeality in relation to the subjectivity of stars and fans and the fragility of their identities within the dynamics of spectacle. ∎

NOTES

1   "[a]llí donde el mundo real se transforma en simples imágenes, las simples imágenes se convierten en seres reales, motivaciones eficientes de un comportamiento hipnótico" (author's translation).

2   For a summary of Deleuze's controversy around film phenomenology, see Ferencz-Flatz & Hanich, 2016: 37-38.

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"IT'S IMPOSSIBLE FOR ME TO BE THAT WOMAN AGAIN": EMBODIMENT AND IDENTITY IN *QUIÉN TE CANTARÁ*

Abstract

This paper analyses Carlos Vermut's *Quién te cantará* [Who Will Sing to You] (2018) with a focus on the relationship between film form and female subjectivity. The study examines the construction of the film as a perceptual experience, where corporeality and gestures take centre stage to convey the anxieties of women whose identity is impacted by celebrity culture. Taking haptic film theory as a framework, the film is examined as an overcoming of the hegemony of optical visuality, with an analysis of how the film's mise-en-scène, sound, and focus on the body operate in a sensorial narrative.

Key words

Haptic Visuality; Affect; Embodiment; Gesture; Celebrity Culture; Feminine Subjectivity.

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«ES IMPOSIBLE QUE VUELVA A SER ESA MUJER»: CUERPO E IDENTIDAD EN *QUIÉN TE CANTARÁ*

Resumen

Este artículo analiza *Quién te cantará* (Carlos Vermut, 2018) enfocándose en las relaciones entre la forma cinematográfica y la subjetividad femenina. El estudio examina la construcción de la película como experiencia perceptiva, donde la corporalidad y la gestualidad adquieren protagonismo para transmitir las ansiedades de mujeres cuya identidad está influida por la cultura de la fama. Tomando como referencia la teoría háptica, se explora el film como una superación de la hegemonía de la visualidad óptica, y se analiza cómo la puesta en escena, el sonido y la materia corporal operan en una narrativa sensorial.

Palabras clave

Visualidad háptica; Afecto; Corporalidad; Gestualidad; Cultura de la fama; Subjetividad femenina.

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