

Avatars in *A Plague Tale: Innocence*

Xue Fuguo

Introduction

As an essential component in a videogame, avatars play an important role in storytelling and are the medium of human-computer interactivity. This essay aims at discussing the videogame *A Plague Tale: Innocence* by applying two concepts mentioned in Ryan's book *Avatars of Story*: textual architecture and types of interactivity. After discussion, this essay will suggest some ways to complicate the game's choices for players while maintaining the overall story structure.

Before analysis, a short game summary is provided as follows. The story has the background of the Hundred Years' War in Middle Age Europe between the Kingdom of England and the Kingdom of France, while the Black Death was happening simultaneously. The French noble girl Amicia attempts to protect her brother Hugo from the plague and the hunt-down of English troops.

Discussion - Narrativity

This part of the essay analyzes the videogame *A Plague Tale: Innocence* (hereafter referred to as "*Plague*") in the aspect of textual architecture.

The definition of textual architecture in interactive storytelling is the structure of plot and interactivity. The book *Avatars of Story* (Ryan, 2009) discussed four types of plots: state-transition diagram, the interplay of actual and virtual events, interwoven destiny lines, and travel in the story world.

For *Plague*, it is obvious that it uses the simplest plot structure: state-transition. In the game, substories happen one after another, just like normal storytelling without interactive elements. The evidence is as follows: 1) There is no transition of perspective—players always see the game world through Amicia's perspective. 2) Everything players can experience is part of the reality in the game, no virtual event exists. This is partly due to the use of historical background, which are already part of fact, thus leaving minimal space for virtual events. 3) Although there are geographical transitions, it is not a game that allows players to choose to be at a certain location whenever they want. Rather, the main character's moving in the game world must abide by the storyline. For example, At the beginning of the story, Amicia, her father, and her hound are in the forest hunting for a boar. After her hound's unexplained death, she and her father go back to their manor house in fear. Upon the English army's incursion into the manor and her father's death, Amicia has to run away with her brother Hugo to find their mother. These transitions of location follow the storyline and are not based on players' will.

Discussion – Interactivity

This part of the essay analyses *Plague*'s interactivity.

Interactivity in a videogame means the human-computer interaction elements, which enhance the digital storytelling experience. In Ryan's discussion about types of interactivity (Ryan, 2009), she categorizes interactivity into four kinds: external-exploratory, internal-exploratory, external-

ontological, and internal-ontological.

To determine whether interactivity is external or internal, what most essential is whether players can match themselves in the game in the form of an avatar. To determine whether interactivity is exploratory or ontological, the criterium is whether players' actions (if any) will affect the storyline or the environment of the virtual world.

Upon analysis of the *Plague*, it can be concluded that it is an internal-ontological interactive videogame. It is internal because players think of themselves as Amicia in Middle Age France while playing, and her missions are exactly players' missions. It is ontological because although players' actions cannot change the environment, they can change the avatars' fate. In the game *Plague*, Hundred Years' War and Black Death are always ongoing anyway, but Amicia's actions decided by players can determine Amicia and Hugo's fate (survive or die). Therefore, the interactivity level is considered relatively high.

Alternative

In the scene from 8'54'' to 15'09'' (MKIceAndFire, 2019), players are in the process of getting to know about the world and the situation. However, this part could have more interactive elements. In the game, minor characters speak when Amicia approaches them. However, it can be designed in the way that Amicia approaches the minor character, the minor character speaks, and players get to choose what questions Amicia asks or what lines she speaks. This can make the game even more interactive since the information players gather from the conversations can affect their actions later and change the avatars' fate.

Conclusion

Overall, *Plague* is a video game that emphasizes narrativity rather than interactivity. It applies state-transition plot structure and internal-ontological type of interactivity. This kind of combination is suitable for this game because 1) the state-transition plot structure makes sure that what players experience is real history, and 2) the internal-ontological interactivity mode gives players a chance to experience a person's struggle in the Middle Age's shadow.

Same as in many other video games, by taking actions in the *Plague* game world via the avatar Amicia, players can gain instant feedback, which is one typical feature of interactivity. To make the game more interactive, more choices can be provided during conversations between/among avatars, such that players are more engaged in the game via strategic questioning and answering.

To conclude, *A Plague Tale: Innocence* is a typical videogame with a credible background and a high level of interactivity. It fits in the models suggested by Ryan (Ryan, 2009), but can be improved further by leaving more choices to players in conversation with other avatars to achieve higher interactivity.

References

MKIceAndFire. (2019). *A PLAGUE TALE INNOCENCE Gameplay Walkthrough Part 1 FULL GAME [1080p HD 60FPS PC] - No Commentary* [Video]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fmd6nSo7FJc>

Ryan, M. (2009). *Avatars of story*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Univ. of Minnesota Press.