Stories in an Interactive Medium

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What is the contribution of player interaction to the narratives of the video games Bioshock and The Walking Dead?

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Introduction

The video game industry now generates more revenue than both the film and music industries, highlighting its significance in our contemporary entertainment (Nath). The established media of literature, music, and film have greatly influenced the development of video games, but what sets this medium of entertainment apart is its feature of interactivity, allowing the player to be directly involved in whatever the game has to offer.

This changes the nature of narrative itself. As illustrated by Massachusetts Institute of Technology instructor Rik Eberhardt, the story is no longer being told by the artist but rather is built by the player from narrative elements present in the game, allowing players to simultaneously become the audience and the storytellers (Eberhardt, Extra Credits). Many elements come together to create the experience of a game, including text displayed on screen, the virtual world and its design, the audio, the player's interaction, and more (Ip). This is in addition to the standard aspects of narrative including character, plot, and setting. University of Utah professor of entertainment arts Jose P Zagal asserts that 'the interaction between these elements helps create a certain experience for the player'. With the advancement of technology able to produce video games of a higher quality, its potential as a medium to tell stories has been successfully shown with games such as Valve's *Half-Life* and Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us*.

Unlike a film or a book, the reader is directly involved in the narrative of the game and is able to advance the plot. As discussed by UC Santa Cruz professor of computational media Jim Whitehead, video games have stretched the notion of narrative, 'pushing hard against existing theories' due to the 'many possible ways to experience a non-linear narrative'. However, the player's involvement is limited in many ways, ranging from the abstraction of an input device of a keyboard or a controller, to software limitations. With these, the developer must make decisions on which aspects of the game to let the player control (Simons).

Most academic video game analysis uses techniques borrowed from other established media, as definitions and frameworks for video games are yet to be developed (Zagal). Video game researcher Edward Wesp expresses that 'narrative is only ever delivered through the means of its medium', following *Game Studies*' Editor-in-Chief Espen Aarseth's inaugural editorial arguing the importance of game studies to analyze games independently of other media and give a more complete analysis. Due to the lack of an existing framework to analyze interactivity and narrative, this essay will analyze interactive narrative elements, looking at its narrative purpose and its effect on the player.

Two recent examples of narrative success in video games are 2K's *Bioshock* and Telltale's *The Walking Dead*. Both have won numerous Game of the Year awards, achieving so in different manners due to the natures of the game, one as a first-person

shooter, the other as an adventure survival game. An analysis of these two games will provide a broad yet applicable conclusion to video games in general.

In this essay, I will answer the question: 'what is the contribution of player interaction to the narratives of the video games *Bioshock* and *The Walking Dead*?' This essay will critically analyze how each of these games uses the interactivity of the medium to add to their immersive and emotional stories.

Background

Video game researcher Josh Bycer defines narrative mechanics as that 'which directly influence[s] the story through player action'. This definition, while useful, is limited in that it insists on mechanics present throughout the game and does not include narrative responses from a single case of interaction made by the player. For this reason, I define player interaction, as stated in the research question, as all actions made by the player in the game, and narrative as any aspect that adds to the storytelling capability of the game.

This also fits the framework of 'emergent narrative' as defined by media scholar Henry Jenkins as narrative which results from player interaction in the world, allowing for a unique narrative for each player depending on how they interact with the world. This is opposed to 'embedded narrative' which is direct to the player and exists prior to any interaction, for example, a non-interactive video referred to as a cutscene. This definition, however, groups all embedded narrative as separate from player interaction, not allowing space for embedded narrative as the product of interaction, which is prevalent throughout the analysis of *The Walking Dead*.

It is important to note that variety of video games which serve different purposes. Games such as Electronic Arts' *FIFA* are meant to be played indefinitely, and focus on entertaining gameplay, defined as the player's experience in the game, rather than

narrative. This essay is specifically about story-driven games, in which a narrative is essential to the overall experience.

With the wide range of games that exist, this essay will not explain all the ways in which player interaction is able to create narratives in video games in general, but uses two case studies that differ in nature as games and discusses how they achieved their goals. *Bioshock* is a first-person shooter game that focuses primarily on the use of the environment to tell its story, and features large amounts of gameplay through action in the game. *The Walking Dead,* on the other hand, is an adventure game with little active gameplay, instead using cutscenes, granting the player to intervene at points within the story.

Bioshock

Bioshock, released by 2K Games in 2008, is a first-person shooter survival game set in Rapture, a dystopian city built underwater by Andrew Ryan, a successful American businessman disappointed by increasing regulations during the New Deal period, to create 'a city where the artist would not fear the censor, where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality, where the great cannot be contained by the small' (Bioshock).

Rapture, for some time, succeeds. There are numerous technological advances, including the creation of 'Adam' by Frank Fontaine, which is used to genetically modify humans to provide superhuman abilities. With the success of this newfound technology, Fontaine becomes incredibly influential, a situation eventually resulting in a civil war for power between him and Ryan both using heavily genetically modified humans nicknamed 'splicers'. Fontaine is reported to have been killed, but by then, the utopia has been nearly destroyed with few remaining human citizens. Enter Atlas, a mysterious character who begins to organize another attempt against Ryan.

The player plays as Jack, sole survivor of a plane crash which lands right above Rapture, and an individual whose identity is revealed through the progression of the game. As the game begins, Atlas guides the player into Rapture via radio. Atlas claims that Jack is in a position to save his trapped family, beginning the adventure for Jack, the player, in the city of Rapture. Jack, listening to instructions through a radio, fails to

save Atlas' family, and is then guided to go and kill Ryan, who Atlas believes caused his family's death. The gameplay consists of the player collecting guns, ammunition, and 'plasmids', genetic modifications granting offensive powers, and progressing through the dystopian city of Rapture, defeating 'splicers'.

In his talk at the Game Developers Conference, *Bioshock* game director Ken Levine discussed how players were engaged by the captivating world of mystery the player could explore and obtain narrative from. Catering to all types of players, those interested in the action-heavy gameplay to those wanting to know about every detail of Rapture's history, the developers chose to make narrative something the player can voluntarily opt-into. *Bioshock* accomplishes this through exploring the in-game world, independent of the main progression of the game, to obtain audio-logs that recall a certain narrative of someone previously in that area (Levine).

This presents the first method of interaction that adds to narrative in *Bioshock*. While the medium of delivery was direct through audio, it had the prerequisite of the player choosing to interact with the environment, personalizing the narrative the player receives.

Ken Levine also discussed the importance of tying in gameplay mechanics to narrative. In *Bioshock*, corruption of an ideal society through genetic modification is a core theme, present in the direct narrative, and in the gameplay with the use of 'Adam' and

'plasmids' (Levine). The player understands what has happened to Rapture and its citizens through genetic modification and the free market without indulging in any audio-logs. By tying these mechanics into the narrative, every interaction emphasizes this core theme to the player no matter how the player chooses to play, whether by using 'plasmids' as weapons, encountering 'little sisters' as discussed below, or through repeated encounters with 'splicers'. While minor, this is another way narrative was portrayed through the player's interaction and also acts as a harmony between gameplay and story.

Genetic modification is prominently present through another feature with 'big daddies' and 'little sisters' that appear together at multiple times throughout the game. Fontaine had used these 'little sisters' to hold 'Adam', with 'big daddies' acting as their protection. These 'little sisters' form an important part of the game, as they are required by the player to progress forward and continue to enhance their own abilities. The player must eliminate the 'big daddy' to be granted a moral choice: they can choose to harvest the 'little sister' for 'Adam', leaving her dead; or they can choose to free the 'little sister', letting her live, but with the caveat of less 'Adam' being gained for the player (see fig. 1).

Fig. 1. An in-game screenshot of the 'little sister' moral choice between choosing to 'HARVEST' or to 'RESCUE' presented to the player in *Bioshock* (Parker).

The player will want to do what is best to progress in the game and become more powerful, but the murder of a young and seemingly innocent child will force players to think twice. Philosopher Grant Tavinor asserts his review of *Bioshock* that '['little sisters'] aren't really human at all, and of course, part of the multilayered irony in Bioshock derives from the fact that the Little Sisters are not really human: they are fictions, part of an imaginary game-world with no real existence'. Presenting this choice to the player and making the consequences clear, *Bioshock* is able to let the player decide how they wish to characterize Jack in the world of Rapture—as a power-hungry killer, or as a selfless hero. Allowing the player to choose how Jack exists in Rapture forms the second major method that *Bioshock* employs to use interaction to enhance narrative.

The moral choice also directly affects the conclusion of the game, with multiple endings depending on if the player chooses to harvest all, some, or none of the 'little sisters'. While the sequence of events will be the same for all players throughout the game, this choice also awards an actual change in narrative for the player.

Ayn Rand's objectivism, a philosophical system where the greatest moral good is achieving success for oneself, is a core theme of Rapture and the story of *Bioshock* (Tavinor). This core belief is what led Fontaine to continue developing genetic modifications despite what was happening to the people. The 'little sisters' moral choice also reflect this philosophy—by choosing the objectivist moral of empowering the self, the player earns more 'Adam' and is punished if the player chooses the altruistic path of saving them and earning less 'Adam'. Game developer and critic Clint Hocking describes how this choice made him experience 'what it means to embrace a social philosophy that [he] would not under normal circumstances consider', articulating the success of *Bioshock* in including a narrative theme in a choice presented to the player.

With the major theme of objectivism present in the game, there has been critique of 'ludonarrative dissonance' present in the game—a situation in which the narrative of the game does not agree with the gameplay or the player's actions, despite both being intrinsically linked. Hocking criticizes how in Bioshock '[he was] constrained by the design of the game to help Atlas, even if [he was] opposed to the principle of helping

someone else', in reference to the decision to allow the player to take the objectivist

path of harvesting the 'little sisters', and then forcing them to take the altruistic path of

assisting Atlas against Ryan and his objectivism, creating a conflict on the

characterization of Jack in Rapture and the game's story (Hocking). However, there is a

twist that occurs later in the game that does remedy this.

Towards the end of the second act, Jack reaches Ryan by listening to Atlas, and

discovers that Jack is Ryan's illegitimate son and was genetically modified as a child to

act in complete obedience to all commands beginning with 'would you kindly' by

Fontaine, who faked his death and picked up the name Atlas. He had sent Jack out of

Rapture and brought him back to defeat Ryan. This is narrated through a cutscene in

which the player has no control, and where Ryan himself forces Jack to kill him,

exposing not only Jack's lack of self-control, but also of the player.

This scene provides an explanation of sorts to the player on why they were forced to

follow Atlas, despite the ideals of objectivism littered in Rapture suggesting the player to

do otherwise.

This is the only time in the game where control is taken away from the player, and

Bioshock is able to use the absence of player interaction as a storytelling tool, not only

to show the helplessness of Jack to take actions of his own, but also to create a

powerful level of irony in that Jack, who is in Rapture, has been denied the ideals of the

individual and liberty that Rapture had been founded upon, and that too by the founder of the city himself.

Through the moral choice allowing a direct change in the ending of the story and allowing the player to characterize Jack, by including the core theme of the game in its gameplay mechanics, and by denying player interaction at a narrative twist to emphasize a theme, *Bioshock* is able to use interactivity in more ways than one to create a complete story for the player.

The Walking Dead

The Walking Dead, based off and canon to the comic of the same name, is a survival

adventure game released by Telltale Games in 2012. *The Walking Dead* is unusual in

the current scene of video games in that its gameplay heavily resembles point-and-click

adventure games of the 90s, where there is little interactivity of the competitive type,

and with a greater focus on the story.

The player is in control of Lee, an African-American male who was heading off to jail

when the invasion began. As he escapes, he meets Clementine, a mixed-race young

girl whose parents have not returned home after the invasion. The player begins here,

with the story involving Lee's struggle to survive while taking care of Clementine.

The Walking Dead's interaction mostly comprises of offering the player four options

during cutscenes whenever Lee is involved in talking to someone or needs to make a

decision, often under a limited amount of time (see fig. 2). The player's decisions can

cause the other characters to treat Lee differently or can leave the player in more

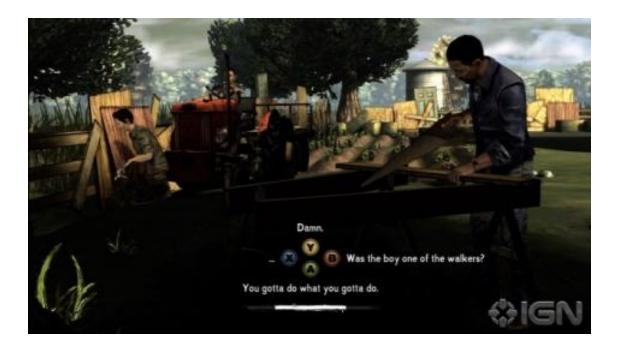difficult situations where they have to choose who gets to live or die.

Fig. 2. An in-game screenshot of the four options provided to the player for Lee to perform (Miller).

With this, the game sets itself up for a detailed non-linear narrative. However, the player's actions cause little effect in the greater scheme. For example, there comes a point where the player is asked to leave a character behind after she chose to shoot another whom she believed had betrayed them. If she is left behind, she will die. If the player chooses to continue with her, she will die in a later sequence, ultimately causing the narrative to converge to the same point. The choice presented to the player is ultimately an illusion.

As described by lead developers Sean Vanaman and Jake Rodkin in a Game Developers Conference talk, the game has 'a focus on choice-driven character-centric

narrative', which was designed to 'stimulate an emotional response and then allow the player to respond back into the game'. The player is granted the power to build the story based on their reactions to events. By choosing which way Lee will progress through this predetermined narrative, the player is able to further identify with the character, allowing them to become more emotionally connected to the game's events.

Video game researcher Jan Simons asserts that the player 'weigh[s] the potential outcomes of the alternative choices they are confronted with'. These choices help characterize Lee into the world around him as now the player has assumed his role. It is left up to the player if they wish Lee to traverse this world as a selfless helper or a selfish survivor. This is core method employed by *The Walking Dead* to use interaction in the narrative, by letting the player characterize the character they play, as had done *Bioshock* with its moral choice.

Game designers and researchers Salen and Zimmerman formulate that 'personification' is key to narrative in constructing characters through gameplay (qtd. in Bizzocchi). Microsoft user researcher Deborah Hendersen in a study noted that players were more likely to remember game characters than they could remember details of the plot from beginning to end (qtd. in Bernstein).

As the game industry matures, there has been an increase in the number of paternal protagonists, reflective of the demographics of game developers today, in what Sarah

Stang calls the 'dadification' of video game stories. Titles such as Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* have been criticized for 'centralizing the father-figure as active and the daughter-figure as passive' who 'exist for the pleasure of the assumed male player' (Stang). This father-daughter relationship is critical to *The Walking Dead* as the game is about Lee doing what he can to keep Clementine safe. Player interactions are made more significant as whenever a decision is made that can affect the course of the story, or even a minor change in a character's opinion towards Lee, the player is presented with a pop up in the corner of the screen letting the player know of the consequences of their actions (see fig. 3).

Fig. 3. An in-game screenshot with a pop-up in the corner following a player action (Kuchera).

By doing so, the game is able to create a more positive father-daughter relationship as Clementine is not a passive character who emulates the father figure like those criticized in *The Last of Us*, but rather a character that 'functions as a motivating factor and emotional centerpiece, as well as a moral compass for the player, as she reacts negatively to anger and violence' and is able to 'encourage the player to reflect on their actions' (Stang). This is what psychologists Connor and White call a 'social father: a father who provides ethical guidance, nurture, and emotional support' (qtd. in Bell, Kampe, and Taylor).

The choices made will not affect the narrative on a grand scale, but leave a personal impact on the players by granting them choice in minor narrative branches and letting them characterize Lee. As Lee dies in the end, the choices made by the player will shape Clementine as she moves on without him, as explored in the sequels of the game which incorporates choices made in the initial.

In a 2013 study by researchers at North Carolina State University, it was observed that participants displayed a 'fluid' level of identification between the player and Lee. When asked to provide a rationale for a certain action in the game, the participant would move from referring to Lee in both the first and third persons. Despite the lack of direct relation of the player and Lee in terms of race, age, or situation, interactivity let them assume the role of Lee and enter the in-game world (Taylor, Kampe, and Bell). Rodkin and Vanaman anticipated this as Lee was designed as a character without too much

authority and 'old enough to have a family and not have one', in order to be more identifiable with the player. The study also showed how the participant would predict what would happen in the story depending on an action they might take. It is important to note that in this study, that there were only two samples drawn conclusions on, both mid-20s women, neither describing themselves as a 'gamer'. While insightful, this study suffers from a strong sampling issue.

Another study by the same team analyzes hypermasculinity in Lee by observing two African-American male participants, both identifying as 'gamers', while playing *The Walking Dead*. One participant described how the game pushes the player to make Lee into 'the best image of him that you [can]' (Bell, Kampe, and Taylor). Making Lee into a character that is relatable for people of different types is vital to ensure that the decisions made have an impact on the player so that their characterization of Lee can occur, and to promote the narrative that runs in the player's mind, and in turn emphasize each interactive choice.

Earlier decisions are repeatedly brought up, notably towards the end where a stranger questions Lee on an earlier decision to save one group member over the other. The game offers the player a chance to defend their choice however at this point, the narrative has been set and the player's choice will make no effect. This allows the player to affect the previous narrative in their minds and, as researcher Maria Sulimma

asserts, the player is able to 'express [their] frustration at the game's refusal to deliver the desired plot'.

The result of this characterization brings the player into the game through the use of player interaction as Lee, is a powerful narrative tool. This had even surprised the developers of the game themselves upon seeing the strong emotional reaction from a wide range of audiences to the game's ending (Shroyer).

Conclusion

Many aspects of games are used to portray narrative such as the environment, in-game text, audio, or video. As seen, player interaction is also able to contribute to the narrative of *Bioshock* and *The Walking Dead* in different and unique ways. Both games make extensive use of allowing the player to characterize the character they are playing, to assist with identifying with the character and more importantly, to shape the character in the story set out for them. By allowing the game to respond to their choices, this effect is amplified.

Bioshock has an advantage of being a more interactive game and thus makes exploration too a form of narrative due to player interaction. *The Walking Dead*, on the other hand, has engineered a story shaped around the player's choices, while still retaining the original artist's vision.

While this essay does not provide an exhaustive understanding of narrative in video games due to the existing wide range of games, it can still provide an insight into how *Bioshock* and *The Walking Dead* had accomplished narrative in their respective genres. Further, these games still extensively use the classical literary aspects of plot and setting as a major part of their narrative and so, the contribution of narrative by solely interactivity can be a more valuable metric to compare to the contribution of other features of a game. Nonetheless, 2K's *Bioshock* and Telltale's *The Walking Dead* have

both been able to exploit what is unique to the medium and turn it into a narrative tool, delivering stories that only an interactive fiction could deliver.

The demand for non-linear narrative will only increase as the video game industry expands, and while standard linear narrative will continue to thrive in other non-interactive media such as film and literature, interactive narrative has and will continue to change the face of storytelling.

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