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Unfolding the Rhetoric of Embodied Metaphor in Video Games

ABSTRACT

This article examines the BAFTA award-winning interactive game, *Before Your Eyes*. It argues that *Before Your Eyes* is an artistic rhetoric of embodied metaphor that helps to lead players into understanding new meanings of important experiences in life, as well as bringing them to a cathartic release. Articulating *Before Your Eyes* into an embodied metaphor context, this essay uses Sonja Foss' theory of metaphoric criticism and H.R. Ryan's classical criticism, to examine a variety of, often overlapping, physical and emotional responses to *Before Your Eyes*. Specifically, it does so regarding the game's use of eye-tracking technology that lends a sense of full immersion, due to its ability to communicate through the user's actions instead of words. However, this differs from the traditional rhetoric of immersion as the game uses the eye-tracking technology as the main control. The paper then tackles the deep and meaningful messages pertaining to the human experiences of life and legacy and what the player is able to take away at the end of the game.

INTRODUCTION

Everyone has heard the saying that "one day life will flash before your eyes" and to "make sure it's worth watching" (Gerard Way). However, it is virtually impossible for most people to tell just what it is that makes a life full. The game *Before Your Eyes* (GoodbyeWorld Games 2021) brings new understandings of the human experience themes of time, life, death,

and acceptance. In specific, the game presents an unconventional yet immersive experience through its user bodily response of the use of eye-tracking technology and visual and sonic metaphors through something I call “embodied metaphor”. This nondiscursive metaphor allows for a way to conceptualize modes of communication through the actions of the user/player, as opposed to the use of words. In order to lend a greater understanding of this I will first review the current literature surrounding this subject, explain the necessary plot and background of the artifact, describe the methods employed to perform an analysis, and offer my ideas through the classical and metaphorical analysis of the artifact.

RHETORIC OF VIDEO GAMES: A REVIEW OF CURRENT LITERATURE

In my study of the 2021 game *Before Your Eyes* (GoodbyeWorld Games), I will be contributing to understanding the ways that time and memory affect the procedural rhetoric of video games. Procedural rhetoric accounts for the way an artifact persuades through its rules and procedures, or in this case, game mechanics. However, while Rughinis and Matei (2015) bring about claims that a game’s use of time can invite self-reflection on the amount of time wasted or rushed through, my analysis focuses on how the use of the user’s bodily function of blinking as a source for game control. It also displays how this embodied metaphor serves to create a deeper cognitive impact on not only the ability to physically impact time, but drives home the acceptance that one cannot manipulate time in order to preserve their legacy, nor should they spend their time trying to become defined by some great achievement. In a similar sense, Anderson (2017) examines how the bodies of players and characters affect the rhetoric of materialism through games employing methods of AI and virtual reality. My argument differs from this in that my claims focus solely on how the use of body, through eye-tracking

technology being employed as a control mechanism via embodied metaphor, affects the impact that the themes of life, death, time, and acceptance have on an audience. In fact, eye-tracking technology can lead to a more immersive experience of gameplay for games of first-person shooters, role-playing games, and modified arcade games (Graham & Smith, 2006). While this is useful, my analysis amplifies this claim by exploring the way this embodied metaphor and eye-tracking technology immerses the player to the end-point of cathartic release while dealing with topics covered within the human experience.

The impacts of these video games are so intense that most gameful digital designs can alter collective human behavior through socio-cultural and psychological techniques (Akioka, Nakajima, & Sakamoto, 2017). That being said, my analysis focuses on how the use of embodied metaphor can be used to alter player behavior to better grasp the universal themes of the human experience and walk away with a new idea of what it means to live. One of the reasons Ryan (2006) argues these games are often viewed as enriching in narrative, is due to the fact that they are formed to support integrated play in a fictional narrative framework, as opposed to movies and television which lack an integrated play outlet. In my analysis of the embodied controls and metaphors paired with the narrative style of the artifact, I highlight the importance of the tools in the rhetoric communicated about the themes of the human experience combined with the cathartic release that occurs because of the emotional response elicited. While Ruberg (2020) does touch on how the rhetoric of empathy is present in video games when they place the player in another character's life in order to create a deeper emotional response, I discuss that the use of blinking as a control heightens the emotional response elicited by empathy due to the fact that the player is literally experiencing the character's life through their own eyes. My analysis also discusses the importance that sonic rhetoric has on a video games' communication. However,

whereas DeRoss (2020) offers ideas about the immersive and engaging game worlds that are created and emphasized through the rhetorical storytelling brought forth by sonic rhetoric, I offer the pairing of both sonic metaphors that occur combined with the embodied game controls experienced in GoodbyeWorld Games' 2021 Before Your Eyes.

BACKGROUND OF BEFORE YOUR EYES

The game attempts to grapple with the reality of time, life, death, and acceptance of the human experience. In particular, the game, in a vivid storytelling, communicates that the human experience of life is made up of moments that, no matter how much one might want to, cannot be paused, skipped, or changed. It also focuses on the acceptance that a person must grapple with that the choices they made in life were enough when they reach the end of their own. The game communicates these themes in its unique and vivid story-telling mechanics of eye-tracking technology by taking the player on a journey through the life of a child musical prodigy named Benjamin Brynn and his afterlife to meet the Gatekeeper.

Accompanied by a ferryman coyote on a boat, the player uncovers the story of their life as Benjamin Brynn, a child musical prodigy, so that they might be accepted into the Gatekeeper's city. From there, the player plays the game as Benny from his birth to his death (GoodbyeWorld Games, 2021). The big catch of the game: whenever a player blinks, time shoots forward anywhere from a few days to a few years. So, whether the player is reliving a fun night with his best friend, Chloe, or reliving the harsh standards of his mother/piano teacher, Elle, they can neither stay nor leave until a metronome appears signaling their next blink will advance them (GoodbyeWorld Games 2021). While the audience watches Benny grow and change, it is revealed that following his rejection from music school, Benny got sick and had to stay inside for

a whole year. It is then that he gives up music and discovers a love for art, eventually becoming a successful artist. Amidst his hustle and joy for art, silence, heartbeats, and the ticking of a metronome overcomes the player as they learn that their mother has died and their career fades.

Eventually, Benny finds his mother's composition on the piano and, for the first time in years, begins to play it, reawakening his art passion with a piece featuring her, eventually rekindling his relationship with Chloe. We soon learn, however, that most of his story never occurred. In reality, Benny actually became terminally ill when he was just 11 years old. He grows sicker as a giant, red orb with sharp rays, slowly takes over until he dies, a year later, and it all goes black (GoodbyeWorld Games, 2021). The game ends in catharsis as the audience sees the gatekeeper, taking on an ethereal form of Benny's childhood one-eyed cat who watched him from life to death, accepts him into the afterlife.

Before Your Eyes was created by a team of 9 developers from Goodbyeworld Games and published by Skybound Games. The team consisted of Will Hellwarth (creator), Graham Parkes, Oliver Lewin, Bela Messex, Richard Beare, Jake Sally, Dillon Terry, Hana Lee, Brieyh'leai Simmons, and Griffin Libby. What started as a student project entitled *Close Your*, which was meant to immerse the player in life's inevitable constant passing of time as they relive both happy and traumatic experiences, became a much-needed sense of comfort during its official release in April of 2021, during the pandemic. Riddled with heavy topics, the game does require players to be at least 13 years of age.

In a rhetorical situation, Bitzer defines an audience as people in an argument who can be persuaded or create change (1992). The game was designed to be inclusive for players who have limited mobility in their hands and is hoped to one day be able to be controlled strictly through eye movements. By invoking emotions and empathy through the moments encountered within,

the game targets players with shared experiences to illicit intense emotional responses. In fact, the game allows for such personalization through choices that, once the finale began to play, one reviewer expressed a sense of “Here was where I came from, and who I was, described in a way that didn’t paper over anyone’s mistakes, while also not letting them off the hook for their decisions” (Kuchera, 2021).

That being said there are a few constraints, things that shape the discourse of a rhetorical situation, that appear within this artifact (Blitzer, 1992). Two big constraints were that game was released during the height of covid and the game can lose the full impact of its persuasiveness when using traditional point-and-click control versus eye-tracking as it “fundamentally changes the pace of the game” as there is more ability to work around time (King, 2021). All of this ties together to make the exigence, or obstacle that can be positively changed through discourse, of this artifact, that much more apparent (Bitzer, 1992). The blinking mechanic in the game reminds the player that “[they] don’t get to choose how much time [they] have” (Kuchera, 2021). *Before Your Eyes* exists to bring forward a new understanding of the human experience and the acceptance that must come with not only the choices made, but the lack of control that comes with it.

CLASSICAL AND METAPHORICAL METHOD

Within rhetorical criticism, Aristotle created a method of analysis referred to as Classical Analysis which, much like rhetorical analysis, involves a systematic analysis of the use of symbols to move people. Classical Analysis was developed to figure out, through a systematic breakdown, why a certain artifact was made, also known as the telos (Ryan, 1992). The way this method becomes systematic is through its examination of the artifact’s genre, rhetorical appeals,

and canons of rhetoric. To Aristotle, an artifact's genre was a category of discourse that "treated definitive matters and dealt with specific periods" (Ryan, 1992). He split these genres into categories dealing with forensic oratory, epideictic oratory, and deliberative oratory. Aristotle believed that a deliberative genre dealt with seeking justice based on the past, epideictic was a "type of discourse that dealt with seeking praise or blame through examination of the present" and deliberative focused on messages that would bring expediency to a better future (Ryan, 1992). When performing a classical analysis a key portion is the exploration of an artifact's rhetorical appeals, which is the 3 proofs (ethos, logos, and pathos) used to persuade an audience (Ryan, 1992). Ethos was described as bringing belief through "good moral character", logos as logical reasoning that was either correct or even just seemingly correct, and pathos as "stirr[ing] the emotions of the audience... to accept the speaker's address" (Ryan, 1992). Pathos is easy to apply to an ad campaign's use of a sad dog missing their owner in order to sway people away from drunk driving. According to Aristotle and Plato, there are five canons of rhetoric: style refers to how the artifact was made, delivery deals with how the artifact is presented, arrangement is the organization of the artifact, style has to do with how it is crafted, and memory deals with how the artifact's message is retained (Ryan, 1992). By analyzing the artifact and whether the rhetor was successful in their goal, classical criticism is taking place. For this analysis, this method will be employed to look at the messages communicated through the games actions and controls.

Within rhetorical criticism, Foss created a method of analysis referred to as Metaphoric Criticism, a subgenre of Conceptually Oriented Criticism. This method "focuses on deepening one's understanding of concepts through analyzing different applications or frameworks of artifacts and allowing them to bring forth their own theoretical learning moments" (Jasinski,

2001). So, while looking at an artifact, it would be viewed in order to learn more about the nature of rhetorical concepts, such as a metaphor. To understand how an analysis can be metaphoric, we must first examine what a metaphor actually is. In *Silvia Rhetoricae*, it is defined as, “a comparison made by referring to one thing as another”. However, to Foss, a metaphor is something that, through the use of transferring, borrowing, or carrying over characteristics of one domain of literal experience, is then applied to a different domain of non-literal experience (2018). That being said, within every metaphor is its tenor, or “nonfigurative object”, and vehicle, the “figurative object” (Foss, 2018). For example, in the metaphor “heart of gold”, the heart would be the tenor because it is the literal object, whereas gold is the vehicle because it is the figurative object being compared. From a metaphoric criticism standpoint, an artifact teaches us, not only about the artifact and the meanings being drawn by it, but also aids in better understanding metaphors themselves through isolating the artifact’s metaphors, identifying their tenor and vehicle, explaining the effect that the nonfigurative object has on the figurative, and evaluating the rhetorical impact of the metaphor on the purpose of the rhetoric (Foss, 2018). For this analysis, this method will be used in order to closely examine the communicated metaphors buried in the game's design, story, and controls.

CLASSICAL AND METAPHORICAL ANALYSIS OF BEFORE YOUR EYES

In GoodbyeWorld Games’ *Before Your Eyes* (2021), the telos of the artifact is to communicate that the human experience of life is made up of moments through time and that they cannot be paused, skipped, or changed. It also seeks to give the cathartic release of acceptance that one seeks through emotional experiences. This is revealed by breaking down and studying the systematic classical frameworks through which metaphors in the game are

displayed. This artifact contains multiple metaphors with some being more explicit than others. However, they all seem to support the rhetoric of teaching people to be present in life's moments as they are happening, to not hold onto the past, and to not focus too much on the future.

Time as a Metaphor

GoodbyeWorld Games' *Before Your Eyes* (2021), persuades through its style, in particular, its prominent metaphors such as the use of the metronome to describe the steady passage of time. The tenor of this metaphor is time whereas the vehicle is the metronome. The reason this metaphor is so effective is because its understood characteristics of having a set pace that won't change unless of a greater outside force. So, when combined with the vivid use of a metronome appearing whenever the game is alerting you that the next blink will shoot you forward in time, it aids in the rhetoric of time being immovable. It also appears multiple times throughout the game through its use of keeping the tempo of Ben's music and even the ticking of his heart during intense moments.

In fact, Ben's mother alludes to this when she says, "this is called a metronome, we use it to measure time so we don't get lost in the music" (GoodbyeWorld Games 2021). This artifact, although blending classical genres, appears to focus on epideictic as it seems to be aimed towards teaching people to be present in life's moments as they are happening, to not hold onto the past, and to not focus too much on the future. This is important because it reiterates to the audience that no matter how much you fight it, time is going to move forward.

Inevitability as a Metaphor

Just like the unstoppable passage of time, one of the most prominent and perhaps most important metaphors continually displayed throughout the game is the metaphor of blinking relating to the inevitability and uncontrollability of life. The arrangement of the artifact's use of eye-tracking technology that randomly shoots you forward in time when you blink, shows the inability for people to control and manipulate time to stay in or leave a moment in life. The tenor of this metaphor is life, and the vehicle is the blinking because, although the blinking is tangible, it is not the literal thing being described. This lack of control is shown when the ferryman says, "No matter how much you like it, you can't stay. Any time you blink, you're gonna jump forward in time" (GoodbyeWorld Games, 2021). Along with the genre of epideictic, as it teaches people to be more present in life, this artifact also melds into forensic through the way the game moves through the past and even reconstructs it via blinking. It employs pathos to lead the audience through experiences of loss, illness of loved ones, parental relations, friendship, and even death. It does all of this while also employing the use of tone-fitting music, visuals, dialogue, and the emotions that build with uncontrollable blinking and the use of eye-tracking technology. However, its use of the eye-tracking technology as logos is important as it enables a certain level of total and lack of player control, as well as the ability for the player to make 1st hand choices that impact certain aspects in the story-telling leading to a more persuasive effect. Ethos also plays a part through the game's ability to employ the eye-tracking technology to fully immerse the player in Benny.

Notably, perhaps one of the most interesting parts of this metaphor, is that not only do you feel the emotional effects of frustration, sadness, joy, and catharsis, but you also feel the physical aspect. The more you try to hold your eyes open to avoid blinking, the more you hurt

yourself by drying out your eyes to keep yourself from moving on. This is important because it teaches the audience that not only is it impossible to try and fight against the natural flow of time to try to get what you want, it is also incredibly detrimental to your own well-being.

Acceptance as a Metaphor becoming Catharsis

Just as it communicates the inevitability of life, *Before Your Eyes* also persuades through its use of metaphors to communicate a sense of catharsis. The immense relief when you close your eyes after holding them open for so long, is the same kind of relief that comes into play when the player fully accepts their fate. Although there are many other important metaphors displayed throughout this artifact, such as music/art equating accomplishment, the other most prominent metaphor displayed throughout this game is the metaphor of the cat being the physicalization of acceptance. While Ernie the cat is the vehicle and the tenor of this metaphor is acceptance, the metaphor itself is incredibly layered as the cat is repeatedly seen in various situations. Ernie is first introduced as a one-eyed, sick kitten that was rescued by Benny's dad and accepted by them despite his flaws. Ernie is later revealed to be a female once she has a litter of kittens she later loses, but she is still accepted, despite originally being believed to be a male. However, the most apparent uses of this metaphor are at the very end of the game. As 12-year-old Benny lies sick in bed, Ernie appears and Benny and his mother finally begin to accept his fate. During this last intimate encounter with his mother, whom he has struggled to please for most of his life, he has one final conversation with her. It is here that every frustration built between the two of them is released in a single cathartic experience. Ernie reads to a dying Benny, "And he was everything he ended to be... just as he was" (GoodbyeWorld Games, 2021).

The game's display of memory is a bit unconventional in that it focuses on broad moments in life that people could remember and relate to such as a person's first friend, pet, loss, wanting to be remembered, and finding peace in being enough. In fact, the last moment Ernie appears is when the Gatekeeper, taking the form of an ethereal Ernie, accepts Benny and his story into her city. This moment leads the audience to a sense of catharsis because this metaphor, so frequently and specifically used, teaches that our lives are not made up by the time spent achieving accomplishments, but by spending time simply being who we are.

CONCLUSION

Through *Before Your Eyes*' (GoodbyeWorld Games, 2021) unconventional yet immersive experience of user bodily response via eye-tracking technology and visual and sonic metaphors, embodied metaphor is taking place to bring about a sense of catharsis by offering new understandings about the human experience themes of time, life, death, and acceptance. Not only this, but it brings forward a more expansive mode of rhetorical expression. Most importantly, it answers the question that any life is worth watching because every life is full.

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