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How Narrative Writing Affects User Experience

Games Design And Critical Analysis (M6X02045)

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Aims

Within this essay I aim to prove the following:-

- Show how Narrative writing affects players choice.
- What games have used this to their advantage and its affects?
- Weather developers have approached Narrative correctly.

Context

Over the decades developers have evolved to allow Video Games to improve and push what Video Games were capable of and what we the audience experienced and question what games really are. This development has affected many areas of games and this essay will delve into one, Narrative and how it has changed player interaction and how if effects the players actions within the game story. Firstly we will need to understand what Narrative is and how it can affect an audience, we also need to understand Interactivity and gameplay and how these can affect the story and the user experience. We shall look into how games use the player's choice to their advantage and how this also affects the user experience of the game play, player's reaction and finally what games have used this method and how they have approached it, weather they have used it to make the players feel more involved with the characters and the story presented to them or if developers have used it so players have limited choices and affect the experience they go through.

Literature Review

Introduction

Video games have been around for years and still impress us on a daily bases. Each game as told us a story whether, it's through a narrative, its environment or even the characters within the game. We as players are affected by these stories but how and why? This is what this paper will look into, how Narrative games have affected the user experience and the playability of the game is what this paper will look into. Developers using mechanics to allow players a choice within the game and its story drives most recent games in the market and continue to push what games are capable of.

Case Studies

This paper will use games such as the Telltale series, Detroit: Become Human, Fallout 4, Fable, Undertake, and Mass Effect and infamous: Second Son. Also we will look into books such as Interactive Storytelling by Andrew Glassner, The Anatomy of Story by John Trubly, and How We Write by Mike Sharples also Researching Creative Writing by Jen Web, Stylish Academic Writing by Helen Sword.

Gameplay, Narrative and Interactivity

Before we discuss how Narrative influences the user experience within games we must understand gameplay, narrative and interactivity within video games and define what each of these mean and how we can determine that users are being influenced.

What is Gameplay?

Gameplay allows users to interact with video games or video and can characterize the way users play games. This includes the rules, plot, objects and conquering them, this can influence the users overall experience. As popularity in games increased in the 1980's this term gameplay become common and as games continue to grow popularity developers included other types of games as well. User experience is the most important factor in gameplay and helps determine the games success also the games playability sets a factor that measures the ease, comfort and fun when playing certain games.

We know that there are many types of games out there, these games can follow or deviate from the set gameplay formula depending on the games genre. Gameplay allows players to experience different experience when playing certain games, characters and abilities like hooting, jumping, swimming, crafting items, using magic the list is endless. However there are methods developers must measure within gameplay and its playability to improve game play and user experience. These include the following:

- Learning
- Immersion
- Emotion
- Satisfaction
- Efficiency
- Motivation
- Socialization

What is Narrative?

Narrative is a representation or exact manifestation of a story, rather than a story itself and an easy way to remember this that narrative allows player choice and each choice reshuffles the orders of events, the new events means that the player as a new narrative within the same story, which turns into information or knowledge. Therefore narrative allows users to perceive the story how they want it because the developer created the options for them because of the events happening within the game.

What is Interactivity?

This allows users to experience choice within the game system which has been designed to support actions and outcomes. This is because players can interact with the designed system of the game, meaning that interaction can take place across all levels.

Now that we understand Gameplay, Narrative and Interactivity we can proceed and look into other areas that Narrative can influence it players and the user experience like game genre. Genre has been used in many forms over the years, from Visual arts to music. Genre dates back to the 17th century and some hints of earlier which are shown in pictures such as Pieter Brueghel the Elder, and to the first movies like *The Horse In Motion (1878) by Eadweard Muybridge* or *Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville's* who recorded the first sound to the first ever video game *Pong in 1972*. These media's might not have intentionally thought they were a genre but to the modern day society they are considered what made genre and what we consider genre. For Movies and Games genre is very important, this is because game and film producers need to engage to a target audience in order to be successful. Both mediums need genre to interest and engage with the public so that they earn a profit. Films and Games depend on the similar factors like a story line, character build up but games don't always follow a story line or require a character but simply need the genre to advertise their game, whilst film's always need a character, a story to keep up with audience expectations and culture differences and times . Because as the years pass genres in films have died off to make way for a new genre and new films to go with it, whereas games don't have that issue, sure games have kept up with resent genres, but can go back to old forgotten ones if they had a high demand by players.

Looking Into Video Games

Travel back in time to the year 1948 where the earliest game, although this is debatable called Cathode Ray Tube Amusement Device. This allowed users knobs to modify the trajectory of light beams and try to hit targets on a clear screen overlay. Fast forward to 2018, video games have become more than what Cathode Ray Tube Amusement Device or Pong could be and continue to push what players consider what games are and what they are capable of with their impressive character design, environments, playability, storytelling and replay ability and think to ourselves that Video Games have become so much more than what they were decades ago. Graphics and technology are the most noticeable changes but the unseen changes are what make Games so much more than one-note entertainment vehicles; games are now mediums, forms of art because developers wanted to challenge the narrative monopoly to the point now where we have entertainment that blurs the boundaries of interactivity, storytelling and character development.

You can find video games everywhere these days, from your mobile phone to a PC, laptop, and consoles handheld or an Xbox or PS4 but did you know that they started in research labs of scientists?

In 1952, British professor A.S. Douglas created OXO, also referred to as noughts and crosses or tic-tac-toe, as part of his doctoral dissertation at the University Of Cambridge. And William Higinbothm created Tennis for two on a large analog computer and connected oscilloscope screen for the annual visitor's day at the Brookhaven National Laboratory in Upton, New York in 1958.

Looking at games of the present games like Detroit: Become Human, God of War, Vampyr, Yakuza 6: The Song of Life, Shadow of The Tomb Raider, The Walking Dead: The Final Season and Life Is Strange 2, have shown us different in character design, environments, art style, genre and story line but they have one thing in common they influence the user experience with Narrative even though the narrative is used in different ways. Games like Detroit: Become Human, The Walking Dead, Life Is Strange 2 and Yakuza 6 use Choice and Consequence mechanics to involve the player more into games characters and their stories

making the user experience more immersive. There are other games like Until Dawn, Heavy Rain, Life is Strange and The Walking Dead series use a this method and assign it to The Butterfly effect. The first game to present this choice matters experience to players was Heavy Rain, games like these follow a pattern which Donald Strohman explains.

> *However, it's not like every new game they spawn out is absolutely unique in every ways, Telltale Games typically follows a pattern: Plenty of cut scenes and dialogue, with only sparse amount of actual gameplay (that doesn't revolve around choosing what you want your character to say.) Essentially, it's just like watching a movie that just so happens to let you walk do something every now and then. But it all ends up mostly the same towards the end. Your character will still have to face the villain at one point or another, very rarely do butterfly effect games give you any other alternative.*

He also says the following statement as well.

> *We still have yet to see a game that transforms based on the way you interact with the environment. Not by what you choose to say or who you choose to save, but by how you play. Yet, such an idea also leads us to the next big problem with butterfly effect games. (Strohman, 2016)*

Most of the games mentioned do follow the patterns of Heavy Rain; have very limited gameplay and plenty of cutscenes and dialogue to pick from. Sadly some of these games feel very much like movies and can make you feel like your choice really didn't matter. However there is hope a recent game called Detroit: Become Human where your choices change the story and the relationships the characters hold. While Detroit: Become Human makes feels and acts like a game and not a movie it still lacks what the player wants to say and while affects character relationships and how the world see's the androids it's still has the same problems as the games before it.

Choices and Consequences

The Butterfly Effect is a part of Chaos Theory, it is a sensitive dependence of Initial Condition where a small change in a singular state of deterministic nonlinear system which can result in a larger difference at a later state. The Butterfly Effect came from that flapping of butterfly wings within South America could affect the influence of the weather condition in Texas, which means that even the smallest influence in the system could later on have a huge effect. This theory or term within Chaos Theory (Butterfly Effect) is used within Until Dawn as a mechanic which forces the player to make a choice between 2 options in a short space of time that will affect the entire outcome of the player's story. Depending how the player plays or how the player picks their choices characters may die or the relationships may be affected, meaning that the players choice could bring characters together or even more apart and once the choice has been made the player cannot change their mind as Until Dawn will automatically save once the player makes their choice. This ties in to the following quote below from The Butterfly Effect: Everything You Need to Know About This Powerful Mental Model.

> *The butterfly effect is the idea that small things can have non-linear impacts on a complex system. The concept is imagined with a butterfly flapping its wings and causing a typhoon. (*Farnam Street, 2019)

By understanding what The Butterfly Effect is and how and why is used, we can understand why it is used within the games and how it's used as a game mechanic. The game allows the player choices which can affect what happens to the character's as they make a choice and after the choice as been made. The mechanic is used throughout the game as its being played, when the player picks what the character says or reacts to another character or how they get around the area within Until Dawn. Each choice from the start affects the conditions of the story and will have a larger effect to the User experience and the characters as the story unfolds.

This method of storytelling is also called Branching Narrative, which offers the audience a piece of story and asks them to make a choice within the plot or character decisions, this

can affect the story in small ways and may be short lived or the choice has a huge effect and therefore changes the story from that point onward. Some of the games mentioned earlier use this method to allow players to make choice when it actually matter. For example in Detroit: Become Human players have numerous choices that affect Connor, Marcus and Kara in different ways. Some choices affect relationships between these three main characters and other characters they interact with where others impacted them and their future within the game. Like when players start the game there is a scene where you play as Connor and you can look around the scene and interact with objects within the scene. These objects can help the player successfully determine the deviant android's name, why he may have become deviant in the first place, players then can talk to the deviant then attempt to get closer to him and the young child he has hostage by gun point. This start choice is the beginning of the games branching tree as later on in the game you can use this deviant to help you track down where Jericho is and therefore find Marcus.

Quantic Dreams have been known for their choice based games but Detroit: Become Human is the first game that they have published onto PlayStation 4 console and have shown what can be done with the game design as a whole, but going back into Quantic Dreams game history we can see that this new game they published follows their older games like Heavy Rain and Beyond Two Souls, Heavy Rain being the most famous release of Quantic Dreams games in 2010 although it was re-released on the newer console it looked better visually but sadly the game is aged and it shows if you have played Heavy Rain and Beyond on PlayStation 4 as stated below by Tom Hopkins on twinfinite.

> *While it looked better, the game certainly shows its age now. The performances can seem wooden, the visuals look unrealistic, and the characters often move awkwardly. It's better to remember Heavy Rain as the game that released in 2010 than how it compares to modern equivalents. (Hopkins, 2018)*

Another game that uses this method of is Life Is Strange series, Life Is Strange as a Graphic Adventure it's similar to Until Dawn with its choice's and similarly its interest of the Chaos Theory but its focus is time travel since that is the main mechanic for Life Is Strange. Its theme is a polar opposite to Until Dawn however, does have its tense and sad moments and makes the player question about right and wrong, life and death as well as their choices they have already made. Although the mechanics allow players to change their options to

see how they play out and the character's output of said choice, this takes the player out of the feel of the story as players can easily go back and change their choice again and again or leave the game and come back at a later time.

Environment Story Telling

There are many games around that use their environment to tell the narrative of their story as Mike Shepard quotes the following,

> *Environmental storytelling creates the preconditions for an immersive narrative experience in at least one of four ways: spatial stories can evoke pre-existing narrative associations; they can provide a staging ground where narrative events are enacted; they may embed narrative information within their mise-en-scene, or they provide resources for emergent narratives.* (Jenkins, 2004)

Games such as Layers of Fear and Layers of Fear: Inheritance, What Remains of Edith Finch, Gone Home, HellBlade Senua's Sacrifice, Dark Souls, Limbo, Knock Knock, Neverending Nightmare, The Resident Evil series, Silent Hill series, Anxiety Attacks and Fran Bow use the games environment to tell the story as well give the player a visual narrative, though unlike the games mentioned earlier some of these game's do not have choices for the player to pick from however, some do have choices but they are not so visually noticeable like how the games above are, where picking how the characters respond in certain situations, the player with games like Layers of Fear and Layers of Fear: Inheritance or Umfend place collectables around the game that tell the player the story of the character past. Both games place you within a home environment and allow the players to explore around, Layers of Fear's home environment is bigger than Umfend but both have impact to the player, while both are horror games and use the environment to unease the player by having written appear on walls, paintings move or distort, body parts appear, blood running down, creepy/strange figures appear/disappear, consume or move the player around. Both protagonists are male and both are obsessed with completing their mission, one to complete his painting one to finish his experiment.

Games such as Limbo, Knock Knock, Neverending Nightmare, Fran Bow and Knock Knock use their game environments in a different way, they use the same environment continuously but with different situations or puzzle that the must solve to move on to the next section, all three games are 2d side scrolling games and use simplistic colours for their games. Limbo story is all up to player as it can have different meanings. But most look at the story as the nameless boy wondering the edge of hell trying to find his sister that he wonders the environment cannot reach due to characters that harm him, run away or are dead. The ending dose end abruptly and as no true ending but playing it I'd like to think that the boy found his sister and moves on to the light. Others believe that the girl is an illusion and is actually hell and drags him away, each player's interpretation is different.
Games such as Knock Knocks gives the player many questions that want answered and believe will be answered as we play the game, questions such as.

> *Who is this lonely Lodger in a cabin in the woods? Who or what are the ghosts? Are they real or imagined? Where did The Lodger's diary go? Is it even his diary? What*

can't he remember? And why/how did he forget it? Who is the little ghost girl? Why are the spirits haunting/hunting him? What is going on here? (Dinicola, 2014)

The game presents itself as something but as we play it ends up being not what we expected, we start with its creepy atmosphere and dairy pages, its creepy ghosts and no difficulty that allows the players to become absorbed into the atmosphere of the music, art and written imaginary, this eases the player and allows their minds to wonder and consider the deeper implications of the story. When playing the game is split into two sections one being safe and the other dangerous, when playing most players like myself assumed that the missing pages of the dairy would be hidden within the more dangerous areas of the game but this was not the case as they were all in one room within the safe zone.

The game becomes more of a challenge, and is forced to quickly approach the game as a puzzle game which is poorly designed to be. Knock Knock sends a poor message to its players when it comes to horror, helplessness or even the player's agency; it frustrates the players more than scares them. Other games such as Dark Souls or The Walking Dead are difficult and harsh to its players and scare them but use the player's helplessness and agency better and send the message more clearly than Knock Knock.

Knock-knock's attempts at being scary have lost all power, and the game becomes a dry exercise of patterns and systems. To make matters worse, during the final few stages, your character's sanity rapidly dwindles. The game makes no effort to communicate the significance of the white line across the top of the screen that fades over time, but it is tremendously significant. Should you make it to the final stage with all of your sanity squandered, your attempts to proceed are greeted with a Game over screen. If you find yourself in this situation and want a shot at getting a proper ending, you may need to replay the entire game from the beginning, and hope that next time, you get through those last few stages more quickly. It's a punishment so severe and mind-boggling that falling victim to it may make you understand your character's mental state more clearly than you have any desire to. (Petit, 2013)

Another example of a game that changes its perspective and uses dark themes and even darker/ mature storyline is Fran Bow. Killmonday's game is about a young girl with her cat, trapped within a mental institution. Playing this little girl you have the option to take pills which transform the world in a creepy memorable way that tells a tragic, disturbing story with plenty of puzzles and amazing graphics. The game takes place in 1944 over the course of five chapters and two of those are split up in half. This game touches on very heavy adult themes including, self-harm and paedophilia but from the mind set of Fran Bow who is young so it does go into too much depth. The games leave us thinking weather the fantastical world Fran see's and explores is in her head just like Dorothy from The Wizard of OZ, or Alice from Wonderland. The game leaves a lot to the player's personal interpretation and other parts are never truly explained and lead to frustration. Explaining how Fran dose not truly understand or trust the characters she meets through her journey Kate Smith says.

> *Compounding these plot holes, the story can be confusing sometimes because Fran is not sure what characters always mean. Fortunately, the game does a wonderful job at worldbuilding. The other worlds Fran sees have their own mythologies filled with different types of creatures and their roles in the world. From the firefly-like Luciferns to the shadow Kamalas and Grim Reaper-like Deadleeworms, they're all memorably different and strange, never relying on standard cliches. (Smith, 2015)*

Other games like What Remains of Edith Finch use it environment really well to provide the player with a story, which is based off the Finch family and the tragedies that have struck within the weirdly yet unique construct home and within each boarded up bedroom of each family member that has passed. We start the story as Edith Finch who returns to the family home to discover the truth behind what happened to the perennially unlucky family. As we explore the Finch home as Edith it is clear that it has been built upon over the years and looks like something out of a Tim Burton movie. What Remains of Edith Finch is played in the first person perspective and is considered a mystery adventure.

We play each family members story out till their inevitable death at the end of the story, starting with Molly and ends with Edith herself dying during childbirth. To the house to each family members story the environment of the house and bedrooms, the games storytelling through environment is beautifully done and shown clearly, each story touches the player in different ways and makes the player delve deeper into the meaning of What Remains of Edith Finch, this game surprised us all with its chord striking characters and how it handles death and life within this unlucky family and with its beautiful tableaus of gothic dread and emptiness interspersed with moments of incredible vibrancy and imagination.

> *What Remains of Edith Finch sits alongside Kentucky Route Zero as one of the finest magical-realism stories in all of video games. A first-person, story-driven experience akin to Gone Home and Firewatch, it tells the incredible, tragic, and constantly surprising multi-generational history of the Finch family. As you explore the the gorgeous labyrinthine home, you'll go on a guided history of each family member, delve into what may or may not be a familial curse, and ultimately learn how each one succumbed to it. Developer Giant Sparrow (known for The Unfinished Swan) has once again created something truly special. (Sliva, 2017)*

Another beautifully crafted environment that gives the player a story is HellBlade Senua's Sacrifice, based during the Late Iron Age and Early Medieval periods in today's eastern and northern Scotland and its story based on the mythology of Celtic and Norse history. The game follows a Pict warrior named Senua, who travels to Helheim to save her lovers soul. Hellblade's environment is beautifully realistic and certain areas make the player feel uneasy and also stunned by how visually appealing it is to look at and explore around what is possibly northern Scotland during the time period. Though sadly the player cannot interact with items within the environment much it gives the player the perspective of what

is ahead and what may or may not be truly there in reality. With its complex mechanics the player must change the environment to solve puzzles or to get to the next section of the environment.

Hellblade's story again touches the player due to the protagonist Senua continually fighting to save her lover despite the struggles she faces with her darkness and the monsters she must defeat and its ending is truly bittersweet as she gives into the rot that's eating at her and there is no true happy ending only the inevitable ending that we see happen in HellBlade though Senua is reunited with her lover and the goddess Hela is seen dropping the head of Senua's lover off the cliff but its then revealed to be Senua herself and not Hela. The game ends with acceptance of the darkness within if that is ever possible.

> *Senua's Sacrifice grasping for a touchstone to understand the experience. It unfolds like a beautiful, dark, tense visual novel, placing the excellently raw, human performance of its main character front and center on her journey into the land of the Northmen. Her story is one of confusion, sadness, fear, and loss, and it's punctuated by moments of beauty, and strength that has left a lasting impression on me. (Tyrrel, 2017)*

Looking at other games that tell a story though its environment Dark Souls is a perfect example of this. With its minimalist plot leaves a lot of the story up to the player interpretation, rather than it being freely given or shown like the other games above has done. Most of the games mentioned use dialogue to tell a story. Dark Souls story is given by characters, flavour text from items collected and the design of the world the player explores, the opening cut scene establishes the premier of the game. The game is played via third person perspective and is an action role-playing game, players are required to explore with caution and learn from their past mistakes or find alternative areas to explore, Dark Souls is a large and a continuous open world environment which is connected through a central Hub known as Firelink Shrine.

> *Beginning in a rotting asylum for the undead, you move through a vast, connected world comprised of fetid swamps, grandly dilapidated towns and castles, magma-carved caves and tunnels deep within the earth, trap-filled dungeons and much else. Some are reminiscent of Demon's Souls' environments, like the rickety, swampy, disease-ridden Blighttown, whilst others are entirely new; austere marble palaces, murky forests, ashen lakes. (Macdonald, 2011)*

With the game allowing the player free reign of the world and with only small amounts of story given and the challenges player faced over and over, Dark Souls was a game that many believed was the next step for video games and what they are capable of, Dark Souls filled players with frustration and determination to survive and to avoid death. Dark Souls as a series is bleak yet beautiful world that is

"Enthralling to explore and packed with secrets to find, I always felt compelled to come back, eager for that familiar thrill of overcoming even the most exacting challenges." (Rad, 2016)

Firewatch starts with text-based choices that were a huge call back to the adventure genre forebears like Zork. The sequence of the text bounces between funny and heart-wrenching and plausibly establishes why the protagonist Henry ends up in the woods as a solitary fire lookout.

Firewatch's story takes place over the entire summer where different days indicate chapters of the story, playing out at different hours of the day and night. Firewatch gives us beautiful colors from bold reds, yellows and oranges that color this fictional forest is stunningly painted. Firewatch is a truly unique sight to behold and like Ryan Mccaffrey says below, many gamers could not agree more.

A substantial swath of Two Forks Woods is explorable, with supply caches, unique sights, and even a hidden turtle you can adopt (you're gonna live with me now, Shelly Duvall!). You'll rappel down cliffsides, climb up rock formations, explore the lookout tower that doubles as your home for the summer, and more. And yet, these same simple actions that are a delightful exploration of your new surroundings at the beginning of the game become almost terrifying as the plot progresses, leading to points where, playing in Henry's first-person perspective, I was afraid to turn around in the vast, lonely woods. (Mccafrey, 2016)

Firewatch's story is also very interesting and the characters act like real people, the relationship between Henry and Delilah is nice to listen to, asking her about what you see or helping you around the forest or tell you what you need to do in an area that you're struggling with and the best thing about her is that she as an answer for anything and you can easily find yourself eager to radio in to her about everything you come across. However, Firewatch is not all peaceful, its story gets dark and mysterious when 2 teenagers go missing and you playing Henry and Delilah try to piece together the puzzle of where the teens could have gone to. The interaction between them is one of the highlight's of the game and how they comfort each other at their low points and nothing feels cloying or forced and a joke is always waiting to ease the tension.

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