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Renegade or Paragon?: Categorizing Narrative Choice in Video Game Storylines

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ABSTRACT

Choices made during video game gameplay set the stories told in that media apart from other media. Narrative-affecting choices have existed since the earliest games, from character creation in role-playing games to performance-based narrative changes in *Metroid* to morality-based choices in *Ogre Battle*. In the contemporary gaming landscape, some games derive a significant portion of their gameplay from character decisions: exploration, dialogue options, quick-time event reactions, etc. In this article, I give a history and breakdown of how choices have existed and evolved in gaming narratives since their inception. I then propose three categories for significant narrative choices: aesthetic, social, and reflective.

The aesthetic choice is one influencing surface-level elements of the game. An example is *Kentucky Route Zero*, wherein dialogue choices largely serve to fill in the motivation and background of the characters while not actually influencing the narrative trajectory of the game. The social choice is one which impacts the characters' relationship with one another. Perhaps the most well-known social choices are *Dungeons and Dragons* character alignments, *Fallout*'s Karma system, or *Mass Effect*'s renegade versus paragon. The reflective choice is one that asks the player to consider the gameplay or the ramifications of the decision. *Spec Ops: The Line*, to widespread acclaim and criticism, centered its story on calling into question the typical structure of kill-everything-that-moves first-person shooters.

While these categories do not account for every possible decision in a game, they work toward a structure that will allow for a more nuanced dissection of gaming narratives. By focusing on choice, it highlights an area of storytelling that gaming is constantly pushing the boundaries of.

Keywords: game studies, narrative studies, player studies

INTRODUCTION

In Borges' short story "The Garden of Forking Paths," the characters discuss a novel in which all possibilities are laid out and explored:

> Here, then, is the explanation of the novel's contradictions. Fang, let us say, has a secret; a stranger calls at his door; Fang resolves to kill him. Naturally, there are several possible outcomes: Fang can kill the intruder, the intruder can kill Fang, they both can escape, they both can die, and so forth. In the work of Ts'ui Pên, all possible outcomes occur; each one is the point of departure for other forkings. (Borges 26)

The work Borges is describing has come to pass in some form in multiple media. There's the entire genre of choose-your-own-adventure books, as well as more experimental literature like *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in which the author offers more than one possible ending. Movies have played with the same concept, although rarely: *Run Lola Run* and *Sliding Doors* feature multiple plotlines originating from a forking moment of departure, while *Drift* and, more humorously, *Clue* offer the viewer multiple possible endings. By using diverging plotlines and endings, they allow the audience to choose a particular story to hold above the others as the "true" one. More recently, Netflix released a *Black Mirror* film entitled *Bandersnatch* which allowed a choose-your-own-adventure cinematic experience with choices from the audience, and its technology promises more in the same vein.

Video games differ from these media in that the spectator, the player, being a part of the text is not an exception but a requirement. It is the player's performance and actions that propel the game forward, filling in large swaths of the narrative. If a video game was not directly interactive in some way, it would no longer belong to the medium at all. Just how interactive a game has to be to still be considered a game has been debated heavily with the recent explosion in independently developed story-based games[1], but for the purpose of this article, I begin with the assumption that all video games are interactive to varying degrees. Gaming's direct interactivity is one of the things that sets it apart from other media. I offer three classifications of the narrative-affecting choices offered to video game players, with the categories broken down by what the choice accomplishes rhetorically for both the narrative and the audience. Due to the lack of literature focused on narrative choices in video games, I provide accompanying history and context that extend beyond the scope of the typology.

Previous game studies scholarship has firmly established video games' ability to create a narrative for their audience. "One may conclude," writes Marie-Laure Ryan, "that the unique achievement of computer games, compared to standard board games and sports, is to have integrated play within a narrative and fictional framework" (182). Ryan goes on to criticize ludologists, theorists who argue against applying the analytical narratological methodologies of literature or cinema toward video games. Her arguments, especially countering claims that games lack the ability to rearrange events, have only grown more resounding in the dozen years since publication given the innovations found in modern story-driven games, especially in light of large-scale multiplayer games that allow the players to create their own narratives, such as *Minecraft* or *EVE Online*.

Judd Ruggill and Ken McAllister continue Ryan's lines of thinking in their chapter from the book *Media Authorship*. They compare large multiplayer narrative experiences like those found in sandbox games and massively multiplayer online role-playing games with the "mass collaboration" of Wikipedia, YouTube, and Flickr (139). They position the player as a "vital authorial force": "players activate, modify, and create games through their play" (138; 141). In order to create a cohesive narrative, developers must collaborate with and predict the actions of the players. When the actions of the players grow beyond what is predicted by the

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1 One of the most commonly debated titles was 2013's *Gone Home*. For further reading on its status as a game, see Crecente's "When is a game not a game?" (along with the 77 comments in response).

creators, it becomes emergent gameplay. Celia Pearce and Artemesia synthesize much of the writing about emergent gameplay in their book *Communities of Play*, which focuses primarily on online gameplay, though their explanation of how emergence happens applies to all sorts of games: "complex, often decentralized systems self-organize in ways that cannot be predicted by their underlying structures or rule sets, nor by the individual behavior of agents within the system" (42).

Other scholarship has already established and elaborated on the similarities and differences between the reader of a literary text and the player of a video game. In the introduction to *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Espen Aarseth outlines both the problems and the benefits of the frequent use of literary theory to discuss cybertexts (under which he includes both hypertexts and adventure games), noting that "They produce verbal structures, for aesthetic effect [...] But they are also something more [...] when you read from a cybertext, you are constantly reminded of inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard" (3). The forking paths of video game narratives offer their audience a level of choice that is simply not feasible in the traditional forms of other media, specifically television, film, and literature. While Ruggill and McAllister have presented the relationship between audience and text in video games as a co-authorship, Aarseth argues that the types of storytelling found in cybertexts "operate well within the standard paradigm of authors, readers, and texts" (78). I follow Aarseth's assertion and present the choices a player makes during gameplay as being between existing storylines implemented in the creation of the game, not original narratives fully devised by the audience.

Not that such original narratives can't exist within the reader's consciousness. In Iser's *The Act of Reading*, he notes that readers must work to overcome a text's indeterminancy, to privately fill in the gaps that a text inherently has while attempting to communicate a reality's existence (24). This occurs in every media, including video games, and is part of the reason that individual readings of a text are unique. With a book, when a character is not fully described, the reader makes assumptions about what that character might look like based on their own experiences and biases as well as context clues within the text. A recent film example is the ending of *Inception*, when the screen goes black before the audience knows what is going to happen, leaving the conclusion up to the watcher.

J. Cameron Moore compares the way the narrative gaps can be filled differently between media in his article "Making Moral Choices in Video Games": "When we read 'tree' in a fantasy story, we must imaginatively construct a tree in our minds [...] In a video game, on the other hand, we encounter a fully imagined tree on the screen. We do not co-imagine the tree, but we must choose whether to cut it down[2]" (72-3). Moore contemplates how Tolkien would have rated video games' ability to portray the fantastic, given the latter's argument "that literature as opposed to visual art or drama is the best form for fantasy" (72). Certainly, there's an argument to be made that Tolkien's description of fantasy literature as a "secondary world" where "both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside" has more potential for application in video games than in drama or visual art (as qtd. in Moore 72).

Moore's description of the player's interaction with a tree in a game's world might be apt for visual details, but narrative gaps in video games can exist and be similar to those found in film or literature[3]. Events can still take place off-page/off-screen; thoughts and details can still be hidden from the audience. The player is left to fill in the gaps left by the game in their mind, choosing what to believe and how to construct the narrative. In her book *Godwired*, Rachel Wagner compares the process of filling in narrative gaps within

2 Bogost reminds us that the game must first allow the tree to be cut down at all. In describing the unique relationship between a video game as text (with its own limitations) and the player's agency in controlling that, he refers to "the gap between rule-based representation and player subjectivity; I called this space the 'simulation gap'" (43).

3 Aarseth makes a very similar analogy when analyzing the difference in work done between consumers of literature and video games, comparing a reader to a sports spectator and a player to an athlete (4).

the rules of the game's system with the process of interpreting the significance of religious texts and rituals: "To approach a religious text from the perspective of rules rather than from that of received authoritative tradition (and fixed literal text) allows interpretation to become more like gameplay than story-reading" (50). The demarcation noted here by Wagner—rules versus received authority—could also be applied to drawing a distinction between games that allow narrative choices and those that do not.

While the decisions made by the audience in the process of filling in narrative gaps impact their experience of the narrative, because of the individuality and infinite number of variations of the interpretations, it seems more useful to focus on choices made specifically through the player's actions in-game using the text as created by the game's developers. For a similar reason, player-driven narratives, such as those collaboratively created by the players of sandbox games (like *Minecraft*) or massive multiplayer online role-playing games, are also not considered. Games that allow for player-driven stories to be created come the closest to narrative "freedom"—as Wagner notes, video game programmers have "the ability to see all possibilities that will inhere in the game, and also to control the ultimate outcome," which is true when it comes to the choices I'm categorizing in this article. For these choices to exist, the programmer has to create them. With player-driven narratives, though, the game's developer loses control over the story experience. Henry Jenkins describes the "threat" that player participation levels against the developer's authorial intentions (125). The choices players make to create player-driven narratives, to fill in narrative gaps, or are made outside of the actual playing of the game (in menus, etc.) might be an area of exploration for future scholarship.

Further narrowing is needed for the purposes of analyzing narrative choices in video games: some limits have to be placed on what is considered a narrative choice. A broad interpretation could result in every single action the player takes, regardless of the game, to be a narrative choice. If Mario fails to jump across a pit and instead falls to his death, that storyline ends there due to the actions of the player, despite the fact that there is no accompanying narration from the text beyond a "GAME OVER" screen. Within the majority of the iterations of the Super Mario game series, the only possible narrative path is to defeat Bowser and save the princess or fail and then retry. Using a definition of narrative choice that includes failing gameplay mechanics would make a typology needlessly complex. Thus, in selecting examples to form the categorization, I have used the following criteria: a) the choice must happen while playing the game, not before the game begins or in a menu; b) the choice must have some impact on what the overall story of the text is, as it would not be useful to discuss choices like whether the player wields a shotgun or a pistol if it doesn't alter the narrative; and c) the player must be making a conscious choice between options, not just failing or succeeding to perform a task, as described with the Mario example above. These criteria still leave room for interpretation (What, exactly, constitutes an impact or a conscious choice?). Using these criteria, the three categories I have devised are the aesthetic choice, which provides depth to the storyline without altering events or the overall narrative significantly; the social choice, which revolves around the relationships between the protagonist(s) and other characters or factions within the game; and the reflective choice, which calls attention to the act of choosing and the ramifications of the player's decision.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF VIDEO GAMING'S NARRATIVE CHOICES

Player choice in video game narratives has been present since the beginning of the medium, but implemented gradually. Early role-playing games (RPGs) carried over the character creation process from their tabletop inspiration, *Dungeons and Dragons*. Players might choose a character's sex, race, class, and physical or mental abilities. Because character creation typically occurs before the actual game begins, I am not including it in the typology. However, it still deserves some discussion as it can have an immense impact. In the MMORPG genre, for example, character creation often affects the entire playing experience

from beginning to end. *World of Warcraft*, which at its peak in 2010 held the record for most subscribers to an MMORPG, is perhaps the most iconic example (Blizzard Entertainment). When creating a character, the player must choose between races (e.g. orcs, gnomes, dwarves) that make up two opposing factions: Alliance and Horde. Players on the Alliance side are never able to meaningfully communicate with the Horde side and vice versa. The storylines between the two sides differ significantly. The choices the player makes upon creation have other consequences as well. The character's race and class (e.g. paladin, warrior, priest) can determine where the character begins their narrative, the relationship between the character and various groups of non-player characters (NPCs) within the game, or what armor or weapons are available for use. Other games follow similar narrative divergences based on character creation. Many games, including the *Mass Effect* series, place limitations on romantic plotlines based on the sex of the main character. The medieval role-playing strategy game, *Mount and Blade*, effectively makes the game more difficult for female characters, requiring those characters to do more work in order to obtain approval of other nobles.

Some games have also given the player's performance the ability to shape the storyline. A common example found mostly in RPGs is whether or not the player protects a character and prevents their death. These types of narrative shifts might not be conscious choices, as their existence is not commonly made known to the player. One of the earlier and simpler examples of this game feature appeared in Nintendo's 1986 game *Metroid*. At the end of the game, the faster the player completed it the less clothing the protagonist, Samus, has on. Different endings show her in full armor, armor minus helmet, a single-piece bathing suit, and finally in a two-piece bathing suit. The offensiveness of having the female body be the player's reward aside, the impact on the storyline was meaningful, given that without attaining one of the endings where Samus removes her armor there is no indication that she is female.

Possibly the first in the amorphous genre known as the visual novel, *The Portopia Serial Murder Case*, released in 1983, was also one of the earliest games to feature nonlinearity driven by choices made by the player. The story is told through text and unmoving pictures. The player investigates a murder and travels between locations to find clues and interrogate suspects, and the range of possible options is wide. For example, the player can find a matchbook in a living room with a phone number written on it, then pick up the phone and dial that number. While the murderer is the same person regardless of the choices made, the decisions the player makes can change the order of events in the narrative.

Early examples of games that meet the criteria I laid out for this typology appeared on the Super Nintendo console system. *Ogre Battle: The March of the Black Queen*, released in 1993, was the first game to include multiple endings with meaningful differences. *Ogre Battle* would primarily be considered a strategy game and as the protagonist, the player is in command of an army rebelling against an evil empire. Based on who the player recruits to join their army, how the player's army performs, and other factors, there are twelve different possible endings. In some, the main character is seen as a hero and in others as a villain.

Chrono Trigger, a 1995 RPG, put heavy emphasis on its forking paths and multiple possible endings. The storyline revolves around time travel, so the player is able to choose not only *how* to defeat the final boss but also *when*. These endings include different fates for the protagonists and even an ending for what happens if the player loses to the boss. *Chrono Trigger* was the first game to implement a "New Game+" mode, a feature reused in many, many later games that allows players to restart the game's story while retaining progress and items they have accumulated in a previous playthrough. *Chrono Trigger* is set apart from *Ogre Battle* in that there are vast swaths of the story that are skippable depending on the decisions made by the player and the ending obtained, whereas *Ogre Battle* follows basically the same progression up until the ending.

The fact that having multiple possible endings was one of the earliest examples of diverging narratives within video games is probably no accident. In order for a choice to be meaningful, the developers of a video game must create an additional set of content for each possible variation of the storyline. Thus, having the

significant choice occur at the ending of the narrative requires the least amount of resources on the developer's part. This motivation can be seen at play in other ways—for example, two dialogue options in a game might be similar enough to elicit the same response.

THE TYPOLOGY OF FORKING PATHS

It is difficult to provide an overarching categorization for choices within video games based on their effect on the narrative for many reasons. The first is that the choices come in such myriad forms: there are dialogue choices, decisions about who to kill and who to be friends with, literal forks in the available path to move forward, and countless more—future research into the impact of the method of delivering the choice to the player has significant potential. The effects of the choices might be subtle, like changing a visual detail or making a combat encounter more difficult, or obvious, like an immediate text indicator that someone likes a character less. The overwhelming majority of these choices are deterministic, meaning another player performing the same actions will experience the same narrative, but not all of them are. Further, sometimes it's not obvious when the player has *made* a choice, because he or she might not realize there was an alternative action available without playing through the game multiple times or reading about the game elsewhere.

Take, for example, a scene in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*. The protagonist is traveling in an aircraft which is fired upon and crash lands. The player, as the main character, jumps out of the aircraft beforehand and lands a short distance away. Enemies close in on the aircraft and the pilot, opening fire. The pilot tells the main character to not worry about her and to use the distraction to escape. Shortly after, she dies to enemy fire. However, if the player acts quickly enough, they can save the pilot by eliminating the large group of enemies. This might not be apparent at first, due to the fast acting that is required to save her, but if the player investigates the achievements associated with the game, one of them is for saving the pilot, thus informing the player of the possibility.

Choices might serve to provide character backstory, fill in dialogue, determine the next objective, or serve as the main source of gameplay. They might take place during combat, while exploring the world, or after a climactic final encounter. To divide up the choices based on what effect they have on the narrative of the games, though, I have devised the following three categories: aesthetic, social, and reflective. Please note that the categories are not in any way exclusive. Choices can, and often do, fit into more than one category.

The aesthetic choice is one which alters surface level details without significantly changing the narrative arc. A simple set of examples is found in the game *Saint's Row: The Third*. Often, after completing an important mission, the player is faced with two options. One set of options involves deciding whether to blow up a building belonging to the enemy or to refit it as a base for the protagonist's gang. Blowing up the building awards more respect for the player (respect functions as an experience progression system) while taking it over gives a bonus in the amount of money the player earns and allows the player to use the building as a safe house. Neither option is important to the main storyline, but the change is permanent in the world, and the decision alters the perceived motivations of the protagonist.

A prime example of a game laden with aesthetic choices is the episodic series *Kentucky Route Zero*. The game falls into the "point-and-click adventure" genre, where the main gameplay element is moving the main character around to examine objects, explore locations, and talk to other characters. The story is minimalistic: the protagonist is a truck driver who delivers for an antique store. He is assigned a delivery at an address that turns out to be connected with The Zero, a mythical underground highway in western Kentucky. There's a main storyline, one which happens no matter what choices are made, but the game encourages exploration and detours, allowing the player to visit numerous locations that are disconnected from the protagonist's delivery. The choices the player makes determines what happens to the protagonist as he works toward his

objective, they establish what kind of person the protagonist is through his responses to questions, and they even fill in details of the world, like the name of the protagonist's dog.

Surface level changes should not be dismissed as contributing little to the narrative experience. Game designer Raph Koster suggests a thought experiment reimagining *Tetris* as a Holocaust simulator: the pieces dropping become bodies being dumped into a mass grave, and the player's goal is to fit them in as efficiently as possible (Bogost 242-3). By only changing the graphical representation of the game and nothing else, the game has transformed "from a harmless puzzle into a morally debatable cultural object" (Bogost 243). Koster describes this phenomenon well, saying "The bare mechanics of the game do not determine its semantic freight" (qtd. in Bogost 243). Reshaping a character's backstory or the appearance of an object in the game has the potential to significantly alter the player's interaction with the game's texture and story.

A social choice is one which primarily changes the relationship of the main character(s) with other characters in the game. These types of choices are frequently tied to games with dialogue choice systems. The player might respond positively to something another character said, thus making them like them and the other characters associated with them like the protagonist more, which might lead to that character joining the player's team, or to a romantic relationship between the characters, or to a reward. The opposite is also possible: the character's actions upset someone which causes them to not want to help or to actively impede the player's progress. In some games, the effects of choices are clear when made, while others mask the effects[4].

Social choices are often aligned with a system of morality in games and fall in the scale of good versus evil. The title of this article comes from one such system: the renegade or paragon dichotomy found in the *Mass Effect* series. In it, many decisions immediately reward paragon or renegade points. Once players accumulate enough of either, characters in the game treat them differently, and new abilities and dialogue choices are made available. As an example, the player might discover that a merchant is selling illegal goods. The player has the option to turn in the merchant to authorities, resulting in paragon points and a better reputation, or they might take a bribe from the merchant, resulting in renegade points and a monetary reward. The player is always aware of where they stand via a graphical indication in the status menu which shows exactly how much of a paragon or a renegade the character is considered. Similar systems were used in the *Fallout* series (referred to as Karma) and in an overwhelming number of games based on *Dungeons and Dragons*, where characters might start off neutral but are pushed to good or evil through their actions.

The morality system of some games has been criticized for not having enough of an impact on the narrative. In "Making Moral Choices in Video Games," Moore argues that because the eucatastrophe, "the good ending drawn out of the midst of evil," often occurs regardless of the individual moral choices made along the way by the player, that there are ultimately no consequences for those decisions (70). While this might be true in some games, including *Fable 2* which Moore focuses his analysis on, there are games in which the endings are soured by the decisions made along the way (including, among the examples already given, *Ogre Battle*). Like the focus on multiple variations of endings, the fact that moral decisions barely affect the final conflict of the game could be attributed to the amount of work it would entail for the developers. *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II* is one such example. In it, the player takes the role of a Jedi. Each choice made pushes the protagonist towards the light or dark side of the force. These choices alter how other people in the game treat the protagonist and can lead to significantly different experiences in the playthrough. However, in the end, the final confrontation is the same, no matter what choices are made.

Ian Bogost also uses *Knights of the Old Republic* as an example in his survey of scholarship on morality in video games: "Each decision the player makes—whom to help, fight, ignore—affects the player's moral attribute [...] the 'dark' or 'light' side of 'the force" (284). Other examples he looks at are *Fable*, *Black and*

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4 For a write-up of one of the few choices in the *Mass Effect* series where the consequences are not apparent, see Patrick Lee's "Mass Effect Universe Gets Ugly When a Paragon Decision Finally Backfires."

White, Shadow the Hedgehog, *Deus Ex*, and *America's Army*. Of particular interest, beyond the broad review of literature he offers, is the comparison he makes between morality in the decisions made in *Deus Ex*, where "right is never definitively clear," versus *Knights of the Old Republic*, in which "player gestures [...] always map directly to moral values" (287).It's this separation of the implications of the decisions of the games that places the choices made in *Knights* as being more in the category of social choice, whereas *Deus Ex*'s player choices fall more often in the next category: reflective.

Reflective choices are ones in which the choice itself is the focus. These call attention to the act of choosing between different possibilities by requiring the player to think about why they made the choice they did. Often, games remind players of these decisions, having other characters voice disgust or approval at what choice was made. While this means reflective choices often have overlap with social choices, with reflective choices the emphasis is on the decision, not on the consequences to a relationship as a result of the decision.

In the 2012 first-person shooter game *Spec Ops: The Line*, reflective choices are used to comment on the genre of shooters in general. Based on *Heart of Darkness*, players take the role of the leader of a three-man Delta Force team that is sent into Dubai for reconnaissance after a massive dust storm has inflicted catastrophic damage on the city and stranded an army battalion that was attempting an evacuation. The team finds the city in chaos, with insurgent elements, the CIA, and the army all fighting for control. As the story progresses, the player finds evidence that the army has committed atrocities to maintain order. There are situations where the player has to choose between saving civilians or comrades, whether or not to put dying men out of their misery, and how to deal with a mob of hostile civilians. Although the majority of the decisions do not alter the game's overall plotline, the player is constantly asked to reexamine the choices they make by both their team members and the antagonist, thus setting the decisions apart from aesthetic ones. A superficial examination of the game suggests that it is a commentary on the horrors of war in general. However, in the context of other games within the same genre, it's clearly playing with established tropes in shooter games and is criticizing the player for taking part in them. *Spec Ops* is not just seeking to have the player examine their choices in the situations of this one text, but the choices players make in every game that involves shooting mass amounts of people with no thought as to what that sort of slaughter would mean for both the fallen and the perpetrator[5].

The choice I found to be the most powerful in the game was also one of the most criticized. At one point, the player on a rooftop and has to decide whether or not to use a white phosphorus-based weapon against an enemy encampment between the player and their objective. If the player doesn't use the weapon, the game effectively ends: it is impossible to proceed due to an unending number of enemies that emerge from the encampment. After using the weapon, the player descends to the encampment to see soldiers rolling on the ground in pain, crying out to be killed. Even more disturbing, inside the encampment the player discovers an alley full of corpses of civilians who were being held. The burns on the corpses are depicted in full detail; one woman is holding a child. Many players criticized the design of this scenario, as they were upset that the game tries to make a statement out of this moment but doesn't allow an alternate choice (see, among other places, the comments section in Pitts). In an interview, though, the developers knew what their reactions might be. Focus group play testers would actually leave the room after the scene, and while the producer was worried if the game was crossing a line, the developer argued that "if the player is thinking about seriously putting down the controller at this point, then that's exactly where we want them emotionally" (Pitts). Moments in the rest of the game call back to that scene, asking again and again for the player to remember what they had done. Despite there not being another choice beyond letting the enemy kill you or quitting play, this moment fits in with other diverging points in stories where you *do* have a real choice to construct a narrative. The game is intent on being a catalyst for self-examination within the player, and this particular example asks you to think about the decision in the context of the shooter genre as a whole.

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5 For a thorough examination of the rhetorical storytelling found in *Spec Ops*, see Russ Pitts' article "Don't Be a Hero."

In *Persuasive Games*, Bogost examines the rhetorical power of games in general, often by looking at what options are given to the player during gameplay. One example he analyzes, *Antiwargame*, stands out by making a significant and specific argument with the decisions it allows the players to make, decisions that fit firmly within my reflective choice category (82-5). In *Antiwargame*, the player is given the role of a U.S. president fighting a war on terrorism. The player can make choices regarding the deployment of military and foreign aid, domestic spending, and the messaging put out by the media. All the factors are linked, and a decision in one area can cause unintended consequences in another. Bogost writes:

> *Antiwargame*'s procedural rhetoric works because it forces the player to make and enact decisions that might not otherwise seem logical or obvious. By connecting the causal ties between business, war, and civil unrest, the game deploys procedural enthymeme. Once the player completes these rule-based syllogisms, *Antiwargame* offers a procedural representation of how its authors perceive U.S. foreign policy to be broken. (84-5)

Thus, a set of decisions might lead to the best outcome in terms of the player's popularity as president, ultimately the choices exist to communicate a message about the subject matter of the game from the author to the audience.While Bogost's book focuses primarily on games with a political or corporate message (e.g. *The McDonald's Game*), the methodology he describes often overlaps with more mainstream games.

THE RISE OF STORY-CENTRIC GAMES

As previously stated, games focused primarily on player's choices have been around for quite a while, but I will argue that they are experiencing explosive growth in recent years. One of the leaders of this growth, Telltale Games, is a developer of story-based adventure games using existing intellectual property. While Telltale Games has been around for more than ten years, having gotten its start with *Sam & Max* games, its biggest success came in 2012 with their game adaptation of the comic and TV series *The Walking Dead*. Since then, Telltale has developed *The Wolf Among Us* based on DC Comics' *Fables* series, *Tales from the Borderlands* based on the *Borderlands* game franchise, as well as games in the *Game of Thrones* and *Minecraft* universes. All of these titles follow a similar format. They're episodic and sell for a lower price than typical big releases. The games are primarily vehicles for narratives, with part of them being a point-and-click exploration similar to *Kentucky Route Zero* and other moments requiring the player to react quickly to an event with a button push or decision (known as quick time events).

Similar titles, some with more interaction and some with less, include *Gone Home*, *Dear Esther*, *Life is Strange*, *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*, *Firewatch*, and *To the Moon*. Sometimes referred to as visual novels, sometimes as interactive fiction (though this has traditionally referred to text-only games), and sometimes in jest as "walking simulators," all of these games put the focus on the narrative experience. The gameplay exists primarily in service of the story. Because the bulk of the games revolve around making decisions relevant to the story, they typically include decisions that hit all of the categories I've laid out.

These games have flourished so extensively that there's a new wave of games that serve as a sort of meta-discussion of the genre. *The Stanley Parable* in particular picks apart what it means to give a player decisions to make within a game. Reminiscent of the cartoons where Bugs and Daffy would argue with the animator, *The Stanley Parable* has a narrator instructing the player of what choices to make, while the game gives the player the option to ignore those instructions. Ultimately, the game asks how much choice the player is actually allowed in any game, and it breaks the fourth wall by having the narrator speak directly to the player behind Stanley. One of the possible endings of the game involves exploring a museum dedicated to the making of *The Stanley Parable*, allowing the creators of the game to make commentary about their decisions in the making of

the game and presenting that commentary directly to the player as part of the experience.

Virtual reality's continued development will bring additional complications to this discussion, especially with regards to the line between a game and other, possibly yet unnamed, types of media. For example, Cardboard Computer, the makers of *Kentucky Route Zero*, released a short game entitled *The Entertainment*. In it, the player has the first-person vantage point of an extra on the set of a play. The only way to interact with the game, as a player, is to look around the theater, read information presented about objects in the room, and listen to the dialogue of the other characters in the play. That's it. The game was developed with the Oculus Rift virtual reality headset in mind, meaning it could be experienced as a virtual reality theatrical play. I'm sure it will be hotly debated whether experiences like this, which will undoubtedly grow in number, are games. In *The Entertainment*'s case it was developed by a gaming company with a narrative tie-in to the *Kentucky Route Zero* series, but it will be interesting to see how a similar experience created by, say, a university's theatre or digital media department would be viewed. Where is the line between a cinematic, choose-your-own-adventure experience like *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* and a game with significant live-action elements and similar choices like *Her Story*? In any case, the decisions of such an interactive experience might be subject to different analysis based on what medium it is considered by its audience.

CONCLUSION

In his chapter, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," Henry Jenkins attempts to bridge the gap between scholars seeking to shoehorn video games' narrative experiences into the existing frameworks of literary theory and the ludologists by stating "The experience of playing games can never be simply reduced to the experience of a story. Many other factors that have little or nothing to do with storytelling per se contribute to the development of great games and we need to significantly broaden our critical vocabulary for talking about games" (120). In order to have meaningful discussions on video game narratives, we need to have a working vocabulary for the aspect that makes video game narratives different from those narratives found in other media. I have argued that a significant difference is the level of choice available to the audience and offered three types of choices found in video game narratives based on what rhetorical effect they have on the storyline and the player. Aesthetic choices shift superficial details, providing small alternatives to the overall picture. Social choices alter the relationship between the protagonist(s) and the rest of the cast of characters within the game world. Reflective choices ask the player to examine the decisions themselves for meaning. The relationship between the way these categories function and other aspects of individual games such as genre, player response, and various critical interpretations offers a host of potential conversations.

Future research in this area might divide or subdivide these categories differently, or add new categories entirely. It might also be useful to consider how these types of choices manifested themselves across different eras of video game development. Additional frameworks might be built dividing the other facets of these choices. Possibilities include when they occur, how the player selects their choice, or how choices are rewarded or punished. Finally, this analysis has focused on players' interactions directly with the game, but much more could be done to look at similar choices made in the narratives created by multiple players coming together in a single gaming experience, specifically in choices about how to interact with one another, as well as with emergent gameplay.

My hope is that this typology allows for a more nuanced discussion of the medium and gives a scaffolding on which to build future discussion. Setting up a structure for categorizing and understanding these choices will facilitate an easier avenue into a more nuanced and substantial conversation. Narrative choices impact much of a game's narrative: plot points, characterization, world-building, and even gameplay. Given their importance and their uniqueness in gaming compared to other media, by exploring these choices we explore what sets gaming's storytelling capabilities apart.

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