The Videogame: The Newest Narrative

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ABSTRACT

Compared to other media, the videogame is young, unproven, and therefore not taken seriously by most of the general population. But preliminary evidence indicates great potential for videogames as a medium for communication and as an art form. In fact, it seems that in some cases the interactive "game" can be a *better* choice to convey a message or experience than any other medium would be. By summarizing other research and scholarly examinations of the videogame medium, by using examples from conventional and unconventional videogames, and by drawing upon my own experience as a gamer and from creating a short, narrative-focused *LittleBigPlanet 2* game level, this paper seeks to give the reader a full understanding of the videogame and the communicatory and narrative potential its unique properties of interactivity and variability make possible. It doesn't take the direct narrative elements we're used to to effectively convey a message or experience; while film and other media like comics have shown as much, the videogame takes the concept of "indirect narrative" to a whole new level. This paper intends to demonstrate that while videogames have already gone many places that other media have not and cannot, there are still many *more* such places that they have the potential to go. Far from a waste of time, videogames could be one of the most important communicatory tools in the history of human civilization.

INTRODUCTION

You wake up in your bed. The sun is shining in through the window. You get up slowly, feeling rested and content. You step outside for a moment to enjoy the pleasant weather. You go back inside, and head to the bathroom. You urinate, shave, brush your teeth, and shower. Back in

your bedroom, you get dressed and then head downstairs. You take a gulp of orange juice from the carton in the fridge and pour yourself a cup of coffee.

Sound like the start of a typical Saturday for you? It's actually the first eight minutes of a videogame, *Heavy Rain*, which came out for the PlayStation 3 console in 2010.

One player's experience of the first few minutes of Heavy Rain.

No, it's not a simulation game like *The Sims* or an massively-multiplayer alternative world like *Second Life*. Its developers call it an "interactive drama", and after the first half-hour or so, that becomes clear as the story steadily darkens. These first few minutes, besides introducing the conventions of the game controls and world to the player, are important in establishing one of the main characters. The player will think back to the happy life depicted here when, just a few scenes later, she sees the character's much more miserable life a year after his older son's death. This game is telling a story, and it's doing it in a way never possible before in any other medium. What's the point of playing a game like this? Well, what's the point of watching a movie,

reading a book, or listening to a song? Just as with those, it could be to learn, to be entertained, or to receive a message sent by that work's creators.

Media are essential to civilization, to human life as we know it. Since the days of our first cave-dwelling ancestors, media—for the purposes of this paper, any forms of communicating that aren't face-to-face—have played a central role in how humans communicate and get things done together. Back then they took the form of cave paintings and smoke signals. More recently, we've had books, newspapers, photographs, radio, and video. And most recently, computers have opened up whole new realms of possibility when it comes to indirect communication. Part of that spectrum is what we call the "videogame", an interactive medium usually combining video, sound, and a physically-manipulated control device to deliver any of a variety of experiences devised by game developers. The videogame is very young, only first widely available in the 1970s. Compared to literature's thousands of years and even film's single century, the videogame is an infant in a world of mature media.

One of the more important roles of media is to tell stories. By relating experiences, be they based on real events or entirely fictional, stories give people frames of reference and historical and cultural context for their own lives. Each medium tells stories in different ways, and each way can be more effective for different stories and for different audiences. The videogame, with its unique properties, holds the potential to offer the biggest break in storytelling conventions yet. Digital scholar Henry Jenkins discusses how storytelling must and should vary from medium to medium:

> Stories are not empty content that can be ported from one media pipeline to
> another. One would be hard-pressed, for example, to translate the internal
> dialogue of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* into a compelling cinematic

experience, and the tight control over viewer experience that Hitchcock schieves in his suspense films would be directly antithetical to the aesthetics of good game design. We must, therefore, be attentive to the particularity of games as a medium, specifically what distinguishes them from other narrative traditions. (p. 120)

A YOUNG MEDIUM

As the videogame is still a very young medium, the ways in which it has been used so far largely imitate the already-established media, especially film, with which it has many superficial similarities. But the essential elements of the game, the ones that set it apart and give it so much potential to branch off in different directions from what has come before, are its *interactivity* and its *variability*. Those are elements which no other medium can offer, at least not within the works themselves. Those videogames which embrace those unique properties above all others and build their experiences around them will be the most successful, the most effective in conveying their messages to their players.

Like any medium in its early years, most videogames so far have largely dealt with similar subject matter and had similar conventions to one another. The earliest books were mostly reprinting or retranslations of the Bible, but that didn't mean that that's all the medium was good for. In the approximately thirty years since their appearance, videogames have often focused on straightforward, goal-driven, and often violent themes, but that doesn't mean that that's all they can do. Most scholars and many developers argue that games so far have only scratched the surface of what the medium has the potential to do. David Cage, *Heavy Rain*'s

director and writer, talks about his choice to break from the limited subject matter that games have addressed thus far:

> Most video games today are based on very primal emotions. They are based on adrenaline, … frustration, anger—things that are quite easy to trigger. I'm now interested in seeing how we can trigger what I call social emotions, like empathy, like love, … hate, different types of emotions—sadness, … happiness. So how can games expand their palette of emotions? (IGN)

Heavy Rain, though certainly not the only one, serves as an excellent example of the potential of videogames as a medium beyond what has largely been done so far—killing aliens, jumping on monsters, racing around in circles, and so on. While those experiences certainly have value (Who doesn't love a good round of *Mario Kart*?), that doesn't mean the medium is *limited* to those kinds of competitive, achievement-based experiences, just as books aren't limited to pulp fiction and video isn't limited to "reality" TV. Games like *Heavy Rain* abandon the subject matter and control conventions of many games that have come before (while maintaining enough convention for accessibility and practicality), and have been commercially and critically successful despite their deviations. Such successes encourage other creators to similarly deviate from what has already been done, to explore what can be done with videogames that has not yet been done. This gives an exciting glimpse of the potential that the videogame medium holds, and hopefully of its exciting future for both players and creators.

One player's Heavy Rain *experience a few scenes later. The cheery details of that first scene make the bleakness of this one all the more poignant.*

MORE CREATORS THAN EVER

Perhaps helping to speed this along, the barrier of entry into the videogame development world is lower than ever. Until the last few years, there was a well-defined border between videogame creators and videogame consumers (players). In recent years, as people have begun to see the potential in interactive media for conveying information and experiences (stories) and as advances in technology and shifts in culture have placed media creation tools in millions more hands than ever before, that barrier has begun to break down. "Platforms for games" like *LittleBigPlanet 2* have been putting the tools necessary to create and distribute an interactive experience directly into the hands of those who previously were only or primarily consumers. This is part of the larger trend of participatory culture exemplified by "Web 2.0", web services like YouTube and WordPress that serve as platforms for everyday users to post their own content

for their peers worldwide to consume. The first *LittleBigPlanet* bears the tagline "Play, Create, Share", and that's exactly what it allows its users to do: play levels made by the game's developers *and* by other players (accessed over the Internet), create levels of their own with the surprisingly-deep provided tools, and share those levels with other players worldwide and to played and rated by them. The tools in *LittleBigPlanet* and its sequel straddle the line between ease-of-use and complexity, providing a visual way of constructing things that can quickly be learned even by those with no programming experience but still allowing enough freedom in creation that there is a very wide variety in the levels have been created.

Even games whose main focus isn't social content creation have begun to include it as a side or central element for a few years now, since consumers have responded positively to also being creators and since such elements add greatly to the lasting power and perceived value of a product. Role-playing games like *World of Warcraft* and *City of Heroes* let players customize their own in-game characters as they see fit even as the rest of the game experience follows the traditional creator-to-consumer model. Some games, like the Wii's *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* and many PC games, unintentionally allow players to customize their game experience through "hacking", and in fact this may largely be where the trend of consumer-content-creation started.

But creating a game is inarguably different from writing a book or a screenplay (or a short story, poem, stage script, or song, as the case may be). Besides the obvious technical difference in tools used, the interactive nature of games as they are being consumed makes them fundamentally different from the much more passive traditional media. This not only affects the consumer's experience but also the creator's. For example, the creator must have a firm grasp of the interactive nature of their creation, of how the sequence of events could be totally different for two players who play the same game differently. A game creator must plan for these

differences, must decide how wide of a range of possibilities to allow for without making tl

game seem too open-ended or too linear. The creator, then, must even decide what he or sh

the target audience) considers to be "too open-ended" or "too linear".

A game creator has decisions to make that an author or screenwriter would never have to

make. And a game creator also doesn't have to make decisions that a creator in a passive

medium does, like how events will definitely play out, which character's point of view all

consumers will experience the story from, or even what the intended message of the work is.

This allows more freedom, perhaps, in the exploration of a subject or experience, but it also

makes for a tight balancing act. This by nature lends videogames better to some subject matter,

to some methods of storytelling than do passive mediums, and worse to others.

INTERACTIVITY

Unlike in other media, the consumer of a game has a measured amount of direct control

over what happens in the game world. This is where videogames start to break away from their

media brethren. Games scholar Mark J.P. Wolf describes the interactive experience:

> Rather than merely watching the actions of the main character, as we would in a film,
>
> with every outcome of events predetermined when we enter the theater, we are given a
>
> surrogate character (the player-character) through which we can participate in and alter
>
> the events in the game's diegetic world. It is still, in the end, a vicarious experience, but a
>
> more interactive one. (p. 93)

Depending on the nature of the game and on the player's whims, the player can choose to

progress slowly and carefully, quickly and

recklessly, or to stand still or even regress, moving

"backwards", away from the goal. In *Pac-Man*, the

player's assigned goal is to have Pac-Man collect all

of the Pac Dots in the maze, but she doesn't have to.

As long as there are still a few dots left lying around,

the poor yellow guy can run around the maze

avoiding the ghosts forever if his player wants him

to. The end goal is only assigned, not required, in a

game. The player can also get bored of the game

before ever reaching its prescribed goal, and turn it
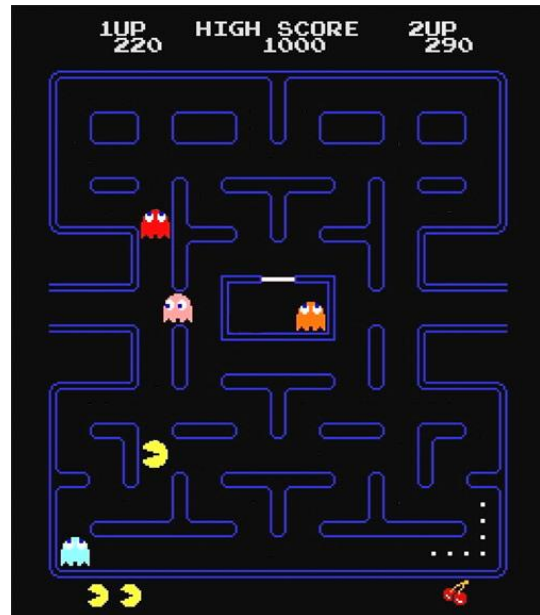
Pac-Man's goal of eating all the dots need never be reached if the player decides to have him do something else.

off. Videogames share this element of interactivity with most mediums—the reader or viewer is

usually in a situation where she can simply put down the book or shut off the movie and never go

back to it. But that's as interactive as those media get. By building the interactivity into the work

itself, by allowing the developer to have some control over how it occurs beyond "has an

experience" or "has no experience", the videogame brings interactivity in media to amazing new

heights.

The game's designer strikes a delicate balance between the structure provided and the

freedom of control given to the player. Make it too linear, and the game becomes a superficially-

interactive movie. Make it too open, and the player will derive no meaning and learn nothing

because any meaning will have come entirely from herself. Of course, in some cases this might

be what the game's creator desires, but it's the creator's choice to abandon control over the

experience to let the player make of it what she will. David Cage, writer and director of *Heavy Rain*, talks about the problem with making a game too open-ended:

> … you can tell people, "Tell your own story," and most people would tell you, "Come on, I'm not a storyteller. Telling a good story is really a job that requires talent and vision. I just want to enjoy a story. I don't want to tell my own story out of the blue." It's part of the pleasure, too, when you go to the cinema, to discover the vision of someone else, and to have a story to be told.
>
> I think what games can really bring to the table is the fact that there is a vision, there's someone to tell it, but you can participate in the story. You can change it, and you can make it yours, but at the same time, it remains a good story with a good story arc and a real journey. Someone plotted the journey for you, so you're guaranteed to live something unique. (Sheffield)

The message of a game depends, like with all media, on what the creator wants to convey. But games are special because the message *also* significantly depends on what the player wants, and is able, to get from the experience. Videogame creators Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn (2006) prefer to refer to the medium, or at least their slice of it, as "realtime art". In their manifesto, they state that interactivity is "the one thing that no other medium can do better" and therefore, they say, it is the element around which the most effective games will be based. We can see the potential in that as games like *Heavy Rain* and Harvey and Samyn's own games, including *The Path*—a horror-genre interactive interpretation of the Red Riding Hood Story— scratch that surface harder than ever.

VARIABILITY

There's no questioning that a game can have a story. Often, games will even have tangible plots, with pre-scripted events set by the developer to be experienced by every player (assuming the player doesn't quit playing the game before the event can occur). But what happens between those events, what order they happen in, and sometimes even the details of those events will be different for every player, for every play-through. James Paul Gee describes a simple example of variability in long-running game series *Castlevania*:

> Every player of Castlevania who does everything you can do in the game will in the end have done all the same things. A player who does less will have done some subset of this. However, each player of Castlevania will have done and found things in different orders and in different ways from each other. Players will have ventured into the parts of the castle in different orders, they will have revisited them a different number of times. They will have faced the bosses at different times and will have defeated them in different ways. They will have found key items in different orders. They will have made different choices of what strategies to use and what equipment to wear and use. This is to say that each player will have enacted a different trajectory through the game. (p. 60)

Every player of the game has a different experience, and even the same player will have a different experience each time she plays the same game. This is where videogames differ drastically from other media. While there is always slight variation in an individual's experience of a book, movie, or song, that variation always comes from outside the work itself, from the reader/viewer/listener's past experiences or the environment she's consuming the work in. The

variation in a videogame is a part of the work itself, something that the game's creators have anticipated, planned for, and built into the experience.

Sample narrative structure of a book or film. Linear. While these parts may have different structures in themselves, the significant fact is that the work itself will be the same for every consumer of it.
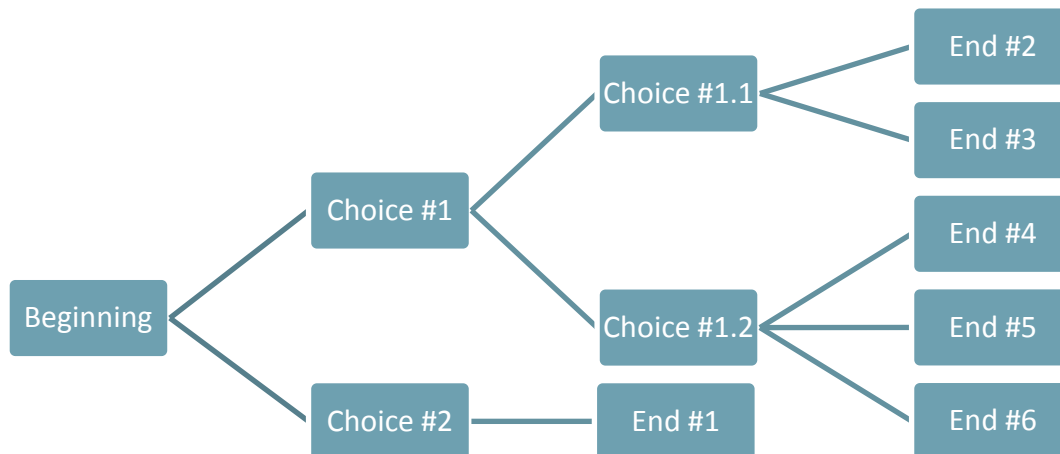
Sample narrative structure of a videogame. Variable. The level of variability will, well, vary from game to game, but every player's experience of a single game will be different from any other.

CHARACTERS AND ENVIRONMENT

Of course, not every element of the videogame narrative is unique to it. Videogames share many of these elements with other media, like books and films.

For instance, every game has characters, be they as simple as the player's spaceship in *Galaga* or as complex as the four main characters of *Heavy Rain*. Characters are the actors of the story. They are what drive it forward, what drag it down, what make it relatable to the player. As the living things in the diegetic world, the characters are the essential element that bridge the gap

of between that world and ours by being immediately relatable to use, the living things of this

world. A story about inanimate objects would be very difficult to make effective for a living

audience, because none of your audience knows what it's like to be an inanimate object. (There

might seem to be exceptions, like the films *Toy Story* and *The Brave Little Toaster* which are

about children's toys and household appliances respectively, but those stories bridge the gap by

making the inanimate objects into animate characters with human-like qualities.)

In games, characters can be broken down into two types: player characters and non-player

characters. Non-player characters are pretty similar to their counterparts in other media. They

can provide information or serve as motivation for the player-character's (potential) actions.

The player character is special, though. The player literally controls her player character,

and the player character provides direct informational and emotional feedback to the player,

bringing her more fully into the experience unlike in any other medium. The videogame's creator

makes a choice when designing the player character: whether to give him a distinct, fleshed-out

personality or to make him a blank slate, ready to take on the identity of the player. Nintendo's

legendary Shigeru Miyamoto tends to take the latter route in his games, including the *Super

Mario* series and *The Legend of Zelda* series. In *Zelda*, protagonist Link never speaks beyond

grunts and yells as he carries out actions. In fact, when starting the game, the player is asked to

give Link her own name. So every time I play a *Zelda* game, it's "John" running around in the

game's world of Hyrule and being addressed by its inhabitants, not a character I've never heard

of. At the same time, the four protagonists of *Heavy Rain* have elaborate backstories already

established by the time the player takes control of them. Again, it is up to the individual creator

to decide what will work best for each individual game and the messages it's intended to convey.

Though not as essential to the experience as interactivity and variability, the visual and sound design of a game's internal world are still very important in the determining what the experience is ultimately like. Visuals and sounds indirectly and directly provide information to the player – providing direct and indirect (in-game maps) representations of the player-character's location in the diegetic world; telling the player what's happening now and what's happened in the past; conveying emotions and themes through color, lighting, reverb (echo-iness), volume, character voices and sound effects; and so on.

A screenshot from Team Fortress 2*, showing one of many such parts of the environment not accessible to the player but which nonetheless provides important information about the narrative context. The large databanks, old data-tape reels, and even the shape of the chair imply a certain time and place in history, and give the player's actions some context as part of a larger, perhaps Cold War-esque, struggle.*

Every decision about how things look or sound is a rhetorical one, whether the creator realizes it or not. The visual and aural elements are essential in shaping the experience. Whole swaths of story can be told without a single word, just by including details in the environment

that let the player infer a scenario's backstory. An excellent example of this comes in *Team Fortress 2*, an online multiplayer team-based shooter that contains absolutely zero direct exposition. Even though the game's characters are very distinct with strong personalities, the players are simply thrown into each game round with the instruction to compete against the other team, with no explanation as to why they're doing it or what the consequences may be within the game world. Much of this can be inferred from the environment itself, though, for the players who bother to stop and take a look around.

POTENTIAL

There are far too many narrative elements to videogames to try to cover them all here, but I've provided enough of an overview to whet your appetite for what this interactive medium has to offer, both now and in the future. In the creative work that accompanies this research, I've attempted to put what I've written about here—interactivity, variability, the player's connection with the player-character, and the indirect narrative attributes of environmental details—to use within my game. Hopefully it will serve as a decent example of those elements working as a cohesive unit, though I make no pretentions at being an experienced videogame creator—just an experienced player.

Videogames have a lot to offer already, and the tastes of potential that games like *Heavy Rain* give us hint at much more to come. If you've written off videogames as a waste of time or merely entertainment before, give them another chance. You might be surprised at what they have to offer beyond some killed-time and laughs with friends. And if it's possible for any medium to change the way you think about things, a video game certainly could.

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