When Stanley Came to a Set of Two Open Doors: The Impossibility of True Agency in Video Games and the Power of Illusion

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Abstract

In narrative-based video games, the player is given control over how the story is experienced and continued. However, this sense of control is based solely upon the illusion that true choice is present. Despite various production limitations that arise during game development, developers try to better anticipate the unpredictability of player desire when creating the choices within the narrative. However, the implementation of these choices and what types of choices players are asked to make varies greatly between games, as does the success with which they are implemented. As a result, there needs to be an examination of choice-based games and the theory of choice and narrative interaction to see how one can modify the strengths and weaknesses of these various forms of storytelling to provide players with that long-desired sense of purpose in gameplay. This will also provide developers with a much-needed guide on how to produce more successful narratives and thus more profitable games. Based on an analysis of different types of choice-based games, it was determined that the vignette style of storytelling and choice implementation was the best way to integrate meaningful choice into narrative games.

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Introduction

Narratives are made significantly weaker without the development of emotional engagement with an audience, regardless of the storytelling medium. The progression of the narrative depends upon the reader, player, or viewer's ability to connect with the events and characters in front of them, allowing them to feel the stakes of the story unfolding.[1] The audience must be engaged fully via an emotional appeal to continue their interactions with the story world. In choice-based narrative video games (CBNGs)—games where story and storytelling are the focus or driving force of the game where the main mechanic is based on decision making—such as interactive dramas or choose your own adventure games (CYOA), the player is given control, otherwise known as agency or choice, over how the story is experienced and continued. Most broadly, agency is one's ability to make significant alterations to the game world, it transforms the reality that one is experiencing.[2] In other words, agency is a player's ability to make choices that will change the course of the story being told to them. Since the functionality of CBNGs is dependent on establishing a sense of agency for players, it is important to examine current games in the landscape for their success in establishing a substantial and meaningful sense of agency for their players. If games are incapable of creating agency in a way that makes the player feel unimportant in the narrative, then the games have failed to properly utilize their main mechanic. Thus, game developers need to be given a guideline on how to properly use this popular mechanic successfully in their projects.

The sense of control players experience in these games, however, is based on the illusion of choice through pre-plotted branching paths. This idea of perceived agency has grown increasingly popular among players seeking a more involved narrative experience, which stems from a player's "desire to know" which Marie-Laure Ryan dubbed "epistemic immersion."[3] This is what makes the players of CBNGs want to become "detectives" and discover the results of the branching paths presented to them.[4] Developers then—despite various production limitations that arise during game development—try to better anticipate the unpredictability of player desire when creating the choices within the narrative.[5] Players all have different styles of play, different personalities, and morals, which leads to an infinitesimal number of possible options that this varied population of players would want to see in their game. This process of catering to every possible player then becomes impossible as most games do not have an unlimited budget or timeline to complete the product. This results in this compensation and compromise among developers who must appease the masses while still creating the illusion of infinite possibilities under the strict guidelines of budget. These challenges in creation then force developers to confront the prospect of trying to create many branching choices—or rather the

[1] Anne Hamby et al., "Examining Readers' Emotional Responses to Stories," Journal of Media Psychology Theories Methods and Applications 35, no. 3 (October 20, 2022): 132, https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000356.
[2] Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford, "Video Games and Agency in Contemporary Society," Games and Culture 15, no. 2 (2018): 139-40, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412017750448.
[3] Marie-Laure Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories: Toward a Poetics of Interactive Narrative," *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 1, no. 1 (2009): 55, https://doi.org/10.1353/stw.0.0003.
[4] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 55.
[5] Marco Caracciolo and Karin Kukkonen, "Hitting the Wall? the Rhetorical Approach and the Role of Reader Response," *Style* 52, no. 1-2 (2018): 47, https://doi.org/10.5325/style.52.1-2.0045.

illusion of choices—that matter to the player, creating weaker and less satisfying final products because of the wide breadth of outcomes that are trying to be explored.

The idea that choices matter or have meaning to players stems from their desire for emotional connections to the stories they are engaging with; such "narrative involvement" is what allows players to place themselves in the narrative and follow along with it.[6] "Meaning" occurs when players desire to make connections in their mind as to why an event they are being shown occurred, and when emotional appeals to their lived reality or possible lived reality are created. This is done through the main progression of the plot—or subplots—and the choices players are asked to make. Developers use various types of choices for players to navigate, but often many of the consequences of these choices are insignificant, not realized, or bring to light that no choice—save for one or two—mattered.[7] No matter the genre of story or medium, the current landscape of interactive fiction style video games often neglects to create stories that allow players to feel as if they have meaningful agency and purpose in the story being told. There is a lack of consistent emotional weight to these choices as the emotion comes from a pre-determined narrative as opposed to what can be revealed through the specifically selected mechanism of choice-based interaction. The stories being told possess emotional weight via tense situations akin to Hollywood dramas, but the lack of player input in creating this drama, and the inconsistent and sometimes non-existent impact choices have on the overall narrative negate the necessity of their use at all, making them meaningless to the player as they can guess what the developer's desired outcome to their narrative was based on how "easy" it is to make a moral choice or how many obstacles there are to making the wrong one.

CBNGs often fall short of using the very mechanic of their namesake. The mechanic of choosing A, B, C, or D is showcased, but not always in ways that will impact the plot. Moreover, the choices are not always successfully integrated into the narrative, as many games will end the same way regardless of choice, boil down to a final choice, or make clear that only a few choices truly mattered.[8] Every choice in a CBNG is a Chekhov's Gun for players, meaning that once we see a choice introduced, we expect it to come back and impact us by the end of the narrative. The players hope that selecting A over B will impact the ending of the narrative, and when they discover that such a choice had no impact, they may begin to wonder why they sunk countless hours into attempting to connect to the narrative. Where novel authors have innumerable models to guide them with writing their stories (Freytag's Pyramid, the Hero's Journey, etc.), video game writers seeking to make these complex, life-like narratives have no easily accessible guide regarding how to manage their plots and ensure their impact on their story. Such a guide would serve to assist game writers with more successfully implementing choice within their narratives.

Since the development of CBNGs poses many challenges for developers, there needs to be an examination of current choice-based games to see how one can modify the strengths and weaknesses of these various forms of storytelling to provide players with that long-desired sense of purpose in gameplay. Developers of CBNGs often struggle with the idea of how to add a sense of meaning or gravity

[6] Hamby, "Examining Readers' Emotional Responses to Stories," 132.
[7] Dontnod Entertainment and Deck Nine, *Life is Strange*, Square Enix, PlayStation 4, 2015. This will be discussed further in the Comparative Analysis of Games section.
[8] The Comparative Analysis of Games will further express examples of this.

to the choices they ask their players to make. This is because they cannot establish and maintain a sense of significant emotional and narrative impact that these choices will have on their players and narratives respectively due to the varying expectations of players in regards to what they want and expect from a narrative.[9] Thus, this study examines how the implementation and follow-through of various choices in narrative video games can be integrated into narrative-based video games to produce a more meaningful sense of player agency. Additionally, it looks at the impact narrative structures have on the development of choice-based mechanics. Based upon the categories of mechanics and player interaction, games are examined for how effectively the two categories work in tandem to tell the game's story.

This study culminates in the creation of a basic outline for developers on how to successfully create games in one of the industry's most popular genres based upon what exactly is the most efficient, in terms of storytelling and seamless player immersion, form of choice integration in games. Players feeling as if they have a sense of control over the game they are playing is paramount to the genre, therefore developers need a model, much like a plot diagram, that leans into the idea that the player is shaping the story for themselves. A selection of various independent (indie) and AAA (pronounced "triple A," meaning high budget) choice-based games, were examined to see what truly creates these successful narratives for players. The games examined in this study were selected due to my own familiarity with the narratives, their popularity, the variety of release date, and the variety of genres.

Literature Review

To examine one's sense of agency, the importance of establishing an emotional connection with an audience through a well-developed narrative must first be discussed. The connection to the narrative world then sparks the potential to create meaningful choice and decision-making opportunities for players. Next, what constitutes as a "game" and how CBNGs conform to that definition will be discussed to establish the legitimacy of the genre and its mechanics in the world of gaming. Studies exploring the nature of play will serve to establish a guideline for how these video *games* can constitute as interactive enough to be considered play as opposed to simply being more passive and akin to a movie. Following this, the study examines the various roles that the player takes within and outside of the game world, and establish how the player's connection to the game and its character(s) impact the level of immersion. Then, the study shifts focus to the various types of narrative structure and how these styles of narrative story telling affect the types of choices players can make. Finally, the varying types of choices players can make in narrative games are discussed, as are the various problems that arise while trying to develop these choices for players.

Emotion in Narrative

Narratives are a mechanism through which we can interpret the world around us and relay our experiences to others.[10] We use narratives to make sense of anything from a still image to series of events

[9] Caracciolo, "Hitting the Wall?" 47.

[10] H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3, 6.

that unfold around us. Humans do not simply want to take an image at face value: they want to know what occurred to create that image, and that is done via the creation of narratives in our minds.[11] According to H. Porter Abbott, "our narrative perception stands ready to be activated in order to give us a frame or context for even the most static and uneventful scenes."[12] This is what allows us to concoct rationale for still images we see of car crashes. We do not simply observe but infer what occurred to lead to that result: the cars sped and crashed into one another. The utilization of this necessity for story and our human ability to connect still images and ascribe them meaning is what allows narrative to provide meaning to the media we interact with.

Emotions tie in directly to this interpretation, as emotions are defined by the subjective interpretation of a given situation by each individual.[13] However, scholar Lois Presser in her examination of how emotions impact narrative, points out that "…while emotion always stems from cognition, cognition does not always produce emotion. The cognition has to matter to us somehow; it has to strike us as making a difference in our lives."[14] This is where meaningful and impactful stories come from. People must care enough about what images are being shown to them to connect to them and elicit an emotional response. It is well enough to want to make sense of an image or a story being told, but to *care* about it is what differentiates a true sense of importance between a series of events and a narrative. The emotions and the strength of the emotion created stem from previously established cultural connections of significance towards the event.[15] For this reason, many narrative video games base the foundations of their stories upon intense, inarguably difficult to handle situations, such as the disappearance and subsequent death of a child in the opening of *Heavy Rain*. Situations like this can evoke a strong sense of fear within their players based on their own experience as a parent, perhaps, losing their child in a crowd, or their own experiences when they were younger of losing sight of the safety net that was their parents.

The intensity of scenes like this drive interactive narrative fiction, especially since the basis of all narratives and the movement from one act to another is some type of subversion of expectation or conflict. For example, in the three-act structure, the move from act one to act two is usually caused by the resolution of an internal conflict.[16] This conflict is established in act one, and it allows the character to resolve themselves to leave their "zone of comfort" to go on the journey requested of them.[17] This is seen often in the *Yakuza*—otherwise known as *Ryu ga Gotoku* or *Like a Dragon*—series of video games where the main character Kazuma Kiryu rejects his connection to the yakuza but resolves himself to maintain the thread for the sake of keeping his friends and family safe. In the "break into act three," a similar conflict occurs from the protagonist's realization that they must return to the fight even after

[11] Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 6.
[12] Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 6.
[13] Lois Presser, "Emotion, Narrative, and Transcendence," in *Inside Story: How Narratives Drive Mass Harm*, 1st ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 63, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctv3znx4s.
[14] Presser, "Emotion, Narrative, and Transcendence," 64.
[15] Presser, "Emotion, Narrative, and Transcendence," 66.
[16] Jessica Brody, *Save the Cat! Writes a Novel: The Last Book On Novel Writing You'll Ever Need* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 2018), 25.
[17] Brody, *Save the Cat!*, 25.

thinking that all hope is lost.[18] Continuing with the example of the *Yakuza* series, Kiryu often appears to have been defeated by the other yakuza family leaders, but he gets up to fight again remembering his motivations to save his family and city. Emotions and moments of high tension push these stories forward, and that's what makes people want to continue to watch or play them. The conflicts players experience and the choices they make must thus move the plot forward in a manner that is cohesive to the rest of the plot unfolding around them. If player choice unravels the narrative that had been spun up until that point, the absurd amount of freedom created negates the creation of a narrative at all, causing players to lose interest because their emotional connection to the story world and its characters has dissipated. The loss of tension in the story that had established a strong emotional connection between player and story world unravels the narrative entirely since the tension, conflict, and thus emotional draw of the story is entirely dependent on the concise structure of the story. Taking part in a narrative via playing a video game should make these conflicts and emotional connections more real as the player assumes the role of the person who has these events inflicted upon them. The element of control should not punish the player for wanting to explore by revoking their story, rather it should help to maintain tension and guide the emotions they will feel as they further engage with the narrative.

Narratives mimic real life in the sense that they are always moving forward and changing the present state of being through action.[19] Specifically, conflict is the driving force of narratives; without a challenge to the protagonist's way of life, the story cannot take place as there is no motivation for the character to change or take action. It is this action that not only moves the plot forward, but the audience's interests as well. The more action or "volatility" in the events of the story, the more likely people are to genuinely engage with the narrative.[20] Many choice-based games play off this using unpredictable and morally complex choices for players to explore. The question of morals brings about an emotional response in players, such as stress, as they are faced with difficult decisions that they believe will irrevocably impact the narrative world. Thus, the emotion may not be tied to the plot beats themselves, but how the player feels as they are forced to confront their moral compass. This plays with the idea of "emotional immersion," in which the player's emotions and choices are viewed as a means to an end when playing a game in addition to them being the guiding force of narrative connection.[21] This emerges as choices where players must decide who lives or dies—like in *Until Dawn*—or whether it's okay to steal—a choice which is explored in the early moments of *Detroit: Become Human.* Narratives rely almost exclusively on emotion to make players care about the stories that are unfolding before them.

Defining Games and the Act of Play

The definition of play—and by extension, games—is a loose, abstract concept often debated and changed to fit one's argumentative needs. Johan Huizinga postulates that play is a purely irrational act, devoid of categorization and succinct definitions.[22] He importantly asserts that play is paradoxically non-

[18] Brody, *Save the Cat!*, 26.
[19] Presser, "Emotion, Narrative, and Transcendence," 69.
[20] Presser, "Emotion, Narrative, and Transcendence," 69.
[21] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 56.
[22] Johan Huzinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London, U.K.: Routledge, 1998), 3.

serious in relation to the real world, but can be very serious within the game itself.[23] This divide between "real world" and game world is known as the magic circle.[24] The magic circle is the suspension of disbelief, it is what allows players to accept the logic of the game world without letting the rules and laws of reality impact play. For example, when playing *Dragon Age: Origins*, players can accept the established novum such as magic, dragons, and demons present in the game without letting the reality that magic is not real ruin the experience for them. Huizinga's establishment of the magic circle and the assertion of the serious nature of games that requires them to exist in their own world gives root to the idea that games can produce serious feelings through the development of impactful narratives.

Moreover, the magic circle allows for the development of a new set of rules separate from the rules of the real world.[25] Importantly, this sets the groundwork that all games must have their own rules to maintain the illusion of the circle.[26] The presence of rules within games allows the player to further immerse themselves within the magic circle, as opposed to limiting them as a new status quo and set of rules provides order and guidelines that will allow players to better understand the flow of the story being told to them. The most successful narratives establish this sense of order that feels natural as opposed to restrictive, which makes the player want to remain within the established story world, the guidelines feel natural and players are then more willing to accept the novum of the story because of their substantial engagement. These guidelines also provide players with a desire to discover, allowing for the implementation of agency as way to fulfill this need to engage. Disrupting the rules of the novum takes the player out of their game and places them into a new one, destroying the magic circle and the world of play. Choice should not be the disrupting factor to this novum, as it should serve to satiate player need for discovery.

Based on these ideas, play can be defined as an act not secluded from, but embedded within reality, in which a new set of rules for life and status quo are established. This challenges Huizinga's idea that the act of engaging with this play has no bearing on reality and can be seen as escapism from the rules of life. If play is irrational and meaningless in relation to real life, people may question how stories told through play can be taken seriously and why they bare academic merit. The emotional draw of these narratives comes from people's ability to liken it to their real-world experiences and/or knowledge of plausibility. Again, this is what encourages readers to infer what has occurred to create the images and/or scenes that are unfolding in front of them. Without the care or connection to playability based on lived experience or heavily established novum, players will become disinterested as the story becomes less and less grounded in its own reality and thus its emotional connect-ability.

Combatting this idea that play and games cannot be taken seriously is scholar Mary Flanagan who posed that games can be used to explore creative expression, social issues, and further critical thinking.[27] Artists can use specific mechanics within games to further a message, as game systems simply serve as a new dimension for creative expression.[28] This is the basis of Flanagan's concept of "critical

[23] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 5-6.
[24] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 10.
[25] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 10.
[26] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 11.
[27] Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 1.
[28] Flanagan, *Critical Play*, 4.

play," in which she stated that games can be used as tools that allow players to question aspects of human life, which extends to the idea of an "activist game" that emphasize social issues while also having the goal of creating a fun experience for players.[29] The role of seriousness in play and the idea of critical play are cornerstones of narrative-based games as they prove that creative works of fiction serve to impact their consumer through highlighted themes and/or parallels to the situation of the world at time of publishing. Furthermore, the insertion of choice into these impactful narrative games adds a layer of seriousness to the play that allows developers to further relay the messages of their story by using the mechanic as a tool to further story building.

To further root play and games in a position of logic, despite their non-serious nature, scholars have attempted to categorize different types of games to better create a working definition and standard point of reference in this nuanced and varied discussion of play. In his book *Man, Play, and Games*, scholar Roger Caillois established four categories of play to address this need for categorization and a standard definition. The category applicable to the genre of narrative-based video games is *mimicry*, or simulation. Games in this category have the player assume the role of another, convincing themselves and others that they are in fact that character.[30] In and of itself, this does not seem much like a game, and perhaps feels more like theater and thus more serious in nature. However, Caillois addressed this concern in categorization by claiming that each category he established exists on a scale from *paidia* to *ludius*, where *paidia* is focused upon spontaneous action and *ludus* is focused on established rules.[31] Theater does fall on this scale towards the *ludis* section, but the reason it is considered play and not a passive act or overly serious is because only the people participating in the production of theater—the actors—are being considered in this discussion. They are *playing* a part, and their belief of the serious nature of the world of their production demonstrates that actors are existing in the magic circle of logic in the world created by the playwright—something that a layperson playing a video game also does as they assume the role of a character by picking up a controller or a mouse and keyboard.

The field of video game study is newly established, thus there is heavy inconsistency within the small group of scholars on the creation of any type of standardization for definitions and common practices. Thus, any ability to define games is truly based on opinion, even with the creation of standards such as Caillois' groupings. The fluidity of the boundaries between each type of game, and the existence of the *paidia-ludus* scale asserts the hazy nature of attempting to pin down what truly constitutes as a specific type of game. Thus, this argument is often based upon opinion, though said personal assertions can be rooted in the careful divisions and definitions established by the likes of Caillois.

The Function of the Player

Once a game and its narrative have been established, a developer must decide how the player will experience their game. In most narrative-based games, this is done by having the player take control of a specific character—or characters—with a specific role within the game world, not unlike an actor in a play. The player will continue to control this character for the entire game, and thus the character

[29] Flanagan, *Critical Play*, 6, 13.
[30] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 19.
[31] Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 13.

will serve as an anchor-point to entering the game world. This character is known as the "player character" (PC). In taking control of the PC, the player establishes themselves in many different in-game and real-world roles in the progression and consumption of the narrative game. Tamer Thabet suggested that the act of play is a form of narration, and thus, the player assumes the roles of narrator, protagonist—as they control the PC—and audience member.[32] Furthering this idea, it is believed that the player can most successfully assume the role of the PC if the character themselves is established as what is known as a *tabula rasa*—blank slate—version of a person.[33] The lack of characterization in these instances allows the player themselves to feel as if they are the one experiencing the events within the game world.[34] However, the blankness of the character can be broken to help establish who the character is,—allowing some type of connection based upon shared values or reactions—explain and explore vital plot points or exposition, or even reflect the player's inputs that will articulate who the character has become as a result of player intervention.[35] The use of the *tabula rasa* character is most common in first person games, as one's inability to see the character because they are experiencing the game through the character's eyes allows one to assume this role of the PC more easily. However, it is possible to create slight *tabula rasa'*s when a game is told through the third person perspective, which has players hover over the shoulder of the PC as they walk them through the game world. In narrative games that assume the third-person point of view, the PC is often given a loose personality that the player develops or changes through choices they make for the character. This is most notably seen in games produced by studios Supermassive Games and Quantic Dream such as *Until Dawn* and *Heavy Rain*, respectively.[36]

Some scholars suggest that without the input of the player the narrative of a game cannot occur. This is the extreme interpretation of Thabet's idea that the player functions as the narrator of a video game. It is believed that the game cannot progress, and will simply remain inactivated code, and thus an untold story, if the player does not engage with a controller or mouse and keyboard to move the character forward.[37] It is also believed that the player themselves establish a story, experiencing something of their own creation, independent of the developers of the game itself.[38] Others stipulate that the very nature of an interactive narrative is oxymoronic as the narrative and all possible outcomes of choice have been pre-established.[39] The player then becomes a mere audience member and has no necessitated participation within the narrative. However, the vast breadth of video game genres and sub-genres allows for these two ideas to coexist, though not in the pure sense of each idea. Without the player, the narrative cannot be individually experienced by a player, the story will remain unchanged and will exist, essentially lying in wait for its code to be activated, experienced, and interpreted, without having been

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[32] Tamer Thabet, *Video Game Narrative and Criticism: Playing the Story* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2015), 5.
[33] Sercan Şengün, "Ludic Voyeurism and Passive Spectatorship in Gone Home and Other 'Walking Simulators,'" *Video Game Art Reader: Volume 1*, ed. Tiffany Funk (Amherst, MA: Amherst College Press, 2017) 35, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.12471115.7.
[34] Şengün, "Ludic Voyeurism," 35-6.
[35] Şengün, "Ludic Voyeurism," 36.
[36] Supermassive Games, *Until Dawn*, Sony Computer Entertainment, PlayStation 4, 2015; Quantic Dream, *Heavy Rain*, Sony Computer Entertainment, PlayStation 4, 2016; Quantic Dream, *Detroit: Become Human*, Sony Interactive Entertainment, PlayStation 4, 2018.
[37] Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 2.

[38] Hanna-Riikka Roine, "Computational Media and the Core Concepts of Narrative Theory," *Narrative* 27, no. 3 (2019): 318-19, https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2019.0018.
[39] Şengün, "Ludic Voyeurism," 34.

altered by required player intervention. Moreover, even though narratives are preestablished, certain games still provide players with a multitude of branching choices and physical in-game branching pathways to explore. This does not mean that the experience of one player will be entirely unique from another, but it does allow the player to feel as if their actions had an impact on the way the story was told to them since the player is experiencing this "epistemic immersion" and experiencing the results of their narrative detective work.[40] The idea of required player input is exemplified best in procedurally generated games—games in which certain aspects such as game world or plot points are shown to the player at random based on algorithmic design—such as *Road 96*. In *Road 96*, certain vignettes (short scenes which showcase a point in the narrative where the player may make a choice, or a showcase of the result of player choice) are shown to the player at random through the course of the playthrough, and not every scene may be experienced in one playthrough.[41] In this sense, the player is absolutely required to input their controls and start the code that will relay the story. On the other hand, each scene has been prewritten, and thus it exists in wait—meaning that the exact opposite of Galloway and Thabet's postulations can be true, since the narrative has already been established and endings determined, so the player does not need to take part in the game to understand what happens or could happen—without the player having to experience it, as its existence within the game world has already been accounted for. This falls more so in line with the idea that the player is less of a narrator for the fictions they engage with and that they are more akin to a passive audience member; their input or lack thereof will not change the fact that the story has already been written and they simply have to experience it.

Video games, however, are bought and downloaded to be played. People who make the effort to engage with the medium will not simply let the code go inactivated forever. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the player will not have some type of passive, superfluous role in running through that code and narrative. Şengün's ideas that interactive narrative games are all predetermined, and thus experienceable independent of playing a game, connect with the idea that the player is an audience member. To assume the role of an audience member is becoming a bit less common in gaming. It is usually exemplified through the use of cutscenes where the player cannot interact and is simply fed crucial plot information in a cinematic.[42] These ideas can co-exist with the ideas of active play and work in tandem with them. Games like *Dragon Age: Origins* allow the player to wander around the game world, battling enemies, and interacting with party members, but all crucial elements with the story rip away the player's control and has them watch pre animated, shot, and acted scenes to relay information about the progression of events within the game world of Thedas.[43] Thus, there are elements of player interaction mixed in with moments where the player steps back and simply watches the game. The idea of being an audience member also exists within the game world as one experiences the story alongside the characters. This is seen in games by the aforementioned Supermassive Games and Quantic Dream studios. Their games are based almost exclusively on player choice through dialogue or optional physical actions, but after the choice is made, the player sits and watches as that choice plays out, or they are

[40] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 55.
[41] DigixArt, *Road 96* 🚀, DigixArt and Plug In Digital, Windows, 2021.
[42] Galloway, *Gaming*, 11.

[43] BioWare, *Dragon Age: Origins – Ultimate Edition*, Electronic Arts, Windows, 2010.

presented with chapter interludes to recap the story of the game (this specifically occurs in *Until Dawn*).

The audience member role is not one that necessarily needs to be relegated to watching cutscenes. Players can be placed in this role while simultaneously taking action to move through the physical space of the game. The actual experience of progressing through the narrative allows the player to feel as if experiencing the unknown, as if watching the plot of a movie unfold before them, the ideas of curiosity and suspense moving the player forward.[44] Thabet asserted that the three roles of the player existed in tandem, but certain creators position this role of audience member as paramount to storytelling, as it most conforms with the traditional mediums of storytelling such as books and plays. Developer of the walking simulator, which he self-defines as a PINE (Playable Interactive Narrative Experience), *Fragments of Him* Mata Haggis asserts that player input in a game can cause ludo-narrative dissonance—meaning that a disconnect is established between how the story is told and how it is played—and therefore should be regulated and limited heavily in order to faithfully relay a narrative.[45] Haggis also believed that the goal of narrative games in the style of a PINE, should not be to create a sense of fun for the player, and that the developer of the story should have complete control over the game.[46] Thus, Haggis sees the player's ability to impact the narrative and game world as secondary, or in fact detrimental, to the game's main function of relaying a story; further negating the necessity of player input in a game, and making the selection of a video game as a medium for play questionable as the mechanics of the genre are not being taken advantage of by the developer.

In a less dramatic view of placing the player, Şengün postulates that the player can serve as a voyeuristic observer to certain events within the game world by interacting with predetermined outcomes, observing the story itself, and exploring the various paths of the branching narrative.[47] The idea of the voyeuristic observer still places the player within the world of the game, acknowledging that they must be within its world to invade upon the intimacy of the story; the player cannot simply engage with paratext related to the game, they cannot simply consume the beats of the story summarized to them, rather they must actually turn on the game and play it, as Galloway suggests, to make the game "exist" as they act upon the narrative. It places importance upon the player's active role within a game and demonstrates that each act of play—narration, protagonist, and audience member—can overlap and works best when coexisting within a single narrative.

The player, in their assumption of the three roles created by Thabet, can be viewed by scholars in a myriad of ways that both conflict with one another and coexist. This messy and varied view of how the player interacts with the game parallels the range of views that scholars have in regards to defining play and games. Despite the differences in interpretation, however, the role of the player is still rooted in the same logic that they are taking part in the medium as both a direct actor in and on the story and an outside observer.

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[44] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 55.
[45] Mata Haggis, "Creator's Discussion of the Growing Focus on, and Potential of, Storytelling in Video Game Design," *Persona Studies* 2, no. 1 (2016): 24, https://doi.org/10.21153/ps2016vol2no1art532.
[46] Haggis, "Creator's Discussion," 22.
[47] Şengün, "Ludic Voyeurism," 38-9.

Relaying the Narrative

But how must that narrative be relayed to players? What form of narrative structure will allow players to feel the most significant connection to the game world? It has been stipulated that the very nature of computer games requires player choice and action.[48] But the way to implement and allow that sense of choice can vary. Marie-Laure Ryan draws into question how the extreme ends of the *ludus* and *paidia* scale establish narrative games as either narrative games or playable stories.[49] Narrative games are defined by the idea of *ludus* (rules), there is a goal of "winning" and the story is a mere draw into the game world.[50] Playable stories are focused on *paidia* (spontaneous action) and only desire to have to player experience the narrative.[51] These two divisions lay the ground work of establishing whether a developer wants to focus more on a story—as seen with *Fragments of Him*—or if they want to focus more on player input—like with interactive dramas.

The ideas of narrative storytelling can be further divided through a combination of the ideas of Hua Qin and Ryan. Their ideas make it possible to create a Caillois-esque division of how narratives can be told. Qin and his fellow researchers pose that there are four main narrative structures in video games: the first style of game is cutscene based, where the player experiences vital plot points but is allowed to run through the game world independently between these scenes—an example of this would be *Dragon Age: Origins*.[52] The next type of game focuses on branching pathways that are introduced through short linear segments that lead into the selection of a possibly plot altering choice—Supermassive Games and Quantic Dream games exemplify this.[53] Third, the game can be broken up into subplots that the player might have the freedom to move between, and the narrative is revealed spatially—again, Supermassive Games' and Quantic Dream's ensemble-based games touch on this theme, as do dating simulator-style visual novels.[54] Finally, games can be entirely unstructured, creating the story as they play it—this type of narrative is harder to pin down but it is best relayed through games like *Road 96*.[55] These specific types of narrative structure fall under larger umbrella categories of top-down or bottom-up storytelling. Top-down storytelling is done using pre-scripted content, exemplified by narrative structures one, two, and three.[56] The fourth type of narrative structure falls under the bottom-up style of storytelling which produces a story through emergent systems or procedural generation.[57] However, the ideas of top-down and bottom-up narrative storytelling implements do not have to always act separately, and certain elements of each style can be found in one game.[58] For example, *The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe* is a walking simulator that, in a top-down manner, always forces the player to experience various inciting

[48] Hua Qin et al, "Measuring Player Immersion in the Computer Game Narrative," *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction* 25, no. 2 (2009): 110, https://doi.org/10.1080/10447310802546732.
[49] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 46.
[50] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 46.
[51] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 46.
[52] Qin, "Measuring Player Immersion," 112; BioWare, *Dragon Age: Origins*, 2010.
[53] Qin, "Measuring Player Immersion," 112; Supermassive Games, *Until Dawn*, 2015; Quantic Dream, *Heavy Rain*, 2016; Quantic Dream, *Detroit*, 2018.
[54] Qin, "Measuring Player Immersion," 112; Supermassive Games, *Until Dawn*, 2015; Quantic Dream, *Heavy Rain*, 2016; Quantic Dream, *Detroit*, 2018.
[55] Qin, "Measuring Player Immersion," 112; DigixArt, *Road 96* 🚀, 2021.
[56] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 51.
[57] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 51.
[58] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 53.

actions before they make a narrative altering, bottom-up, choice by deciding where to walk.[59]

Immersing the Player

Once a type of narrative structure is established, one must focus upon the actual content of the game, and how a connection between the player and the game world can be established. This is most heavily reliant on a game's ability to tell an emotionally engaging narrative. Thabet discusses that video games can function under the guise of reader response theory, allowing for a sense of connection between the player and the story, as not only can people discover morals and themes within the narrative of the game, but they can also insert their own beliefs into a game and see how their response to the "text" would impact the game.[60] Reader response theory allows for connection to a text through the examination of what remains unsaid in a narrative, and a large aspect of attempting to immerse a player within a narrative is developing a sense of curiosity. One cannot develop an engaging narrative—especially not a choice-based one—without establishing a connection between the player and the game world. If a player is not immersed within a game, they will not care enough to abide by its rules and make plot-altering decisions. The player will only care for the narrative if it provides them with the emotional connection to the story world and its characters that they seek.[61] Without that drive of curiosity leading them to push through the narrative, they will not long to actively take part and make choices within the narrative.[62] This is why the "fill-in-the-blank" nature of storytelling that reader response theory generates is beneficial to narrative development.

To further this idea and to specifically apply it to a game world, Qin and his research partners posed that there are six main ways to develop a sense of immersion, the primary mode of immersion being the development of a sense of curiosity.[63] This works off the idea of how to develop an engaging narrative, since emotional connections and engagement that whet player appetites through curiosity for the "how" are what drive narratives forward. The other five methods are: Concentration—which is the player's ability to stay engaged with the narrative; comprehension—the ability to understand a story, control—the ability to feel in control, or to have agency over the events of the game; challenge—via mechanics; and empathy (with the characters and world of the game).[64] When examining player empathy, one must understand that the PC is the gateway from the real world to the game world. Thus, the connection established with the PC is paramount when trying to develop immersion. As people continue to play a video game, they become invested in the character, inserting themselves into that role.[65] The player then actively begins to say things like "I died," or "I beat the boss."[66] This connection to the PC serves to invest the player themselves into the game, and make them want to win or complete

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[59] Crows Crows Crows, *The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe*, Crows Crows Crows, Windows, 2022.
[60] Thabet, *Video Game Narrative and Criticism*, 6-9.
[61] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 56.
[62] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 55.
[63] Qin, "Measuring Player Immersion," 117.

[64] Qin, "Measuring Player Immersion," 117.
[65] Jon Robson and Aaron Meskin, "Video Games as Self-Involving Interactive Fictions," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74, no. 2 (2016): 168, https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12269.
[66] Robson, "Video Games as Self-Involving Interactive Fictions," 168.

the narrative. This sort of interaction occurs when players feel engaged enough with the narrative to *want* to place themselves in the shoes of the characters they are acting as. There needs to be an appeal to the players' emotion by making them want to be the hero in the situation presented. If the player cannot connect, they will not be able to see themselves in the protagonist role, which might negate their desire to push through the narrative, even if the story is engaging. The PC is the most important addition to the story, for if the player cannot find any redeemable qualities to them or justification for their actions and goals, then the player will not want to continue a one-to-eight-hour campaign with them—if the payer's emotional ties are a means to an end, the player should have positive ties to the vessel pushing them towards that end.[67] Moreover, if the villain of the story is not a compelling foe, the player will not want to wait out the campaign to defeat them for they do not feel that they have any true stakes in the conflict. Villains, then, must also have compelling, complex characterizations that make the player curious about their motivations and their own conflicts with the protagonist. By creating these round, complex characters, players are able to understand the justifications antagonists have for their actions, making the horrific acts they take seem understandable within the context of the character's motivations and more so rooted in the reality of the game world they are in. One of video gaming's most popular examples of this is found in *Devil May Cry 3*'s Vergil, the twin brother of the PC Dante, and the game's main antagonist.[68] The game mimics the plot of Dante's *Inferno* loosely, hence the naming conventions, but the subversion of expectation by using Dante's guide Virgil as the villain creates intrigue, as does the close dynamic of making the characters identical twins. This lures players, making them not only want to defeat Vergil, but to discover why he wants to kill Dante.

Focusing in on the idea of challenge in tandem with empathy, a study by Eric Tyndale and Franklin Ramsoomair, found that players enjoyed, and were thus immersed, into games more when they were placed into emotionally and morally stressful situations.[69] They also enjoyed elements of unpredictability within the narrative and endings that satisfyingly reflected their choices within the game.[70] The moral choices allow people to connect with what their own values are and how they want to apply those to the characters they have connected with throughout the game—it places stress onto the player as they don't yet understand how that will impact the narrative, addressing the need for unpredictability through the challenge of making an emotionally taxing decision. These various methods of developing immersion directly impact how agency will be developed for the player.

The Question of Choice

Before discussing how to create agency, one must define what agency is. Most broadly, agency is one's ability to make significant alterations to the game world, it transforms the reality that one is experiencing.[71] In other words, agency is a player's ability to make choices that will change the course

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[67] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 56.
[68] Capcom. Devil May Cry 3: Dante's Awakening Special Edition. Capcom. PlayStation 2. 2006; the game's version of the poet Virgil spells his name incorrectly as "Vergil."
[69] Eric Tyndale and Franklin Ramsoomair, "Keys to Successful Interactive Storytelling: A Study of the Booming 'Choose-Your-Own-Adventure' Video Game Industry," *i-Manager's Journal of Educational Technology* 13, no. 3 (2016) 31, https://doi.org/10.26634/jet.13.3.8318.
[70] Tyndale, "Keys to Successful Interactive Storytelling," 32.
[71] Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford, "Video Games and Agency in Contemporary Society," 139-40.

of the story being told to them. Agency gives players a sense of meaning and purpose when they play a game because it gives them a sense of control over the pre-established magic circle of the narrative they are engaging with. However, that agency must exist in a pre-established system—narrative—otherwise the agency provided is purposeless as it will provide players only with a sandbox experience, where they are able to do anything they want with no goals, rules, or quests to guide them. These are the stakes that are paramount to creating meaning in narrative games, they provide value to the experience and without that sense of value, there is a lack of purpose to engaging with the story. There is no power behind making decisions without the limitation created by rules with established consequences. Without the narrative, there is no emotional connection and thus there can be no true desire to make informed decisions about how to navigate the narrative of the game.

When building up these choices for a player to make within a narrative, the biggest concern is identifying what choices the player should actually be allowed to explore. It is important to note that giving the player free-will will not create a meaningful sense of agency, as it will break the set of rules established for the game.[72] Limitations of choice must be established within a game as these restrictions reflect the real world and how people are bound by rules—law—to not make certain decisions.[73] Therefore, developers must assume what players will want to see and do, they use "folk-psychological knowledge," or preconceived notions of human behavior based on previous experience, as a guiding factor on how to develop their choices.[74] However, there is no guarantee that the options created will satisfy all players, thus one aims to appeal to the masses. Nevertheless, people will still attempt to address as many possible courses of action as possible, but a developer's ability to engage with all possible outcomes desired, and follow them through the entire narrative of the game as opposed to ending the branch, is limited by a developer's access to time and funds.[75] This inability to explore options is usually masked by choices that lead to the same outcome—which would be unknown to the player during an initial run-through of the game.[76] As a result of these limitations, agency is solidified to be an illusion because each choice and outcome has been predetermined for the player.[77] When developers make sacrifices and only explore a few choice options, they must decide which are worth exploring and how that will impact the game world. The choices and their impact are already planned and decided by the time the player gets their hands on the game.

Furthermore, the illusory and unpredictable nature of some choices via the same produced outcome can lead to dissatisfaction as one does not know when they "failed" to make the right choice.[78] On the other hand, some believe that developing the illusion of choice is a necessity to game development, though the illusion must be masked to assert that the choice has meaning.[79] Mundane, meaningless choices do not provide the player with excitement: they do not give the player a sense of

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[72] Tyndale, "Keys to Successful Interactive Storytelling," 30.
[73] Carlen Lavigne, "Pressing X to Jason: Narrative, Gender, and Choice in *Heavy Rain*," *Studies in Popular Culture* 41, no. 1 (2018): 16, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26582195.
[74] Caracciolo, "Hitting the Wall?" 47.
[75] Haggis, "Creator's Discussion," 23.
[76] Haggis, "Creator's Discussion," 24.
[77] Lavigne, "Pressing X to Jason," 16.
[78] Lavigne, "Pressing X to Jason," 23-4.
[79] Tyndale, "Keys to Successful Interactive Storytelling," 31.

satisfaction that the choice they make will impact the game, i.e. provide a sense of agency. These meaningless choices then appear only as filler that might demonstrate a lack of direction in the course of the game, as the purpose of choice-based narrative games is to reveal a character and shape a world through the player's personality; and choices about what shirt color you'd rather wear—for example—do not reflect that goal. Despite one's financial and time restraints, the choices that are explored should be well-developed and meaningful even if only a few choices exist.

In terms of the development of actual choices, reflections of the real world and real-world reactions or outcomes do not always have to be the produced option. The player will not care about the impossibility of a certain event or outcome if it adds to the overall enjoyment of the gaming experience.[80] This is the basis of most fictional stories with some type of fantasy or sci-fi element as, again, we as player must accept the novum we are given in order to enjoy the story. Thus, players will accept that they must make strange, illogical choices since they make sense within the magic circle. The caveat to this is that the ability to manage this strange novum is dependent upon a narrative in which that type of oddity can be accepted. The story must guide the choices to allow for that curiosity and emotional connection from the narrative to take root. Emotions act as the driving force behind these choices, and thus a narrative relying on these appeals to real life connections will be most successful in creating the allowance for odd choices. The story does not necessarily have to be front-and-center within the game, but it still must be the driving force to motivate all other actions and elements created within it.

In many games, this unpredictability and unrealistic production of outcomes is explained away by the butterfly effect, as it becomes a justification for the unpredictability of choices.[81] The butterfly effect is woven into the stories of *Until Dawn* and *Life is Strange*, for example, but each game handles implementation differently. The choices made in *Until Dawn* can impact who will be alive by the end of the game, and *Life is Strange* simply abandons their butterfly effect for one binary choice at the end of the game, but both games show the player "pages" that demonstrate how one choice leads to various actions.[82] Most narrative-based games develop their choices in this butterfly effect manner, be that interactive dramas with the choices being made leading up to whether a character will die or not, or a role-playing game where choices can lead to how friendships and romances with characters develop. However, the actual map of these choices might not always be shown to players, making it less obvious that certain choices lead to an unexpected outcome in the game.

Synthesis

Effective narrative-based games require a set of rules imposed on decision-making that ground the player into the game world to establish a stronger connection to the narrative and character(s). Moreover, using narrative structures that place player choice at the forefront of importance, such as Qin's second postulated method of storytelling that presents the narrative in vignettes that lead to a section of choice. This method of storytelling will further place the player in a mirage-like version of control as it

[80] Caracciolo, "Hitting the Wall?" 48.
[81] Muriel, "Video Games and Agency," 139.

[82] Muriel, "Video Games and Agency," 139; Supermassive Games, *Until Dawn*, 2015; Dontnod Entertainment, *Life is Strange*, 2015.

focuses on top-down storytelling that reenforces the rules of the game world, thus preserving the narrative. The most important aspect of developing choice comes from the follow through of choice through actions like the butterfly effect method of story development. If the choices have no impact on the rest of the narrative, it renders the mechanic of selecting a choice pointless, it becomes fake interactivity for the sake of interactivity. The player must be able to see that their decisions have an impact on the narrative to make them continue to want to make those choices and follow through with the campaign. The butterfly method does this well by establishing to players that every little action they take can have some type of unforeseen impact on the progression of the narrative, so it encourages players to carefully think and even revisit the game to see the outcome of choices they wouldn't normally make. However, when using this method, one should ensure that they develop choices that further an emotional and challenging connection to characters and the game world. If the choices presented only establish frivolous changes, such as a cosmetic alteration, the choices become unimportant, again making the mechanic almost entirely pointless to gameplay overall.

Via a comparative analysis of popular narrative games in various mediums of the genre, theory regarding the role of the player and the types of choices presented was analyzed to determine how successfully each idea was integrated into the final products discussed. The idea of success is based on how necessary choice is within the game based on the impact choice has on the overall narrative. Choices were reviewed for how they integrate into and seriously impact—change—the narrative. Additionally, the importance of narrative and emotional connection in regards to establishing a sense of motivation and drive for players is explored. The narrative games being discussed all explore different subject matter and/or exist in different genres, so the impact that those variations of the narrative may have on player motivation to engage with the presented choices must also be examined. The story, as mentioned prior, is the guiding force for the choices that will be presented to players. Player curiosity for the story world informs their decisions and increases their desire to engage. Thus, it is necessary to look at what types of stories are told in choice-based narrative games and how their messaging—if any is present—is handled.

Methods

Through this examination of the key features and perceptions of the games discussed, the most successful and easily replicated method of creating a choice-based narrative game that does not make the player feel like a passive vehicle to the telling of the narrative is determined. As the video game market grows larger, it is important for developers to better understand not only the fundamentals of narrative storytelling, but the fundamentals of player implementation and relation, or role, in the narrative they are supposed to be shaping.

Comparative Analysis of Games

To best determine which formula for question introduction—or combination of formulas—proposed by theorists will best suit the genre of CBNGs, each of the three types of games proposed

earlier (interactive dramas, role-playing games, and visual novels) have been examined to determine which formula they presently use for choice proposition, and how they focus on elements such as player immersion and narrative presentation. Each game medium has been examined individually and compared them all to see what is presently working in each game and what is weakening the overall gaming experience for players. Games have been selected based on release date, genre, popularity of the titles in the gaming sphere, and my own familiarity with the material. However, there is little variety in project size and funding as almost all these games—with the exception of BioWare's *Dragon Age: Origins*—have been developed by independent studios, though they were produced by larger companies.

Within each medium of game being discussed, two to three example games are explored to visualize the application of theory more clearly. The games being discussed for the interactive drama portion of the comparative analysis are *Detroit: Become Human* (2018), *Until Dawn* (2015), and *Life is Strange* (2015). In the role-playing game section, *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009) and *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023) are discussed, and for the visual novel section the games *Dream Daddy: A Daddy Dating Simulator* (2017) and *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (2017) are examined.[83] Finally, I will discuss a specific "case study" of the game *The Stanley Parable*, which finds itself uniquely situated in a medium that is not often choice-based and places choice at the forefront of its narrative, breaking the mold of mediums and providing an interesting exception to these other highly formulaic mediums.

Interactive Dramas

Interactive dramas can be difficult to perceive as video games due to the extremely cinematic nature of the medium. These games focus on motion-captured actors in (usually) highly realistic 3D animation. Some of the most famous games in this genre include the elaborate stories created by studios Quantic Dream and Supermassive Games, which popularized the genre in the modern-day gaming scene. For this comparison, Quantic Dream's Detroit: Become Human and Supermassive Games' Until Dawn were examined. Additionally, the episodic release interactive drama Life is Strange by Dontnod Entertainment was discussed to further expand the scope of narrative genre and release date.

To begin, the story of *Detroit: Become Human* follows three android protagonists in a not-so-distant future version of Detroit where menial jobs are completed by androids. [84] The game cyclically switches between which character is being controlled as each navigates breaking their programing—becoming deviant—and how they will react to or take part in the android revolution. The endings to each of the characters' stories is determinate on player action. *Detroit* focuses on placing the player in the role of the protagonist, as opposed to nursing the other two roles (audience, protagonist, and narrator) that Thabet suggested. Players are given the power to walk around and make choices based on the physical pathway they take, whether they want to fight back in certain situations, or how they want to talk to other characters. This game most clearly utilizes the vignette style of narrative expression as these important plot beats are showcased to the player via an end-of-chapter flowchart of choices which labels various

[83] I will be using the 2010 version of *Dragon Age: Origins* (*Dragon Age: Origins – Ultimate Edition*) during my analysis.

[84] Originally released in 2018 for PlayStation 4. Developed by Quantic Dream.

scenes, their related choices, and their outcomes.

Until Dawn follows a group of friends as they unite for their yearly get-together at their friend's mountain lodge.[85] However, the group soon discovers that they are being hunted by Wendigos—a Native American mythological creature. The group must learn to fend off the beasts and survive until help arrives at dawn. Which characters survive is dependent on player choice. The game treats the player in a similar manner to that of *Detroit*, allowing the player to walk around freely, and make choices in dialogue and physical action. However, the game makes a conscious effort to place the player more clearly in the role of an audience member by separating the game into chapter segments which each begin with a "previously in *Until Dawn"* segment that recaps the previous chapters. The game more subtly uses the vignette style of storytelling with its more sporadic usage of cutscene-like cinematics, keeping the player constantly glued to the controller. The game only hints at the idea of an important event via an on-screen queue displayed as a butterfly—representative of the butterfly effect which is explored both within the narrative itself and in a pre-game explanatory cinematic—and a menu tab that allows players to flip through various labeled books of butterfly wings which are each dedicated to a specific choice thread.

Life is Strange follows the story of Max Caulfield as she realizes she has the power to rewind time, which she uses to prevent various bad things from happening.[86] The game ends with Max having to make a choice between saving her friend Chole or her town, Arcadia Bay, as her actions throughout the game have been preventing Chole's fated death. The game presents with the same chapter breaks and recaps that *Until Dawn* does, however, their inclusion was less of a stylistic choice and more of a necessity of their medium, as the game was released in parts. *Until Dawn* was released with its complete campaign, but players of *Life is Strange* had to wait months for each new chapter to come out throughout the course of 2015. *Life is Strange* also features a lot of physical exploration, character interaction, and a less-direct vignette style akin to *Until Dawn*, also only hinting at importance via an on-screen queue that features a butterfly and the text "this action will have consequences…," again playing to the idea of the butterfly effect, but the impact of choices is not viewable anywhere in a game menu. This puts more of a focus on watching the game play out, as opposed to attempting to figure out how things will end up, like with the first two games.

Each of these games utilize the vignette style of storytelling, but that alone is not what makes or breaks the narrative immersion. Presentation of choice is paramount to a CBNG's success, but the follow-through and types of choices presented in addition to more overarching story-telling concepts, like how the player connects and is inserted into the narrative, is what produces a successful CBNG. Thus, it is important to see how these variables can impact the narrative experience when combined.

All three of the discussed games have a heavy focus on making the player assume the role of a protagonist, but the allowed act of making plot altering decisions and walking around has the "side-effect" of making the player feel like a narrator, as they have some control over the story. However, since both the player and the PC are at the mercy of the pre-established narrative, there is minimal

[85] Exclusively released on the PlayStation 4 in 2015. Developed by Supermassive Games.
[86] Episodic drama—meaning it was released in chapters that players would have to buy individually—released in 2015 on the PlayStation 4 by Dontnod Entertainment.

legitimacy to the idea that players may act as a narrator in this type of game. Nevertheless, the player can experience this spatial and epistemic immersion by physically moving throughout a space and utilizing that movement to discover the mysteries of the narrative, respectively.[87] These ideas further player connection to the game, as movement and rewarded exploration, via the discovery of collectables that can reveal more about the narrative, keep the player immersed in the story-world. This level of immersion seamlessly feeds into the natural addition of vignettes which serve to enhance and reward player curiosity. This, however, does not mean that all these games reward the players' exploration effectively. While *Detroit* and *Until Dawn* feature a number of endings almost all of them serving as the logical result of previous choices, *Life is Strange* simply boils down to a binary final decision, making previously established player connection to the narrative moot since the same answers will always be discovered regardless of the choices made throughout the narrative. *Detroit* and *Until Dawn*, on the other hand, will hide endings and vignette choices from the player based on exploration, or lack thereof, rewarding more options to those players who felt the motivation to explore. Thus, the player can see a clear action-and-reward-based system as they play: better exploration results in better and/or more vignettes. This makes the choice to utilize vignettes seem more purposeful and easier to follow for the player.

Furthering the idea of player connection to the narrative and thus their motivation to make choices within the game are the PCs. None of these interactive dramas explicitly feature *tabula rasa* characters. *Until Dawn* and *Detroit* establish characters that can drastically change emotionally as the games, but *Life is Strange*'s Max does not change at all, regardless of her actions; no new opportunities are awarded to her based on her kindness or lack thereof, and she is instead victim to the butterfly effect exclusively. However, the lack of *tabula rasa* characters simply allows the games to develop bold personalities that players can latch onto based on if they adore them, or adore to hate them. This is more successful in *Until Dawn* and *Detroit* as the large ensemble casts present more opportunities for interaction or profound efforts to cease all semblance of seeing those characters. In *Life is Strange*, players are stuck with Max and Chole no matter what, which puts more pressure on the developers to try and make a moody teenage girl likeable and relatable to all players. However, when these characters are so well defined—or definable via choice—players can identify with them more easily, allowing them to become more involved with the narrative and able to align themselves with the characters goals.[88] The closeness players feel with these characters could then be seen as a driving factor to push a player through a narrative as empathy pushes them through the story and influences their decision-making processes.[89] This connection could then be viewed as a reason players are willing to sit through longer, clearer vignette type scenes as seen in *Detroit*.

All three of these games focus heavily on the idea that *paidia* drives the game, as people are playing to experience the story as opposed to the world of the game itself, which places these games in the camp that they are told via a top-down method of storytelling, as the focus is a pre-scripted set of

[87] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 54-5.

[88] Hamby, "Examining Readers' Emotional Responses to Stories," 132.
[89] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 56.

events that the player can never break away from. This centered focus lends itself to vignette storytelling since the curiosity for the narrative itself is what's driving the players forward, thus furthering a necessity for these short, rewarding/leading choice scenes.

Finally, and most importantly, how these games develop agency must be examined. *Life is Strange* has the weakest sense of agency when examined from an outward perspective of having finished the game. Many of the choices while playing feel meaningful, as you are forced to use your intuition to decipher how things will play out, and you can rewind if you have second thoughts, creating that sense of epistemic immersion through "mystery solving."[90] For example, when the character Kate is harassed by the school security officer, the player as Max may either step in or take a photo, which Max will save. Players can fill in the blanks of the benefits to each of these choices, but their outcome is not revealed until much later, when Kate is standing atop a dorm room attempting to kill herself. She can only be talked down if you stepped in to save her. No choice the player makes while talking to her in that moment will save her. This plays into the idea that players enjoy unpredictable outcomes.[91] But, it also makes the player feel a sense of frustration as they view the inescapable vignette since they quickly realize that nothing can be done, and that their decision had been made chapters ago. This is almost a punishment for the player's educated guesses about outcomes; it is almost making fun of the joy the player got from the pre-established temporal immersion because the player's long-range planning has failed or didn't matter at all. This lack of meaning is seen in the game's binary ending where all meaning behind any of the player's choices is erased, as the final decision of the game—save Chloe or Arcadia Bay—will erase everything the player has done by either going back in time to the game's inciting incident and allowing the death of the character Chole, or by killing everyone in Arcadia Bay by allowing a tornado to hit in order to save Chloe.

Detroit and *Until Dawn*, on the other hand, have countless endings and little alterations throughout that impact the course of the game. Both operate on systems that value character relations, and have various branching paths that can lead to numerous different deaths for all the characters. However, some peril is faked as certain characters are required to deliver important plot information. For example, Mike in *Until Dawn* cannot die until the final scene of the game as he is the only character that makes it to the asylum chapter of the narrative. In *Detroit*, Markus must stay alive until the final act of the game, since he must start the android revolution, otherwise the detective characters have nothing to investigate. This is a weakness to the vignette style of storytelling since it needs to create key plot beats that move the story forward, allowing for a satisfactory narrative for all players, while still maintaining the illusion that different choices are what got the player there or that different choices could've prevented them from getting there. The more a player plays through a narrative, the more obvious these forced scenes become, making them feeling boring and repetitive upon subsequent playthroughs, especially if there is little choice within the scene. Another limitation to the vignette style and branching paths in general is that scenes will be repeated no matter what choice is selected. Both *Detroit* and *Until Dawn* fall prey to this idea, resulting in seemingly drastically different choices resulting in the same outcome, simply with a different line reading from the actors. This is seen in *Detroit* when

[90] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 55.
[91] Presser, "Emotion, Narrative, and Transcendence," 69.

the player as the character Connor can choose to shoot or spare an android working at a nightclub who killed one of her patrons.

All three of these games focus heavily on the ideas of engaging the player by placing them into a highly structured story where they feel as if they are a vessel to push it forward. Players create connections with well-rounded, established characters, and form bonds with them that influence their decisions. The large focus on mystery and morals provides players with the chance to make exciting and unpredictable decisions that either will or will not feel as if they have a substantial impact on the game. This provides these games with a large sense of replay value, as players become curious about the mere possibility that choices could've altered the ending they received. The vignette structure presents a clear progression goal and a small sense of reward, even if a negative vignette, such as PC death, is reached, since the new vignette can be seen as unlocking the mystery of what happens when you pick choice A over choice B.

Role-Playing Games

Role-playing games (RPGs) tend to be what come to mind when people picture a classic video game. They are usually rooted in the logic of table top games, such as *Dungeon & Dragons*, in that they build large worlds with expansive and well-developed lore that is integral to the stories being told within the game world. These types of games set themselves up for sequels and spin-offs as the expansive world building provides a sense of believability that more stories can be occurring at the same time, or any other number of expansions on a story-world. *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Baldur's Gate 3* are unique in this stance as they are both parts of a series, *Dragon Age* being the first installment in a series, and *Baldur's Gate* being the most recent game in a trilogy. These games, despite the gap in release date, are extraordinarily similar because the genre is so rigid in what its skeleton contains, and the uniqueness of the individual stories is what sets each game apart.[92]

To begin, *Dragon Age: Origins* follows the PC, who is a recruit for the Grey Wardens, called on to protect the nation Ferelden, as it is being attacked by an archdemon. [93] The player must work to mend the bonds between peoples in the country and stop the archdemon. Based on player action, relationships with the people the PC meets, the state of the nation, the game's ending can be altered. In a similar vein, *Baldur's Gate 3* presents players with multiple different paths the game can take based upon the player's initial character creation/selection. [94] The primary run follows the PC after they are infected with a mind-altering parasite. The PC then meets other infected individuals, who they team up with to stop the cult that's controlling them and trying to take over the world.[95]

Both games function almost entirely the same way due to the aforementioned ironic rigidity of the *Dungeons & Dragons* system used within the games. In terms of player roles, both *Dragon Age* and

[92] It should be noted that the two games are also linked since the studio BioWare developed the first two *Baldur's Gate* games. Thus, there might be a so many similarities between these games due to the history between the studios.
[93] Role-playing game developed by BioWare in 2009, with a multi-platform release.
[94] 2023 role-playing game based on the rules for Dungeons & Dragons. Developed by Larian Studios and originally released for Windows.
[95] During discussion regarding *Baldur's Gate 3*, I will be referring to the plot and subsequent events that occur regarding exclusively to the Tav run for the sake of simplicity.

Baldur's Gate situate their players as the protagonist and the audience member. Much like with the interactive dramas, the player is in control of who the PC becomes via interactions with NPCs, making them assume a role within the game world, as if they were an actor in a play.[96] However, these PCs are true *tabula rasa* characters, having no personality, little to no voice lines, and no name or even appearance until the player decides it. The player is also given spatial and temporal immersion through the ability to walk around the game world and discover various documents that reveal more about the expansive game world.[97] This is where the mediums of interactive dramas and RPGs differ significantly, since players are not merely attracted to the narrative, but also the world in which the narrative takes place, since the world-building created via exploration is significantly more complex and does not exist within the isolation of a related main-line narrative.

The contrast of being the passive audience member is revealed thorough the games' liberal use of cutscenes to relay important plot points. This is the main way to showcase the narrative to players. Cutscenes, unlike vignettes, are more akin to short movies that can only be viewed or skipped. The player can stop holding their controller entirely and the scene will play out all the same. Unlike the vignettes which change depending on choice for many of the decisions made, main-narrative cutscenes (as opposed to side story scenes, like romance scenes) will hardly change through the course of the game. All cutscenes serve to move a specific plot forward, like the "required" vignettes in interactive dramas. Thus, the cutscenes are seen less as a reward for exploration and more as a benchmark in the narrative because nothing specific was done to achieve them. Cutscenes will always happen the same way regardless of player action. However, *Baldur's Gate*, unlike *Dragon Age*, has more active cutscenes akin to an interactive drama where dialogue and physical action decisions can be made. The game also, very atypically for video games, features a genuine narrator who narrates the actions taken by the PC after the player makes a choice for them. Nevertheless, the choices made throughout both games don't have a significant impact on the main narrative. In *Dragon Age*, the largest final impact is related to which characters die in the final battle, but no matter who dies or does not die, the main villain will always be killed. Additionally, in *Baldur's Gate*, despite the fact that choices can be made regarding things like party NPCs and subplots that directly impact these side narratives, the player will always have to go to Baldur's Gate and battle the main villain, being left with a binary choice of killing or taking control of the main villain. This is a huge shortcoming for cutscene-based games, since it makes the player's discoveries within the environment (epistemic immersion) and their subsequent curiosity and desire for suspense and surprise (temporal immersion) mean nothing in regards to the main narrative of the game.[98]

Although many meaningful choices don't occur in the main-line stories of these RPGs, many exist within subplots. The player may choose from a wide variety of dialogue options to assert their personality and to build relationships with NPCs. There are also less obvious choices, such as the option to leave certain NPCs out of your party that travels with you, thus preventing you from hearing their banter and accessing their subplots. Still, even though these interactions are satisfying, providing an emotional connection and immersion, the usage of an almost entirely pre-determined narrative renders

[96] Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 13.
[97] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 54-5.
[98] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 55.

them almost pointless in the end, much akin to the downfalls of *Life is Strange*.[99]

Both *Baldur's Gate* and *Dragon Age* utilize substories and character interaction to showcase the emotion within the plot, as their plots, for the most part, are set in stone. There are deviations, of course, to what will be the ending, but many of the events are already preestablished, and only affected by how the player decides to act in substories or conflicts that are building to the climax. These games are less about making the player feel like they are impacting the main narrative and more about making the player feel like a member of a rich fantasy world. Still, if choice is being examined as one of the main functions of these games, the strict narrative created by cutscenes makes the player's sense of agency feel unimpactful towards the game's ending.

Visual Novels

Visual novels, much like interactive dramas, are also difficult to see as video games, as they are extraordinarily akin to the medium of a CYOA book with a heavy focus on reading, as opposed to additional mechanics like combat or puzzle solving, for example; however, both games I am discussing are atypical visual novels that feature mini-games and other such side mechanics. Visual novels are usually character-focused and work to establish substantial relationships between the PC and NCPs, the game experience comes from creating bonds and seeing where your realistic choices will take you in the plot. These games are almost a combination of cutscene and vignette style games, since they are long stretches of reading broken up by choices to be made and the occasional simple animation or mini-game. It is almost entirely "cutscene" with a brief choice intermission that immediately starts a new cutscene. But, the specific genre of dating simulators, which I discuss here, tend to follow the subplot format, with each dateable character being a substory the player can pick and, occasionally, switch between. However, *Dream Daddy* does not allow for the completion of a dating narrative if too much switching occurs, and *Doki Doki* does not have any switching, so I feel it would be inaccurate to judge these as "subplot" games. So, for the sake of simplicity, I will call the style of narrative presentation seen in both games, and visual novels at large, "question break narratives." The games being discussed, *Dream Daddy: A Daddy Dating Simulator* and *Doki Doki Literature Club!*, both attack this narrative presentation in a highly different manner.

Dream Daddy: A Daddy Dating Simulator follows the *tabula rasa* PC, created in the same manner of the RPG PCs, and their high school-aged daughter after they move to a new town.[100] The player is then introduced to all the dads that live in the community, who are all eligible to be dated. The player can then select who they want to interact with throughout the game, which can lead to the relationship between the PC and the prospective partner either blossoming or failing. There are several endings to the game—which can even include the death of the PC—which are determinate on player action.

Doki Doki Literature Club! is a horror visual novel masked as a dating simulator. [101] The game takes place in a Japanese high school, where the *tabula rasa* protagonist joins the school's literature club.

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[99] Hamby, "Examining Readers' Emotional Responses to Stories," 132; Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 56.
[100] A dating simulator created by Game Grumps in 2017, originally released for PC (here meaning "personal computer).
[101] Developed by Team Salvato in 2017, originally released on Windows.

The tone of the game takes a sharp turn as characters begin to commit suicide and are erased from the game as each suicide causes the game to restart. The game then "breaks" and "infects" the player's computer, making the narrative take place both inside and outside of the software itself. At the end of the game, the player must confront the one character that did not commit suicide, Monika, as she admits that she has "gained sentience" and realized that she is in a game. Based on player action, there are three ways the game can end, with varying degrees of violence.

Both *Dream Daddy* and *Doki Doki* place a higher focus on situating the player as an audience member as opposed to a protagonist or narrator. Both games have the player passively engage with the media due to the question break styling. For example, both games have substantial opening scenes to establish the setting and introduce all the characters—the key emotional connection point within the game.[102] *Dream Daddy*, however, quickly takes the opportunity to provide a meaningful choice, introducing the starting points for each of the subplots right after the opening scene by asking the player which neighborhood dad they want to see that day. From that point on, however, the game is a lot of reading, broken up by conversational questions with the dateable dads. These questions, however, do have significant impact as they influence how the NPC dads view the PC, setting the player up on a path to see if they will end up with a partner at the end of the game. *Doki Doki* on the other hand does not provide players with many meaningful choices as only a few select actions early in the campaign, or specific actions unknown to the player as a possibility upon a first playthrough, will impact the ending received. For example, a player can only get the "good" ending by confessing their love to the character Sayori before she kills herself and by viewing all optional cutscenes—which can only be done my saving and reloading several times. But these are not really "choices" that the player can make, they are more so a puzzle for the player to solve that masquerades as a game filled by narrative choices that impact the game. This does, however feed into the player's desire for exploration, by providing a mystery to explore.[103] However, the mystery is not narrative-related, but instead it is a software puzzle to solve, thus, this is not true temporal immersion since it is not actually something the player can predict and discovery via narrative-based curiosity.

Although the PCs in both games are *tabula rasa* characters, they have basic motivations and character outlines which are unavoidable, much like RPG PCs. However, the *Doki Doki* PC quickly just becomes the player themselves as the game "breaks" and "infects" their computer. This guiding character premise is what allows the player to "mentally relocate" to the narrative world.[104] This ability to jump into the magic circle of the game is the guiding force behind visual novels: the magic circle must be interesting and emotionally compelling enough to make the player want to buy it, since these games are essentially books with a few extra bells and whistles.

As previously touched on, both these games relay their narrative in strikingly different manners, but their base systems as visual novels remain similar. Both focus on the idea of *ludus*, players want to "win" the game by getting a date with the person they desire, or by finding out how to prevent Monika from taking over their computer. While, yes, there are stories that surround these ideas, the stories and

[102] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 56.
[103] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 55.
[104] Hamby, "Examining Readers' Emotional Responses to Stories," 132.

their specific intricacies are secondary to the idea of getting a desired outcome; as opposed to simply experiencing with the characters like in the interactive dramas. Additionally, both games are told via a top-down method of storytelling. Although *Doki Doki* breaks from the expected route of a dating simulator and breaks the magic circle, it is still not a bottom-up game, as the player's own actions are not creating established systems. The game's "attack" on the player's computer is pre-scripted and will always occur.

Next, both games immerse the player and create an interest in the plot in very different manners. But they both rely on creating little mysteries about the characters' lives and functions to allow for players to engage in the principles of reader response theory and ask questions as they play, establishing temporal immersion based on curiosity as a key component to these games.[105] However, *Dream Daddy*'s main draw is creating empathy—emotional immersion—between the PC and the NPCs. [106] As a dating simulator, the game wants to create at least one character the player will like and desire to connect with by the end of the game. The game also creates slight moments of challenge via the sporadic use of minigames, but those more so function to break up the monotony of the visual novel medium than to truly have a deep impact on the plot. The necessity of breaking up the monotony of reading in these question break narratives can be viewed as a downside to the games since, especially in the case of *Dream Daddy*, these seemingly random minigames are not repeated throughout the game, and players can only build their skills in them by reloading saves, as opposed to progressing. The need to break away from the main form of how the narrative is presented and force random challenges onto the player can give the impression to players that the emotional pull and temporal pull of the game is not enough to keep them entertained.

In a completely different vein, *Doki Doki* relies far more heavily on curiosity and comprehension—or rather a lack thereof. The game wants people to ask what is happening to these girls and why. But it also wants to confuse and alarm players by breaking the barrier of the magic circle and having them try anything they can to break the cycle of the game deleting itself. However, *Doki Doki*'s break from the format to "infect" the player's computer can more so be viewed as a subversion of expectations, playing with the weaknesses of the genre, to provide a more entertaining experience.[107] This decision to create an unpredictable outcome for the very functionality of the game can be viewed as the most extreme final output of the surprise created from temporal immersion.[108]

Finally, we must ask how these games establish agency for their players. *Dream Daddy*'s branching paths and subplots provide a wide variety of choice type, and much like *Detroit* or *Unitl Dawn*, each decision has two to four options that can be selected with each presented choice. However, there is not a strong sense of a butterfly effect system, rather the choices have almost immediate outcomes that might be unpredictable in and of themselves, such as when the player goes on a date with Craig and goes to jump off a waterfall into the water below. If the player does it one too many times, they will die. The game is fun for players based on the absurdity it presents alongside the traditional dating simulator

[105] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 55.
[106] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 56.
[107] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 55.
[108] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 55.

experience.

The chaotic and unpredictable nature of the game surrounded by the very normal premise of living in a new town and trying to find love provides players an emotional connection through the joy of absurdity. The idea of the absurd is based around the concept that a framework of reality must be destroyed in order to create it. When people are exposed to these deviations from logic, they feel an "arousal state" that makes them essentially desire to make sense of what they are seeing, based upon their knowledge of the frameworks that had governed their world view previously.[109] When people draw on these previously experienced frameworks, they may warp their worldview to account for what they are seeing, or they may relinquish their original beliefs entirely.[110] This is heavily connected to the idea of humor, which relies on creating this subversion via a series of surprises for its audience.[111] Commonly this is done by establishing a material within a "frame" which is developed via narration, images, or other forms of conveying information.[112] The frame is then pulled away and many more frames are introduced to recontextualize the original piece of information.[113] However, humor, unlike simple absurdity, is dependent on the idea that the audience watching will understand the joke or subversion being told to them.[114] This is how *Dream Daddy* creates its appeal. It takes a common concept, and gives its players an unexpected twist that, in this case, presents itself in a humorous nature, making its players connect—or disconnect—with the framework that has been established. This also helps to ground the player within the game's magic circle as the humor of the absurd sets a precedent that serves to ground the game in this strange framework, which pushes the game's writers to hide these moments of absurdity to get an unexpected laugh out of players that encourages players to explore and make choices they might not make if this game was a more "traditional" and "grounded" dating simulator because they become curious about what could happen to these characters due to the zany unpredictable nature of the plot. The choices, however, are rooted in the logic of the game, keeping the player grounded with realistic possibilities for outcomes while still rewarding them with odd outcomes for their equally odd inputs.

Doki Doki instead only focuses on the idea of unpredictability in its absurdity, not comedy; as players are made to be taken aback by the lack of loyalty to form. This creates a fear response in players, as they are presented with a classic bait-and-switch, expecting to receive a classic dating simulator game, and ending up with a gruesome horror story instead. The fear created in the player encourages them to push forward, as their curiosity for why these events occur emerge past the initial shock of being shown gore and graphic depictions of suicide.

These visual novels are widely different in genre and mechanics, but they are all rooted in a similar question break formatting. The two examples explored rely heavily on emotional connections and the idea of the absurd to keep players engaged, but both game's decision to shift focus either briefly, in the case of *Dream Daddy,* or entirely, in the case of *Doki Doki*, to a challenge-based system could be

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[109] Travis Proulx, "The Feeling of the Absurd: Towards an Integrative Theory of Sense-Making," Psychological Inquiry 20, no. 4 (2009): 231, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40646438.
[110] Proulx, "The Feeling of the Absurd," 231.
[111] William O. Beeman, "Humor," Journal of Linguistic Anthropology 9, no. 1/2 (1999): 103, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43102438.
[112] Beeman, "Humor," 103.

[113] Beeman, "Humor," 103.
[114] Beeman, "Homor," 103.

viewed as a lack of confidence in the format selected. In the case of *Doki Doki*, this makes means that the focus is not actually on the plot of the narrative, rather the mechanism of how it is told. This makes *Doki Doki* less of a narrative experience and more of a physical experience that players are designed to feel pride in for overcoming. The developers' seemingly inherent need to draw players away from the formatting, trying to take the player's focus away from choice and more towards the absurd situations they are thrown into, positions the question break format as a weak option for creating successfully immersive agency-based narratives.

The Stanley Parable

The Stanley Parable is a walking simulator that was originally released in 2013 for Windows by Galactic Café.[115] The game has the player assume the role of an office worker named Stanley who one day comes to work and realizes that all his coworkers are missing. The player must then navigate through the office building to try and figure out what has happened to them. The player is guided by the voice of a narrator who they may obey or disobey, leading to various endings and alterations to the way the game plays out. The game is played on an endless loop, although some endings allow the player to see the credits role and return to the title screen. The game does not fall into any of the aforementioned categories of choice-based game, as the genre it is set in does not traditionally allow for players to make many choices at all. *The Stanley Parable* is a walking simulator—like the previously mentioned *Fragments of Him*. Games in this genre have players assume the role of a faceless character who they play as in the first-person—their eyes are the character's eyes. These games are heavily plot-based, and have players walk on a set track, perhaps with some possibilities for variation, to experience a story. The most interaction these games usually allow for players comes from their ability to physically move the character about the space, and pick up—or neglect to pick up—various collectibles that the PC may or may not comment on to add context. The characters in these games are almost always *tabula rasa* styled, only interjecting to add context occasionally. These games also very plainly host all three of Thabet's roles for a player at once, as the *tabula rasa* character makes them the protagonist, the story being told to and around them makes them an audience member, as opposed to an active participant like in the other game mediums, and the ability to physical walk around and interact—or not interact—with objects makes them the narrator, controlling what the player sees. This narrator role is more clearly seen in *The Stanley Parable* specifically.

The Stanley Parable broke that mold of minimal interactivity. The player does not have to obey the path set out for them by the narrator, and going against the narrator's wishes is in fact where a bulk of the game's content comes from. The narrator continues to narrate the disobedient actions, and the results of disobedience become increasingly absurd. The narrator will reveal to the player that he knows this is a game, and that the player's disobedience is ruining his story, so he will lament, make fun of Stanley—and thus the player, produce strange obstacles for the player to try to get around, and so much

[115] The version of the game being cited is *The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe*, which was recreated in a new game engine by the studio Crows Crows Crows. However, the original version, which was developed by Davey Wreden, was created under the studio name Galactic Cafe. The *Ultra Deluxe* version of the game contains the entirety of the new game, plus multiple additions and endings. However, these additions do not alter the intended messaging and effect of the game.

more.

The game rooted in *paidia* as the desire to continuously play the game on its loop draws people to the story, draws people to want to see how the narrator will react next. This is facilitated by the branching path nature of the game, which, much like the more traditional choice-based games, encourages players to keep replaying the game. This is how the game keeps its players engaged, by creating a sense of curiosity, but the idea of reader response theory is not applicable, as the only mystery in the game cannot be solved on your own, it cannot be pieced together, and it must be fed to you by the narrator. The only draw is the wild nature of what *could* happen, not what *did* happen in the "plot." The unpredictability of the outcomes is what allows the game to compensate for the fact that almost all the choices are binary, thus a moment of satisfaction can still be granted to the player.

Additionally, the choices in *The Stanley Parable* that make genuine changes to the game are so minute that players must keep playing each choice section over and over to get new outcomes. There are almost no choices that lead to the same thing, the game branches exponentially. Much like *Doki Doki*, the game attempts to feign this idea of an emergent system, as the narrator "reacts" to your "incorrect" actions. However, if the player cycles through the game enough times, they will see that all of these "incorrect" choices were already predetermined, thus confusingly making them a "correct" choice, too, as the option would've never been present if the story did not want you to do such a thing. In doing this, the game challenges what it means to tell and story. It combats the popular dilemma that games in this genre have, which is creating a "good" ending and "bad" ending. *The Stanley Parable* has no "correct" or "good" ending, since technically the game never ends, as the player is put on a loop: each time the player reaches a supposed conclusion point, the game goes dark and places Stanley back in the starting position.

This game is a remarkable break from the norm of gaming, and it forces players and developers alike to ask why they are creating their games the way they are, to ask them why they feel the need to be bound by systems, and why they give the player the role that they do. The game places a heavy focus on humor, laughing at both the absurdity of itself and at the player's desire for more than it can offer. The game mocks the idea that games should have endless outcomes that allow the player to do whatever they want and go wherever they want by utilizing a narrator that fights with, makes fun of, and laments to the player. The game even showcases this absurd desire for endless interactivity and game breaking by forcing the player into Minecraft—the most popular sandbox game of all time—to mock their desire for something that a narrative game could never give them. The draw for players is curiosity for the absurd, and—most importantly—a hatred or love for the narrator leading them on their journey, as that will guide their decisions to obey or disobey what they are being asked to do.[116]

The Stanley Parable is a game based on the idea of unpredictability, and because of that, the game excels at creating emotion within its players since the basis of gameplay is deciding if you want to agree or disagree with the narrator. The emotion of the narrative is not developed through following the plot as it is narrated to you, rather figuring out how you, the player, develop alongside the narrator as you play the game on its endless loop. The game creates the impression that the player and the narrator are

[116] Galactic Café. The Stanley Parable. Galactic Café. Windows. 2013; This only occurs in the original version of *The Stanley Parable*, in the *Ultra Deluxe* version, this moment is replaced by putting the player in the game *Firewatch*.

building some type of relationship as they interact with each other more and more on each loop. This character interaction is the plot of the game, and since there is such a heavy focus on the emotion of the player, players feel more engaged and inclined to explore how this "relationship" will progress.[117]

Although the game is meta and breaks the magic circle of a traditional video game often, it is not saying that this is the answer to breaking the monotony of all video games, it is merely suggesting that a subversion of expectations and a lack of a clear set of morals or an idea of correctness can truly facilitate a more dynamic and engaging story.

What Makes a Successful Choice-Based Game?

Based upon a thorough analysis of the previously discussed games, many similarities have arisen that showcased a preference in the systems that should be unitized to tell narrative-based stories. First and foremost, all these games depend on the usage of top-down storytelling to protect the narratives they have established. There is no way this can be changed if a developer wants to tell a specific story. It is important for developers who make CBNGs to have an established story in mind to guide their games as that will be the motivation for players to engage with the context. The presence of a well-organized and thought-out story separates narrative games from sandbox games, thus giving the players genuine goals and purposes to guide them through the campaign. Additionally, there is an obvious preference for using branching paths, as that is what facilitates the developer's ability to implement choice. However, this structure can be supplemented with other forms of storytelling in order to enhance the illusion that there are innumerable choices. Moreover, the plots of these games need to have stakes to them, there needs to be something that must be solved, something that must be discovered to push the plot forward. This can only be articulated if the story creates a strong connection via either curiosity for the narrative or game world, or empathy for the characters present. These ideas are the driving forces of most all narratives, regardless of medium. The reader or player must be hooked by their emotional connection to the characters, story world, and the moral conundrums presented to them if developers want to hook players in and push them to continue their engagement with the plot. This allows for the development of serious choices that are not as simple as a "yes" or "no," which also allows for the opportunity to create unclear "right" and "wrong" answers, making the morals truly subjective to the player, enabling their ideas to truly give them their own satisfying ending based on the choices they felt justified in making.

However, significant differences in format—vignette, cutscene or question break—present the player with largely different experiences each with their own drawbacks and benefits, regardless of how compelling the created narrative was. The selected format can either end up helping or hindering the assertion of choice as a main function in the final game. The vignette style seen in interactive dramas can become repetitive, especially if no significant choices or actions are taken throughout the scene, but they provide players with a clear "sub-reward" throughout the narrative's progression. Players can see that choices are clearly what led them to get the "reward" of a new scene and further narrative progression. In RPGs, the cutscene model can push players into a more passive role, as their choices throughout the game will not lead to significant, main-plot-altering choices. However, the insertion of

[117] Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories," 56.

choices in these games' substories serves to build up a larger game world, making the game feel lived-in. Finally, the question break narratives of visual novels showcases minimal player interaction that *must* be supplemented by the absurd or unexpected to keep players engaged, pushing the mechanic of choice to the background and bringing other mechanics like puzzle solving to the forefront of these games.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to articulate that the implementation of choice as a mechanic in a video game should not be frivolous. The idea of selecting something as simple as "yes" or "no" should impact the cannon of a narrative for the player, otherwise their journey had no point in existing. Games that feature narratives but no choice rely on other mechanics to push players through the game, such as engaging combat. Players go into these games knowing they cannot change them, rather understanding that they are there to experience a story and hone their game-related skills (combat, puzzle solving, etc.). But the introduction of choice implies the ability to enact change, and when players are not shown that change, the usage of the medium of a CBNG can feel pointless. Thus, by showcasing a clear cause and effect for players throughout the story, and through its ending, the usage of the medium has a purpose. The developers using this medium should want to tell multiple stories and explore various facets of the human mind.

This clear cause and effect was exemplified best via the vignette style of choice introduction. This approach provides short scenes with enough emotional resonance to result in the necessitation for player action. The vignette format shows a direct need for choices, as player choice in dialogue or physical actions are the clear cause that effects what vignettes are shown to players. This style of narrative provides players with each type of immersion presented by Ryan: spatial, temporal, epistemic, and emotional, each of which are created by the vessel with which choice occurs (emotional attachment to the PC) or the narrative and story-world itself via the ability to move in a space, the need to discover, and clear importance of player input throughout the narrative. This open-ended, yet easily follow-able format allows writers to create denser narratives with lore for players to discover and come to understand as the story progresses, since players will be spending the entire game living through someone who is experiencing these events for the first time, too. This room for creativity is what will engage players to pick up games utilizing this structure of choice presentation. However, developers must use caution when creating vignette games, taking care to not stagnate gameplay and keep the format from feeling repetitive.

Nevertheless, the vignette style of storytelling is simple to follow, and can be utilized to tell a wide variety of stories of many genres, providing an easy entryway for writers and developers into the world of branching storytelling. But, the wide utilization of the formula requires those who tell stories in such a manner to add a sense of uniqueness to how they use the structure in order to make their game stand out among the many others in the genre. This can be done via the development of a unique story that focuses heavily on a variety of moral conflicts and an element of curiosity that sparks the desire to explore. Additionally, games utilizing this format should try to enhance the basic mechanics of choice-based exploration and progression by implementing additional mechanics, such as combat, or some type

of health or sanity meter that the player needs to maintain throughout the narrative. These additions add a level of challenge to the game being produced that entice players to keep playing in order to get better at these scenes of combat or maintenance of stats. By enhancing these games, however, there must be a care put into grounding the game around the narrative and the idea of choice, otherwise the game may break genre by becoming focused too heavily on a mechanic that was supposed to be supplementary; the focus of narrative choice-based games is, after all, the narrative. But finding the balance between a *Fragments of Him* player-exclusionary-style game and a *The Stanley Parable* player-dependent game is no easy task, and begs the question: should we continue to fall within the expectations of the genre with something easily produced, and proven successful, or should we attempt to push the boundaries of genre and seek to create these *The Stanley Parable*-and *Doki Doki*-esque games that break the mold and take risks? Do we as writers need to appease the masses or appease ourselves and defy our own expectations of genre conventions and ourselves? Creating these narrative games truly sets its developers out on their own exponentially branching path of creation, but at what point must we reign ourselves in to decide the project is "finished"? Despite all these questions, one thing game developers can know for sure is that these types of narrative games are profitable and grasp their players' attention for campaigns that span hours—or even days—long. Developers simply need to break from the comfort zone of what they know works to what they think could work in order to take risks to allow them to create exciting, unpredictable, curiosity-fostering interactive fiction that prevents stagnation in the field. There is no single correct combination of narrative types and choice presentations, the only limitation is skill and time. The idea of using the vignette formula is simply the easiest, most surefire way to create a narrative game dependent exclusively upon a narrative. Developers should take this idea as a guideline, a skeleton for the plotting of their games, not necessarily something they should always use to establish a narrative repetitiously. Innovation is the most important part of any field, but in the world of fiction writing, it is paramount. Writers all have the same skeleton types to work with—the three-act structure, Vogler's story types, Freytag's pyramid—it is only natural that game developers have an equivalent structure. The problem within each field, however, will then become discovering how to disguise those structures to keep players engaged and ready to be surprised but what the game has to offer.

I believe that the study of video games and agency could and should be expanded. To further the findings and shortcomings of this study, further research should examine player perception of games and the choices they present via qualitative statistical analysis. This could further assert—or disprove—the conclusions drawn in this study regarding which presentation of choice—vignette, cutscene, or question break—provides players with the most sense that their actions and choices are what is moving the narrative forward. Moreover, further work could be done by looking individually at a specific narrative presentation style to allow for the examination of more narratives across a larger period of time to see if player opinions vary significantly based not only on form but genre.

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