CREATOR'S DISCUSSION OF THE GROWING FOCUS ON, AND POTENTIAL OF, STORYTELLING IN VIDEO GAME DESIGN

MATA HAGGIS

ABSTRACT

The video game industry, by its wider reputation, is not commonly regarded for its deep and thoughtful experiences. In its common media presence it is represented as frequently dealing with content that is excessively violent and usually expressing themes and genres that are otherworldly: science fiction, horror, or fantasy. However, the broad reputation of video games' reputation is not wholly deserved, partly due to an arthouse-esque movement growing rapidly alongside the larger, traditional releases. In the last decade, and five years especially, there have been an increasing number of games which tell personal stories that are inspired either by life or that are autobiographical and that defy that broader reputation. These games are often highly concerned with creating vivid and believable characters, telling personal stories, or conveying emotional experiences using interaction to enhance the narrative. This article discusses some of the key titles in this area, the debates in video game culture surrounding them, and some of the choices made in the development of the author's own narrative game experience 'Fragments of Him'.

KEY WORDS

Video games, autobiographical, storytelling, game design, narrative design

The video game industry, by its wider reputation, is not commonly regarded for its deep and thoughtful experiences. Typical media coverage from outside the industry represents games as being obsessed with content that is excessively violent, stereotypical in its representations of gender, and exclusively expressing themes and genres that are otherworldly: science fiction, horror, or fantasy. Even the most famous games that offer players comparatively realistic settings, including *Call Of Duty* (Activision) and *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar Games), have completely unrealistic features such as lead characters with miraculous powers of healing from bullet wounds.

Game worlds are often larger-than-life, they have a heavy bias towards stories featuring male lead characters, and revel in spectacle. In many ways, this is similar to blockbuster cinema, but without the century of history and cultural variety outside of the blockbuster releases; the broadly negative reputation of video games is not wholly deserved, partly due to an arthouse-esque movement growing rapidly alongside the larger, traditional releases. In the last decade,

and in the past five years especially, there have been more games that tell personal stories either inspired by life or that are autobiographical. These games are often highly concerned with creating vivid and believable characters, telling personal stories, or conveying emotional experiences using interaction to enhance the narrative.

Games that could be described as real-life dramas, tackling serious issues, are becoming common: *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games) tells the true story of the creators, Ryan and Amy Green, whose son was dying of cancer during the creation of the game. The game deals with the themes of love, loss, and religious faith, presented in a style that could be most easily compared with the cinematic style of 'magical realism', seen in films such as *Amélie* (Jeunet) and *Pan's Labyrinth* (del Toro). The way the topic of mortality is handled in *That Dragon, Cancer* uses the interactions of video games to create an immersive and emotionally realistic sense of the lives of the creators as their son's health waned. Although less weighty in its inspiration, *Memoir En Code* (Camilleri) deals with the life of its creator, using small instances of gameplay to convey his feelings at the notable moments that he considers to have shaped his identity. *LIM* (Kopas) has an abstract graphical style and is designed to use gameplay mechanics to convey the sensation and pressures of being forced to fit in with social expectations (Keogh). *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios) and *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* (Ubisoft) both deal with fictionalised versions of real-world conflicts, the former showing a bleak version of what it is like to be a civilian in a modern warzone, the latter being a lighter-toned representation of several characters in WWI. Each of these examples demonstrates that, as with independent cinema appearing alongside the blockbuster, the global games industry releases successful smaller-budget titles that deal with complex and nuanced themes.

These games are most often considered to be part of what is termed 'indie games', meaning that they are games that are usually released independently, without the backing of a major publisher. It should be noted that this term is very loosely applied and is also sometimes used to describe a range of gameplay experiences. Not a conventional 'genre' in its own right, indie games have what might be better described as a 'persona', a characteristic set of styles that are typically situated outside the mainstream, including games that are short, limited in scope or diversity of interaction, or lacking typical gameplay features, such as scoring or increasingly difficult challenges. The term can be applied regardless of the size of the publisher; for example, *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* was released by a major publisher but is still considered indie by virtue of the style, genre, and play mechanics, such as absence of direct violence and the game's tonal approach to the setting. In this regard, and like many other indie titles, it is considered indie because of the sense that the game is reaching to be thought-provoking or perhaps aspiring to be Art, rather than to be solely viscerally entertaining. Games such as *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* may be seen to exhibit indie persona in the way that arthouse cinema is analogous to indie filmmaking; never expecting to be as commercially successful as blockbuster cinema as it retains a characteristic difference but is nonetheless able to achieve significance and retain importance to film-making as a whole. It should also be noted that indie games can be entirely gameplay-oriented experiences that do not have any focus on storytelling or characters. The 'indie games' area of video game publishing is the most experimental and so also where the extreme focus on narrative, and specifically autobiographical games, is most likely to appear, but storytelling is by no means the only focus of the indie game market.

There is some discussion among players and developers of video games about whether some indie games, including those cited above, are indeed even 'games'. This is a largely semantic discussion, based on personal preferences among players about what a video game should contain, such as scoring systems, competition, requirement for either fast reactions or

strong strategic planning (or both), etc. This debate is addressed alongside my research work, in my role as the lead game and narrative designer on *Fragments of Him* (Sassybot). During development of this title we have coined the term 'Playable Interactive Narrative Experience' (PINE) in recognition that its gameplay and narrative do not fit many of the common expectations of a video game. *Fragments of Him* tells the story of a man who dies in an accident, and how some of the people who loved him come to terms with the loss. The theme is unusual in games, but mechanically it is also outside of common video games: there are no puzzles, no timed challenges, no difficulty beyond using simple controls, no actions that can result in a failure of any sort, and there is nothing blocking the player from completing the whole experience in a single play session. In some respects, *Fragments of Him* is more like attending a theatre performance than playing a video game. Whether this is indeed a game can be topic for debate: in the discussion of their game *Façade*, the creators emphasise the importance of agency to create a 'satisfying dramatic experience' (Mateas and Stern) that is also a 'game', but in *Fragments of Him* this agency has been almost entirely removed. This calls into question whether the implied meanings of the word 'game' are appropriate for the nature of *Fragments of Him*, or whether a new term such as PINE would be more appropriate to recognise its different use of the digital interactive medium. Despite the semantics, there is some merit in assessing whether the use of the term 'game' limits the expectations of an audience to experiences that can be very serious in their content and depictions, perhaps even pushing creators to turn away from attempting to address mature or complex themes in their work.

The term PINE has other implicit meanings that take it beyond the ludological minimisation of agency: it shows recognition that many games with a narrative focus have stepped away from giving highest priority to fun. Where the common goal of most commercial video games is to deliver a fun experience, PINEs do not share this goal. Their character is often introspective, melancholy, or lonely, and the consistency of the narrative setting is the priority. This does not mean that they have no uplifting moments or joyous elements, only that these are often provided through catharsis via an emotional and engaging narrative experience rather than as a moment-by-moment part of the gameplay. Where traditional games may be grouped by mechanics, such as shoot-'em-ups, beat-'em-ups, First Person Shooters, Role-Playing Games, etc., the genre of PINEs may become most recognisable by their narrative aesthetics and contemplative emotional preoccupations that span various interactive approaches and viewpoints.

As Mateas and Stern argue, storytelling in an interactive medium has some challenges that are unique when compared to other media. We might describe books, films, and theatre (in their most common forms) as linear narrative mediums, where each retelling of the story is intentionally as identical as possible to the previous telling. In an interactive medium, this will not necessarily be the case: it is the choice of the designer/s where, when, and if a player has control over how the narrative will develop. In *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company) the player experiences the story from a first-person perspective (meaning that they walk around an empty house as if they were seeing through the eyes and controlling the movements of the player-character, in this case a young woman returning home). The narrative is arranged so that it will unravel in a designed order which lasts approximately two hours, but there are elements that can be found out of sequence and small puzzles which the player may miss or not solve at all before the end of the story. If the player engages with the events out of sequence then it is possible that the two hour story could be completed, albeit with only very partial coherency, in a few minutes. The lack of coherency could be a choice for players, but could also be stumbled on accidentally too, effectively breaking the pre-designed story. Such destruction of pre-ordained order is not a risk of the medium that is necessary for creators to take into account in

typical cinematic, literary, or theatrical productions, but this risk is an essential consideration for game developers that are interested in using their medium for storytelling.

The influential game *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room) removes player control over the story completely, and is sometimes called a 'walking simulator' because the only player interaction is to control a person walking in a first-person view along a path across an island. The player cannot deviate in any significant way from the path, there are no ways to die or fail, and no objects to interact with at all: the only player action is to walk. As they walk, semi-randomised sections from a letter addressed to a woman called Esther are read to the player, building to a growing sense of the relationship between the player-character and Esther. *Dear Esther* was first released as an experiment in the limits of storytelling in games by Professor Dan Pinchbeck from Portsmouth University, before later being upgraded to be a commercially released game experience. It met with critical success and modest commercial success too, but also provoked controversy about the minimalism of the experience in regards to the limited gameplay (MacDonald): a complex story and theme, when detached from gameplay mechanics, were not considered by some to be features that are important for video games.

Both *Gone Home* and *Dear Esther* put significant limitations on the player's ability to influence the story, and both are inside the indie games area. Some of the restriction of player options observed in indie games is likely to be the result of economic limitations restricting the creation of choices for the player which influence the outcome of the story but may not be seen: for example, for every choice where a character lives or dies, a whole branch of the story must be created in which that choice logically, narratively, and emotionally resonates, but the financial cost of developing that branch will only be appreciated by players who choose that destiny, and the more branches there are then the more of the production will go unseen. Some indie games allow for huge variation in player input into the story, but this will commonly limit the length of the experience, such as the early experimental narrative game *Façade* (Mateas and Stern, Façade) that has a play time of approximately 15-20 minutes. If the experience is compelling, players will return to the experience to see another branch, but this is a risk for developers. Some larger productions, often termed 'AAA games' (pronounced 'triple-A' and signifying that the Art, Audio, and Animation are all of a high standard and usually have had a large amount of time and money spent on them), do focus on storytelling, such as in the game *Heavy Rain* (Sony Computer Entertainment), but usually this is mixed with action sequences or science-fiction, horror, or fantasy themes, such as in the *Mass Effect* trilogy (Bioware). In AAA narrative games, the stories commonly focus on points of conflict that are tropes from the blockbuster cinematic media, typically hero's journey stories defeating a Manichean evil threat to a group or whole civilisation, rather than smaller tales of personal challenge and self-development.

It is in the indie titles that narrative designers usually have the greatest freedom to control the overall experience of the player. A narrative designer can do as little as write a script, but they can also do as much as: choosing all of the interactions in the game; designing the player feedback systems (such as how the sound effects support the emotions of the characters); directing the animators and performers; or choosing every item in the world that will be created by the artists, from the clothes worn by the characters to the handles on the drawers in their bedrooms. It is in this extreme of the role of a narrative designer where the game can, and most likely will, become an interactive reflection of the personality of the designer.

In *Fragments of Him*, I was entrusted with full control over all narrative content and design. Every decision in the game regarding the narrative world was mine, and I have poured a

huge amount of my personal experiences into bringing the game to life. Although the story is fiction (I have not lost a partner in an accident), it is inspired by real events and many aspects of the story have either happened to me or people I know. The settings in the game are taken directly from real-world reference material, with areas of London and other locations being recreated faithfully for the game. The walls are decorated with paintings by my grandfather and other art from friends and family, and each of the images was specifically chosen for how it complements the narrative setting and emotional reality of the characters. Although *Fragments of Him* is fiction, it is also a deeply personal story for me and reflects many of my own views, experiences, and emotions.

Unlike *Dear Esther* and *Gone Home*, where the player directly controls a character and sees through their eyes in first-person, or *Heavy Rain* (Sony Computer Entertainment), where the player directly controls a character from outside their body in a third-person view, in *Fragments of Him* the player acts in a way that could be considered 'second-person': the player is like a director walking on stage among the actors. When the director steps on stage, the script is followed and actors ignore the director's presence, but the director can indicate places where the actors should go next to continue the story. I chose this to circumvent an issue that I perceive to hold back the realism of a video-game's narrative: ludonarrative dissonance (Hocking). This is when the player has direct control (agency) over a character, they can make the character act in ways which do not fit the narrative setting; for example, in *Gone Home* the player may clumsily guide the character to bump continually into doorways, or in *Heavy Rain* the characters can be made to stand staring at walls while urgent matters need attention elsewhere. By taking most control away from the player through the second-person view, the characters in *Fragments of Him* will never act in a way that breaks their role. It is still possible to leave them standing for an extended period, so arguably the second-person viewpoint does not solve all issues with breaking-role, but I feel that this viewpoint gives it a unique strength for narrative games when compared to direct first- and third-person controls found in the majority of other three-dimensional games.

As discussed earlier, player choice is a unique feature in interactive entertainment. Like other narrative-focussed games with serious topics, *Fragments of Him* does not feature many branches in the narrative, but limited choices are also available throughout. Choices that are made by the player are either minimal or used for thematic purposes. In regards to minimal-impact choices, early in the game the player can choose to go to the bathroom or kitchen first, and the character will be reminded of a story with an ex-girlfriend or their grandmother depending on which location they enter, but later in the game the character will enter the second location and see the other story. The mid-point between the two stories adjusts depending on which was chosen first, but the emotional journey of the character is identical: the player misses nothing and the effect is only significant on the ordering of the scenes, not the content or meaning of the game itself. At other points, the player has the choice of several interactions at one time: it may be that picking any option will have the same result, or it may be that the player is taken down a short sequence in the story before returning to the moment of the choice to complete the other options. Again, a choice is available, but it does not lock-off branches of the story.

Alongside these choices with minimal impact, choice is also used for thematic purposes in *Fragments of Him*. At the beginning of the game, the character Will is leaving his home and the player chooses in which way Will bids farewell to his partner, or if Will says anything at all. Unknown to Will, and likely many players, these are the last words said to his partner before a fatal accident. After the accident, the player is then returned to the moment Will wakes on that final morning. They player goes through the morning routine with Will and inevitably reaches

the point again where Will is leaving the house for the last time and saying his final words, except with a small difference: there is no longer any option of what to say because in the real world the choice of final words can only happen once. In ways such as this, *Fragments of Him* does not use player choice as a way of controlling the story, as is typical in narrative games, but gives and restricts choices as a way of expressing the themes of the story. It deals with real emotions and events that reflect life, and while we have choice in-the-moment we can never replay that time to make another decision. The final minutes of Will's life is the only point of the game that is repeated, and I hope that the meaning will be clear to players: each moment of a life contains choices, and once they are made they cannot be changed. One of the core themes of the game is how life is unpredictable and sometimes cut short, and that each moment with those we love is important. By giving player choice at the beginning of the game and then highlighting that removal later in the game, I hope to emphasise the theme that each choice we make in life is permanent. The first instance of this choice can be seen in the video that accompanies this discussion article.

Jeffrey Yohalem, a lead writer for Ubisoft on AAA games such as *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* (Ubisoft), stated that *Fragments of Him* 'proves that we have barely scratched the surface of the emotions that can be raised through interaction' (Sassybot). *Fragments of Him* will be released in 2016 and may provoke further discussions about the nature of storytelling in games. Whatever the reception to the game, it is part of video games expanding to address topics that range beyond the blockbuster tropes of violence and associated themes, such as revenge or visceral horror. Whether PINEs become a permanent feature in digital interactive entertainment, or if this is a temporary trend that soon dissipates, is yet to be seen. The expansion of interest in creating vivid characters in games is by no means the only trend in video game culture and content that is worthy of academic examination, and many other mechanical and thematic developments are also both interesting as evolutions of the medium and as reflections of wider social conditions; however, the increasing numbers of creators that are using interactive media to address complex themes suggests growing potential for their importance as a medium for personal, social, and cultural expression.

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