

## NARRATIVE IN VIDEO GAMES' VERBAL MODE

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### Summary

As a distinctive form of art, video games feature a narrative element in a similar way that literature, theatre, and cinema do; however, there are certain characteristics that make video game narrative different from its counterparts in other art forms. Through the video games' brief history (as compared to other art forms), the narrative went from being almost absent and neglected to playing an integral role in the product. The goal of this paper is to research the narrative element present in the verbal mode of video games. Hence, the study focuses on the history and evolution of video games and narratives represented in them. It also considers the peculiarities of video game texts resulting in their analysis and detailed description. Methods used in the research include induction, deduction, synthesis and analysis; categorization; descriptive method, and historical method. Practical importance of the paper lies in that the results may become the basis for further investigation of narrative elements and the role texts play in video games.

**Key words:** narratology, art and media, textual studies, interactive art, semiotic resources.

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### 1. Introduction

Video games are a relatively recent type of entertainment media that appeared as far back as late 1950s, and has been developing in strong connection with technological advancement. Early games were quite primitive both gameplay- and narrative-wise, but the developers quickly realized that just as any form of entertainment, video games require a story, so first games with a plot were introduced in the 1980s. Considered a form of art from 2011, the overwhelming majority of video games now feature narrative elements in them (even the ones that do not have any words).

Narrative studies based on video games were conducted since early 2000s as a part of a broader research (*Buckingham et al., 2003*). Distinctive video game studies that primarily focused on multimodal and narrative features of the media appeared a decade later (*Ensslin, 2012*), as well as manuals written for future narrative designers that shed more light on interconnection between ludic and narrative aspects of video games (*Skolnik, 2014; Heussner et al., 2015*). However, the object of study is unique and complicated, and research stands in its early stage and requires more contributions into the discourse. Hence, it would be beneficial to study video game narratives and verbal aspect of its multimodality in more detail.

The goal of this article is to overview video game narrative and analyze in-game texts as a part of its verbal mode. The article provides an overview of video game history and describes its multimodal nature. It also categorizes and further analyzes the texts present in video games, which results in identifying and formulating the specific features of narratives.

Using the method of continuous sampling, we looked through game texts and were able to find some recurring patterns, which later helped us divide the texts into groups and sub-groups with the method of categorization. Having described and analyzed the texts, we could find unique features of video game textuality, as well as features that are common for all art forms that feature text. Conclusions were formed based on the findings with the help of induction method.

## 2. Video game narrative history and overview

Video games (also called computer games or electronic games) are one of the most recent inventions in the world of digital art and entertainment. William Higinbotham created what is now considered the first video game (called *Tennis for Two*) in 1958 (*APS News, 2008*), with earlier developments dating as far back as the beginning of the decade. The game created by Higinbotham was a simple tennis game, where the players had to hit the tennis ball at the right time and at the right angle. *Tennis for Two*, along with other early games (such as digital versions of *Tic-tac-toe*, *Mouse in the Maze*, and *The Management Game*) had very little story in them, and even gameplay-wise could be considered somewhat primitive.

The first video game that had a story in it was *Donkey Kong*, directed by Shigeru Miyamoto for the company Nintendo in 1981. The game's plot consisted of a player character rescuing his girlfriend from his pet ape, who climbed higher and higher with every level. Player could see the (first ever) cutscenes that unfolded the story little by little as the game progressed, as well as text bubbles (such as the girlfriend's cry for help). Another early game with a plot was *Crash Bandicoot*, which followed a similar story: Crash (the protagonist) has to save his girlfriend from the antagonist, Dr Neo Cortex.

Even though technically those games did have a story in them, it was rather simple and in many ways gave way to the gameplay, simply providing context for the player's actions. However, they mark an important milestone in history of video game narrative: simply playing tennis, marching a mouse through a maze, or even shooting an enemy's spaceship (as in *Space-war!*) without any reason or motivation besides winning wasn't enough already. If a player jumped across platforms that hung in the air, dodging enemy's attacks and climbing higher and higher, he or she needed a reason to do so, such as to save the girlfriend in distress.

Nowadays it is hard to imagine any video game completely without a plot. Featuring a protagonist (whether pre-defined, as in *Resident Evil* and *Life is Strange* or adjustable, as in *Dragon Age* and *Baldur's Gate*) who has goals and means to achieve them, an antagonist who (for whatever reason) tries to stop that from happening, and events that unfold in a certain sequence (whether scripted or dependent on the player's choices) are now as inextricable as fighting, running, or solving puzzles.

The article mentioned terms *story* and *plot*, which are a part (although not an exhaustive one) of a video game *narrative*. As is the case with any other form of narrative, video game narrative is a system that involves a story (or a plot), different senses that the story implies and messages it aims to convey, and means that enable the story to unfold.

Narrative is present all around us. We read a book – and it has a narrative; watch a movie – it has one, as well. Even scientific, medical, or historical works – all contain a narrative,

in one form or another, to some extent. Political narratives have been an object of discourse (*Patterson, Monroe, 1998*) too – whatever they may be, the word is on the lips of many these days. As a separate form of art (recognized in 2011) (*Melissinos, 2012*), video games contain narrative, too – in their own special way. Thus, video game narrative has a number of distinctive features described below.

### 3. Verbal mode and narrative

Being the most technologically developed (and demanding) form of art, video games are multimodal. Modes are “semiotic resources that allow simultaneous discursive and communicative practice and different ways of interaction between its participants.” (*G. Kress, 2001*) When we say that video games are multimodal, we mean that they have multiple semiotic resources participating in exchange of information. Those modes are verbal, non-verbal (gestures, camera movement, etc.), audio-visual, and interactive. While non-verbal and audio-visual modes are, without a doubt, vital components of a video game, the article will mention them briefly. Verbal mode poses the most interest for linguists, but its distinctive features derive from the other three – particularly, from the interactive one.

Interactivity is one of the most prominent features of video games, as it creates new ways of consuming (or rather, interacting with) art. Video games are not the only art forms that involve interaction, but they cannot be non-interactive. Interactive mode influences the verbal one, making video games so different from, for example, movies that use verbal, non-verbal, and audio-visual modes, but very few of them can be influenced by the viewers (those are mostly experimental and not widely popular). Interactivity turns events into quests, consumers into players, with a verbal mode adjusting accordingly.

Verbal mode plays an important role in video games – it transmits information about the game. Although non-verbal and audio-visual tools, such as decoration on a house in-game, a character’s design, or a camera angle, may convey *some* information to the player, the overwhelming majority of it still relies on words. It is worth mentioning, however, that there are games that heavily rely on actions and surroundings to tell the story (*Little Nightmares, Limbo*); therefore, they do not pose much interest for linguists, and their means of storytelling will not be discussed in this article. The overwhelming majority of video games, especially ones that are set in a fantasy or sci-fi world with its own laws and history contain quite considerable and intricate verbal mode that can take many forms and serve many different purposes: from dialogue to gameplay tutorials, and each form has its own peculiarities. Thus, the article will concentrate on those types of games, mostly role-playing games.

### 4. Types of in-game texts

The first form words can take is dialogue. We are all familiar with it: it features a conversation between two (or more) people, during which an information exchange takes place. In more “traditional” forms of art that contain dialogue (literature, theatre, and cinema) it can tell us a lot about the scene, the characters who speak, their attitude towards the topic of discussion, etc., with the right choice of words. Video game dialogue serves similar functions: *characterization* (gives an idea about the player character and NPCs), *worldbuilding* (tells about history and culture of the game world), *pacing* (offers a moment of relaxation after a hard battle), and *humor* (lightens the mood).

In the book *The Game Narrative Toolbox* (Heussner et al., 2015) the authors divide video game dialogue into three categories: ambient dialogue, interactive dialogue, and dialogue in cutscenes. Brief distinction between the three is suggested as follows: ambient dialogue does not interrupt gameplay and serves to fill the silence in moments where it feels like the characters should say something; interactive dialogue is a mixture of verbal and interactive (gameplay) modes – here the player can choose a response he or she deems the most appropriate; dialogue in cutscenes interrupts gameplay and serves as an addition to the actions happening on-screen.

The most prominent peculiarity of video game dialogue is its variability. For example, there is usually more than one option for an ambient dialogue line that can be triggered in a certain area (“*I think this is the place*”), after attempting or performing a certain action (“*The chest is locked, we need a key*”, “*Well, that certainly did something*”), or simply after a certain period of time passes (occasional banter between characters, for example). In games with non-linear narrative (‘string of pearls’ or branching) variable dialogue can serve as one of ‘choice mechanics’, where different options lead to different results. For example, in the final quest of the game *Dragon Age II*, the player must choose a side in a conflict between mages and templars, and that choice is presented in a form of dialogue where the player character has to articulate his or her choice in words in front of companions before setting the plan in action. Depending on the line chosen, the player will have to fight the opposing side (and, depending on multiple other choices earlier in game, some of the companions may support the player character or fight against them).

It is difficult to assign dialogue in video games to a single distinctive style due to high variability of video game genres and even types of interactions within one game; it may vary from informal (an interaction between two friendly characters) to formal (when speaking to an authority figure) and literary, or elevated, style. However, as dialogue serves a purpose of imitating real-life conversations, it often has what is called a personal style, conveying through a manner of speaking a character’s background, temper, their attitude towards a certain situation. Hence, the vocabulary of dialogue varies highly, featuring simple lexis that is used by all manner of people, as well as elevated, pejorative, or archaic one. Syntax may also differ from one dialogue to another: short phrases and sentences are usually present in ambient dialogue, especially that which accompanies an action, while during an interactive dialogue a character may answer to a question with long, complexly articulated sentences, especially when explaining lore-related information.

Another form of verbal mode in video games are in-game texts: notes, journal entries, quest descriptions, tutorials etc. They can essentially be divided into two major categories: those that exist *inside* the game’s world, and those that exist *outside* of it. Different notes, letters, and codex entries belong to the first group: they are usually filled with background information (that helps build depth of the game world) and can be written as to resemble real scientific/historical works. For example, in *Dragon Age* series there is an imaginary scholar by the name of brother Genitivi, and extracts from his works, along with many others, can be found by the player all throughout the game. There are also notes written by some characters that are not from any ‘scientific’ work: those may be entries in a diary, notes passed between characters as a form of communication, orders in written form, etc.

As in case of dialogue, there is also a high stylistic variation when it comes to such texts. Those codex entries that are written as if to resemble a scientific or theological work will have features typical for such texts: explanatory or descriptive nature, high amount of terminology (usually the one unique for the game, as such texts serve mostly a lore-explaining purpose), use of Passive Voice and impersonal constructions for pseudo-scientific texts, and elevated,

religious, sometimes poetic language of pseudo-scriptures. Notes and diary extracts are usually written in a semi-formal style (but may vary depending on a character that wrote them). Based on a video game genre vocabulary of such texts may contain archaic lexemes (as in medieval fantasy games) or modern day slang (in games set in modern times or nearest future). Syntax also varies greatly from one text to another, featuring simple sentences in personal notes, and more complex clauses when it comes to literary works.

The second category includes texts that exist outside the game world, but are important for the player. Such texts can be quest descriptions, game tutorials, item statistics, etc., and they can usually be found in a character's journal. Journal is a peculiar part of any video game: it seems to exist between the in-game world and the real world, and its contents may vary depending on the player's actions (whether a quest was completed or not, and if yes, with what outcome, etc.).

Let us further look into the wording of quest descriptions. In this case, developers (writers, narrative designers) can choose between different approaches: they can either describe a quest as simply an instruction for a player, or they may stylize it to fit the in-game world. For example, the game *Hades* has a list of tasks that a player character can complete in order to get some rewards, and they are written in the form of prophecies: "*The son of the god of the dead shall someday break free from the realm in which he was born*". In *Disco Elysium* some quests have a description in the form of a player character's inner voice telling him what he should do, and sometimes differ in the amount of detail. For example: "*Someone must know something about your lost firearm. Maybe a district authority, like someone high up in the Union? Or someone local, who saw you with it before you passed out – the Whirling's absent bartender? You could also ask the local pawnshop*". Depending on the game's genre, the style of quest descriptions differs from formal and/or elevated to more familiar, which then dictates certain choices of wording, but all quest descriptions should feature so-called *anchor words* or phrases that give a hint to what the player should do next: name of a location, or a character they need to talk to, or an action to perform.

Game tutorials are probably the most "real-world" game texts, as their purpose is to show the player how to play this game. They help the player learn how to move (walk, run, crouch, jump, etc.), use items, open journal and inventory, change armor/weapons, and also some other gameplay mechanics unique for a certain game. Game tutorials are written in a form of instructions and have a neutral, semi-formal style: "*Press W, A, S, D to walk*", "*You can drag and drop items between the two sides or down to the quickbar, double-click to use or equip them automatically, or right-click and hold to open the radial menu to interact with items*". Imperative mood prevails in such type of texts, as well as modal verbs and infinitive constructions. Sentences differ in size and complexity based on the type of action that needs to be described.

## 5. Conclusions

Video games with plot in them appeared approximately 30 years after the creation of the first video game, and their narrative has developed significantly over the decades. Narrative in video games has a number of peculiarities, of which the most prominent one is its interactivity, reflected in video games' verbal mode, the most relevant mode for linguistic studies. It can be divided into dialogue (ambient dialogue, interactive dialogue, dialogue in cutscenes) and in-game texts (quest descriptions, notes, journal entries, tutorials etc.).

Dialogues in video games stand out with their variability: there are usually multiple phrases that can be said in one situation or following one action. Dialogue options can also be

presented to the player that define the course of action (and plot) and may have different outcomes based on the choice made.

In-game texts are divided into those that exist inside the game world (notes, extracts from fictional works, character's diaries, etc.) and those that exist outside of it (quest descriptions, tutorials). Texts inside the game world serve the purpose of expanding and deepening the lore, making it more corporeal and believable. Different stylistic decisions can be made considering quest descriptions to make them more integral with the game world and look less like instructions, but those still exist mainly for the player to understand the course of action. Tutorials explain the mechanics of a game, and teach the player basic and advanced movements and actions, sometimes even unique to a certain game.

Further research is necessary on the topic of verbal mode as a part of video games structure, types of game texts and how they form the narrative and help move it forward. Stylistic, lexical, and grammatical variability of texts featured in video games constitutes one of the most prominent and curious peculiarities of their verbal mode. Generally considered a less valuable art form compared to literature and cinema, video games, however, offer a vast area of research of complex intermodal relations and interactions, making it intriguing for programmers and marketing specialists, as well as linguists and narratologists.

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