PRINT OR PLAY:
VERBAL AND MULTIMODAL NARRATIVE PECULIARITIES

Olena Pozharytska

Candidate of Philological Sciences (PhD), Associate Professor,
Odesa Mechnikov National University, Ukraine
e-mail: grammarlena@onu.edu.ua, orcid.org/0000-0003-4820-8129

Summary

This article explores the narrative representation of *Nancy Drew: The Phantom of Venice* in two media formats: the printed novel by Carolyn Keene and the 2008 video game adaptation. The study focuses on the transformation of verbal storytelling into a multimodal communicative experience in a quest-type video game, examining how narrative elements are preserved, adapted, or altered. Particular attention is paid to the concept of ludonarrative dissonance, where the storyline and gameplay mechanics may conflict, potentially disrupting player immersion.

The research draws on J. Huizinga's theory of play and James Joyce's epiphanic model, conceptualizing the game as an alternative form of cultural expression and reader's multi-existence. By comparing Nancy's character dialogue in the novel and the game, the study highlights changes in sentence structure, communicative intent, and character interaction.

Quantitative analysis reveals a shift from narrative-heavy text in the book to dialogue-driven gameplay, with the novel containing 39% of author's narrative and 61% of characters' dialogue, while the video game features only 18% of author's narrative content and 82% of characters' dialogue. The study also examines the illusion of choice in the game and the psychological appeal of multiple possible outcomes, contrasting the linearity of print fiction with the interactive nature of digital storytelling.

Ultimately, the article argues that while the video game adaptation retains core narrative elements, its structure reflects the needs of digital communication and player agency. This shift enables a deeper form of immersion, self-projection, and cognitive engagement, illustrating how video games reshape traditional literary experiences into dynamic, player-driven narratives.

Key words: video game, novel, narrative, dialogue, sentence, verbal communication, multi-existence, ludonarrative dissonance, interaction, multimodality.

1. Introduction

The present study addresses the problem of representing a narrative of a literary work through verbal means in a printed edition and through multimodal communicative tools in a video game. It is evident that electronic media provide a convenient means for disseminating information, including the plot of a literary text. Human – computer dialogue offers certain advantages, creating an illusion of direct and personal communication that can be initiated or ended at any moment without causing discomfort. In the process of interpersonal interaction, three interrelated aspects are usually distinguished: communicative (information exchange), interactive (organization of interaction), and perceptive (communication partners' perception of each other) *(Morozova, 2012; Puchalska-Wasyl, 2010)*. Thus, human communication is, on the one hand, an exchange of information, and on the other, a means of self-expression.

The development of electronic means of interpersonal communication has contributed to the progress in the area of encoding narrative messages within video games. A game possesses all the necessary properties for a person seeking new possibilities, self-development, social relevance, and a fulfillment of dreams and desires *(Pozharytska et al., 2023)*. It serves as a way to fill emotional loneliness and realize unfulfilled aspirations.

A new academic field of **game studies** has emerged quite recently, from the ludology vs. narratology debate, associated with Espen Aarseth *(Aarseth, 1997),* Gonzalo Frasca, and Jesper Juul. Researchers of classical **narrative** (R. Barthes, I. Bekhta, M. Blauverg, J. Bruner, C. Griffin, T. van Dijk, I. Morozova *(Morozova & Ershova, 2019)*, P. Ricoeur and others) generally do not consider the verbal components of video games, whereas **ludologists** (M. Eskelinen, S. Chatman, R. Chernov, J. McGonigal *(McGonigal, 2011)*, J. Schreier *(Schreier, 2017)*) primarily focus on the psychological aspects of video games without providing detailed analyses of their verbal content.

The relevance of this research stems from both the underdevelopment of the problem of communicative correspondence between ludonarrative in video games and the printed versions of the same plot, and the growing popularity of video games in contemporary culture. The object of this study is Nancy's character lines in the novel *Nancy Drew: The Phantom of Venice* by C. Keene *(Keene, 1985)* and her communicative contribution in the 2008 video game under the same title *(Her Interactive, 2008)*. The subject of the study is the specifics of information transfer and verbalization in the novel and in the quest-type video game.

The main aim of the research is to establish correlations between the printed version of C. Keene's *Nancy Drew: The Phantom of Venice* and its multimodal representation in the eponymous video game. To achieve this aim, the following tasks were set:

– to characterize the video game as a specific form of plot representation of a literary work;
– to identify the causes of ludonarrative dissonance in the game;
– to determine the degree of "free" choice available to the player;
– to conduct a comparative analysis of the types of sentences used by Nancy Drew as a character in the novel and the game.

The conceptual foundation of the research lies in the classical theory of the play-origin of culture as outlined in Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens (Huizinga, 2005: 251)* and in James Joyce's epiphanic model *(Fomenko, 2006)*. At the core of this conceptual framework is the idea of play as a possibility of simultaneous multi-existence, which becomes the structural basis for human activity *(Pozharytska, 2016; Pozharytska et al., 2023)*. James Joyce's innovative shift from linear to rhizomatic artistic thinking finds a vivid reflection in video games. His epiphanic model makes the reader a participant in the literary discourse *(Fomenko, 2006)*. Renowned scholar of literary semantics, A. Bell, notes that the essence of the work is not revealed to readers-players, but evolves according to their cooperative efforts with authors-publishers… *(Bell, 2010: 46)*.

2. *Nancy Drew* as a Typical Quest Video Game: Plot, Interface, and Ludonarrative Dissonance

There are various classifications of video games *(Pozharytska, 2021),* but many of them are conditional, since often games combine features of several categories. This study focuses on the **quest-type video game**, where the player moves from task to task, solving a main logical problem, with communication mainly conducted through text-based information. This genre, in our opinion, is the most suitable correlate for a detective novel.

Nancy Drew is a series of games about the girl detective Nancy Drew, based on books written by a group of authors under the pseudonym Carolyn Keene. *Nancy Drew: The Phantom of Venice* is the 18th quest game in the series *(Her Interactive, 2008)*, based on the 1985 book of the same name *(Keene, 1985)*. The player progresses through the game according to the plot of the novel. The developers have added several side mysteries, which must be solved to complete the game.

From a psychological perspective, the game's influence on the player's personality is binary in nature and does not depend solely on the individual or the game properties *(Pozharytska et al., 2023)*. This effect results from the interaction between the game matrix (its characters, plot, and dynamics) and the player's psyche (including emotions, fantasies, mental imagery, etc.) *(Johnson, 2012; McGonigal, 2011; Morozova et al., 2021)*. This combination sometimes creates the conditions for **ludonarrative dissonance** – a term introduced by game designer Clint Hocking in 2007 – which describes a contradiction between the discourse conveyed through the story and environment and that conveyed through gameplay. This contradiction leads to a lack of immersion, or even detachment from the narrative. Although the term "dissonance" has a negative connotation, many researchers treat it as an inherent flaw of video game storytelling.

According to E. Aarseth, a video game is a unique "cybertext" in which the gamer acts as the protagonist of the narrative *(Aarseth, 2001)*. Notably, players never see Nancy's face in the game. She appears from behind or from a top-down view, and even photographs of her are blurry or obscured. This feature enhances immersion and encourages the player to merge with the character.

The *Nancy Drew* games use a typical quest interface. Most of the time, the player controls Nancy Drew, travels through a virtual world, interrogates suspects, gathers evidence, solves puzzles, and investigates mysteries. In *The Phantom of Venice*, Nancy goes to the world's romance capital – Venice – where the gamer sees canals, gondolas, narrow streets, and cozy cafés through the character's eyes. Nancy is tasked with helping the police catch a masked thief, nicknamed "the phantom" because he/she leaves no traces and vanishes into thin air. A "Second Chance" feature allows players to retry a failed moment without replaying from a save point.

3. Novel Vs Video Game Experience

Our observations confirm that locations in the game and the novel coincide completely, differing only in their interior or exterior descriptions. In most cases, players can interact only with selected parts of the environment. Some objects drive the game forward – for example, interacting with a costume triggers a dance puzzle in *The Phantom of Venice*.

In every *Nancy Drew* novel, the heroine always solves a mystery, finds a criminal, and prevails. In the game, however, the player can lose – by making an incorrect choice or failing a task, resulting in "*Nancy is dead.*" *(Her Interactive, 2008)*. The likelihood of success depends on the player's age, experience, and chosen difficulty.

Our carried out online survey has revealed an average success rate of 64% and a "failure" rate (use of retries) of 36%. The ratio of players who never finished the game to those who did by any means is 15% to 85%. This indicates that only one in three players can complete the game without hints, and roughly one in eight abandons it entirely. This pattern supports the hypothesis that the popularity of quests stems from their competitive nature and a relative freedom of existential choice they offer.

In the printed version of the novel, the reader always acts as a passive partner of the author *(Morozova & Ershova, 2019; Morozova & Pozharytska, 2021)*. The comparative analysis of narrative representation in the book and its multimodal reflection in the game leads to the following generalizations. Beyond the obvious substitution of narrative with visuals in the game, there is a difference in the number of suspects. The game introduces more characters – a generous artist, an elderly countess, a curious journalist – each with their own goals, making them potential culprits. This expansion naturally affects the ratio of narrative to dialogue. In the novel, narrative constitutes 39% and dialogue 61%; in the game, ludonarrative makes up 18% and virtual dialogue 82%. This dominance of dialogue in the game is explained by the need for player interaction with non-player characters, making dialogue the primary narrative mode.

4. Video Game Narrative: Structural & Communicative Peculiarities

Our study found significant differences in the distribution of sentence types. Simple syntactic constructions dominate in the game (73.4%), followed by compound (14.2%) and complex (12.4%) sentences. In the novel, simple sentences appear less frequently (55.6%), while complex ones account for 29.4%, and compound – for 15%. In-game complex sentences tend to be explanatory, e.g., "***He says*** *it wasn't him.* ***He says*** *someone else wrote the note and left the sausages for me.*" *(Her Interactive, 2008)*

Nancy's statements in the novel are more extended and polite, often including emotional descriptions or social cues, e.g., *"I'll be glad to come, she said warmly. And don't worry, Tara, you'll bear up, I'm sure of that Just think how happy your Dad will be to know you've come all that way for his sake" (Keene, 1985).*

In terms of the communicative aim, the video game shows a sharp increase in interrogative structures, especially wh-questions designed to maintain dialogue and offer choices, e.g., *"Why would someone do it?", "What did he want to say?", "Why does everyone's phone number begin with five five five?" (Her Interactive, 2008)*. Nancy frequently motivates or advises, e.g., *"Let's spy on him, and we may find something"* or *"I would check this room one time more, maybe we have missed something." (Her Interactive, 2008)*These examples also reveal a trend for illusory freedom: although framed as suggestions, such actions are mandatory for progression.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the increase in dialogue in the video game format brings it significantly closer to real-life interpersonal communication, fostering a sense of immediacy and participation that is largely absent in traditional print narratives. This dialogic expansion not only enhances immersion, but also facilitates a deeper emotional and psychological involvement, allowing the player to project their own identity onto the protagonist. The dominance of syntactically simple interrogative structures serves a dual function: it lowers the cognitive threshold for interaction, making the game more accessible, while simultaneously promoting critical thinking and sustained engagement through choice-based progression.

Unlike the passive consumption, typical of reading a book or watching a film – where the narrative unfolds independently of the audience's input, – a quest video game places the player in an active, decision-making role. The presence of multiple narrative paths and alternative endings empowers players to shape the storyline in accordance with their preferences, actions, and

problem-solving strategies and grants them multi-existence. This interactive structure fosters a unique process of self-exploration, in which players not only engage with the fictional world but also reflect on their own choices, values, and reactions.

The possibility of replaying the game and discovering new outcomes further amplifies its appeal, encouraging players to test different strategies and adopt various perspectives. This flexibility contributes to a sense of autonomy and creative freedom, positioning the video game as a powerful medium for both entertainment and introspective development. In this way, the digital adaptation of *Nancy Drew: The Phantom of Venice* transcends mere transmedial translation, emerging as an interactive, multimodal experience that redefines narrative participation and expands the boundaries of character embodiment and story ownership.

References

1. Aarseth, E. (2001). Computer game studies, year one. Game Studies, 1(1). http://www.game-studies.org/0101/editorial.html

2. Aarseth, E. J. (1997). Cybertext: Perspectives on ergodic literature. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

3. Bell, A. (2010). The possible worlds of hypertext fiction. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

4. Bopp, M. (2006). Didactic analysis of digital games and game-based learning. In: Affective and emotional aspects of human-computer interaction: Game-based and innovative learning approaches. Amsterdam: IOS Press, 132–147.

5. Fomenko, O. H. (2006). Linhvotypolohichne v idiostyli Dzheimsa Dzhoysa [Linguotypological features in James Joyce's idiolect] (Doctoral dissertation, Zaporizhzhia). 10.02.04 – Hermanski movy. [in Ukrainian]

6. Her Interactive. (2008). Nancy Drew: The Phantom of Venice [Video game]. Available on PC, Mac.

7. Huizinga, J. (2005). Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

8. Johnson, S. (2012). Playing the odds. In Games, learning, and society: Learning and meaning in the digital age. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 44–49.

9. Keene, C. (1985). Nancy Drew: The Phantom of Venice. New York: Bentam.

10. McGonigal, J. (2011). Reality is broken: Why games make us better and how they can change the world. New York: Random House.

11. Morozova, I. B. (2012). Movlennieva povedinka personazhnoi osobystosti kriz pryzmu yii sotsialnoi prynalezhnosti (na materiali suchasnoho anhlomovnoho romanu) [Speech behavior of fictional characters through the prism of their social affiliation (based on modern English-language novel)]. Naukovi zapysky. Seriia "Filolohichna", (26), 224–229. [in Ukrainian]

12. Morozova, I. B., & Ershova, K. I. (2019). Lingvalni zasoby vyrazhennya emotyvnosti v zhinochomu romani [Linguistic means of expressing emotiveness in women's fiction]. Mova. Naukovo-teoretychnyi chasopys z movoznavstva, (31), 20–26. [in Ukrainian]

13. Morozova, I. B., & Pozharytska, O. O. (2021). Characters' pilgrimage from the canon to fanfiction: A gestalt approach. The IAFOR Journal of Literature and Librarianship, 10(1), 78–96. https://doi.org/10.22492/ijl.10.1

14. Morozova, I., Pozharytska, O., Artemenko, Y., Bykova, T., & Ponomarenko, O. (2021). Digital discourse in the English-language fiction. AD ALTA: Journal of Interdisciplinary Research, 11/02-XXII, 87–90. http://www.magnanimitas.cz/11-02-xxii

15. *Pozharytska, O. (2016). Computer literature as a new modus of the readers' existence. Science and Education a New Dimension. Philology, IV(23), Issue 100, 27–32.*

16. *Pozharytska, O. O. (2021). Zhanrova taksonomiia videohor [Genre taxonomy of video games]. Nova filolohiia: Zbirnyk naukovykh prats, 81(2), 66–76. https://doi.org/10.26661/2 414-1135-2021-81-2-9 [in Ukrainian]*

17. *Pozharytska, O., Morozova, I., Miliutina, K., Gusieva, H., & Lenska, O. (2023). The computer game as an alternative artistic discourse. Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 13(2), 311–317. https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1302.05*

18. *Puchalska-Wasyl, M. (2010). Dialogue, monologue and change of perspective – three forms of dialogicality. International Journal for Dialogical Science, 4, 67–79.*

19. *Schreier, J. (2017). Blood, sweat, and pixels: The triumphant, turbulent stories behind how video games are made. London: Harper Paperbacks.*