Origami Fiction: Psychological Horror in Interactive Narrative

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One of the most relevant elements in contemporary narrative systems is the atmosphere creation. Even when talking about new digital media, interactive narratives can still be supported by strategies used by former media like cinema and television; namely, character design as well as the setting bonded to architectural space design. These elements are offered to the players through graphic representations that are intended to convey not only an uncanny atmosphere but also an aesthetic experience for psychological horror narratives in videogames. With narrative proposals close to interactive movies, titles like Heavy Rain manage to create a gloomy mood by using basic elements of style such as form, composition, and light, and also open the opportunity to get emotionally involved with the characters through everyday life choices. Even though Heavy Rain is not considered as an action videogame, its narrative audiovisual system is fully able to create enough tension and suspense in order to offer a quite intense aesthetic experience. However, most of its narrative resources are taken from cinema and television audiovisual strategies to tell stories and to hook the audience. Therefore, the study of former narrative systems both as language and human thought and psyche, could allow designers to create more effective interactive narratives for contemporary audiences.

Key words: narrative, videogames, space, graphic representation

1. Introduction

Interactive media, such as videogames and interactive movies, has not only achieved an outstanding degree of technical growth but also, and most important, has had progress in storytelling proposals. Though stories remain essentially the same in their main core, as the ones offered by previous media like television, interactive media offer the audience the possibility to develop a plot in several different ways, thus creating multiple narrative universes.

Minding the need to preserve the atmosphere for the story in psychological horror narratives, videogames like Heavy Rain (Quantic Dream 2010) manage to convey the mood in the videogame by relying on visual graphics, music, and audio. These elements seem to run recurrently across the numerous story lines of the game's narrative universe, no matter what ending is intended. One of the most important elements in the Origami Killer's uncanny story to get the player immersed in the narrative experience is character design; particularly the possibility to choose among several characters with different physical, emotional, and intellectual features. Each character selection builds a story told from a different point of view and opens diverse sets of obstacles and puzzles for the player to solve in order to catch the serial killer.

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Since most of the characters' actions are more based on choices rather than on the controllers' kinetic abilities to push buttons, the player's emotional engagement with the story becomes a top priority for game design. Consequently, questions about the role of visual elements in character and setting design, as well as the impact of the player's freedom of choice in the aesthetic experience, arise as central issues to be studied from the visual narrative perspective.

2. Creating the Universe: Designing Space and Objects

Any story needs a setting in which the actions it describes can take place. "Where?" becomes one central question for the storyteller to answer in order to create an atmosphere and to achieve the player to be immersed in the narrative of any game. Even though screens might show how places look like, that doesn't mean that the visual images are enough for the player to suspend his or her sense of disbelief; therefore this kind of images must be able not only to imitate known places but also to arise the emotional aspects of the players' memories and former spatial experiences.

> Over the centuries, the creation of narrative space has primarily been the purview of those in power; buildings whose purpose is to convey a story are expensive to build and require a high degree of skill and artistry. […] Narrative space is not new, nor is an aberration of 20th century capitalism and commercialism. In fact, architecture has functioned as a narrative medium for millennia. (Pearce, Walz, and Böttger 2007, 200)

Space as a narrative construction follows a certain model for its description, thus eliminating anything that could cause its inner structure to be disturbed. It can be said that the chosen words to describe a place are a consequence of a cultural process that includes the visual image selection (Pimentel 2005, 25); in other words, the content of a space description is ideologically ranked and one of its crucibles is the graphic style shown on screen. When creating the graphics to describe a setting, there are two circumstances inherent in every visual image that should be taken into account: First, visual images as well as textual descriptions are incomplete images of the world they are trying to evoke; therefore players must fill in the blanks in order to get a coherent image of what the world has shown by a videogame might look like. The choice on which kind of image is more suitable for making the shown graphic complete, will be made according to the visual paradigm that the player finds to be meaningful or even "correct" for the structure of what is being narrated.

Second, images are not designed to be "innocent." Images are set in certain order following a particular structure so that some specific meaning and intention might be conveyed. And as it happened with the literary description model and even which the verbal language structure (Cassirer 2003, 17), the graphic style prevents visual noise from altering the general purpose of the visual description which is to allow the graphic manifestations of a visual regime to prevail and to keep endorsing the commonly accepted characteristics granted to places in which actions occur, even when these features might not be empirically proven. "All the reader needs to gain access to the fictional world is a basic knowledge of language, life experience, and a reasonable cultural competence. If there are rules to learn in order to navigate the textual world, these rules can be learned on the fly" (Ryan 2001, 195).

When watching the graphic description for the two main home settings in Heavy Rain and when playing with Ethan Mars as main character, the mood of the story as well as the atmosphere is supported by the architectural attributes of the houses. Architectural design is more about how space is built to be lived and to be felt, rather than a balanced distribution of walls and windows; the architectural space involves the creation of environments by using textures, light, and color. As it can be seen in the first setting of the story, the two-story

house is intended to show an architect's home which is not only roomy but also quite rich in textures and different material finishes. During the first sequence of the story, the presence of transparent window panels allows to have a bright light illumination without it being too intense; and the fact that these panels slide to open gives a swift sense of habitability. The main room is not only a place that shows fabrics, woods, and glass, but also objects of deep symbolic meaning in Western cultures such as a wedding photograph and a handwritten note from Ethan's wife. No more than about two minutes of game play have been going on so far and the player not only knows about the nice and quiet life this character has, but also about the fragility of this domestic equilibrium (Pimentel 2001, 25). As a matter of fact, the balance of the graphic image is so perfect that it's almost foreshadowing its tragic destiny to be broken into pieces of grey shows and dark rain as the story will show later.

In contrast, the second home setting shows a deteriorated house considerably smaller and older than the first one. This place doesn't show a unique balanced design like the first one; it is rather represented as a grey copy of the house next door, poured by the rain and marked by the intended lack of bright light and colors, except for the TV screen light that Shaun turns on in order to avoid conversations with his father. Since the main intention of this graphic environment is to empathize Ethan's grieving the loss of his other son, objects like a back door that opens and closes noisily to a common garden and an almost empty living room will not be casual.

Let's notice the contrasted pairs made by the use of color and the distribution of space: wide/narrow, light/dark, open/closed, new/old, and full/empty. One of the most explicit examples of this spatial contrast is the way Ethan's work table is represented. While in the first home, it is a big well-illuminated surface in which the player can sit the character to actually work, in the second house, Ethan finds hard to do almost anything at all. As we can see, even when both scenes present space as a whole entity, as players we can only "live" it through developing a semantic relationship to some of its specific points; hence the importance of offering the player the chance to choose to use or not some of the objects shown on screen, for instance, using the teeth brush or what meal will be served to Shaun, and even if the rooms will be explored or not. Eventually, as it can be seen especially in the first house scene, the choices made by the character turn out to be of great significance even when they look like common everyday choices in the beginning. "A sense of place is not the same thing as a mental model of space: through the former, readers inhale an atmosphere; through the latter, they orient themselves on the map of the fictional world, and they picture in imagination the changing landscape along the routes followed by the characters" (Ryan 2001, 123).

It can be said that the mental space model generated in Western urban cultures works as the main guide for interpreting the graphics in these scenes as an integrated whole made out of contrast and that appeals to the obsessive fear of loss, drawing the characters in an indifferent endless gray atmosphere. In everyday urban life, we are afraid of losing light, variety, color, and space, in other words, the Freudian anxiety of losing difference. From now on in the game, the algorithm is quite clear for the player: Choosing pizza is different from vegetables and beer from juice.

3. How Should a Victim Look Like?

Even though everyday life has taught us that almost any person who lives in a big city can be a crime victim, media has made a great job in giving the abstract characterization of the concept "victim" a visual image. During the last 20 years, media has played an important role in giving this symbolic form a graphic support and means of expression. Not only horror movies in North America have contributed to the image of

"the victim" and "the bad guy," but also TV series like Law & Order (Dick Wolf 1990-til now), CSI (Zuiker 2000-til now), and Criminal Minds (Davis 2005-til now), have shown the world the face of victims and offenders in fiction. Therefore, if we are going to talk about psychological horror in contemporary media, we might as well take for granted the necessary presence of the most fearing urban criminal: a serial killer, and of course the ideal victims who can be either women or young children.

Previous games like the Manhunt saga (Rockstar North 2003, 7) and Condemned: Criminal Origins (Monolith Productions 2006), showed the player audience images and actions performed by serial killers, characters which were quite standard: The Match Maker, for instance, who killed women and displayed their bodies beside male mannequins, and the Killer X, Leland Vanhorn, is a serial killers that goes after the serial killers that detective Ethan Thomas is trying to catch. "Image: in the love issues, the deepest wounds come frequently from what's seen more than from what's known" (Barthes 1990, 132). Far beyond what profiling sciences may say, the white, late twenties-early thirties, middle class, and urban male has become the common place to represent the serial killer. Their originality thrives in how sophisticated are their means of torture and the process of victim selection. Therefore, the way victims are described and graphically represented becomes one of the top priorities of character design for videogames. "Why do you want to make up horrible things when there is so much real horror in the world? The answer seems to be that we make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones. With the endless inventiveness of humankind, we grasp the very elements which are so divisive and destructive and try to turn them into tools—to dismantle themselves" (King 2010, 16).

In Heavy Rain, the torture designed by the Origami Killer is not a physical one since the body of the victims is hardly damaged. His victims are drowned by rain and the torture consists mainly in making the fathers of the victims play the killer's game in order to save the child. An elaborated torture for a victim that is not a woman; in serial killers narratives, women are killed and disposed of in very violent ways that usually involve the bodies being mutilated or even dismembered. However, Western audiovisual narratives are usually conservative when it comes to children; even though media has paid a lot of attention to subjects such as child abuse or child pornography in the past decade, images of children actually being beaten or killed are shown in very few and peculiar cases. Public and official media discourses talk about violence against children without visual support; in contrast, violence against women is not only broadcasted as text but also displayed in full color.

Having children as the ultimate 21st century victims, the Origami Killer modus operand sets in motion images that appeal to the player's visual memory: The victim is a white ten year old whose father used to be close to the family and even worked at home, two characters common in contemporary narratives and in the last decade of the 20th century. As a graphic image, Shaun is not very different from other boy characters seen on screen such as Carl Grimes of The Walking Dead, for instance. Children in Heavy Rain's narrative universe are murder victims perfect to create empathy, and the Mars boys are designed to covey this kind of empathetic emotion: Both boys are typical kids who like to play, to compete against each other, and whose life is so nice and easy that the death of their pet bird is considered a tragedy. The death of Merlin is used as a very subtle hint about how a balanced and equilibrated world can become the setting for an innocent to die.

Since most of the choices made prior to Jason's death and Shaun's disappearance are meant to create a bond based mainly on caring, the graphics to represent the fragility of the victim will include small size, the use of neutral non-bright colors in their clothes and average facial features. Other than the incident in the mall and the numerous fan comments on whether or not Shaun killed the bird, Ethan's kids behave as very nice little boys.

One of the main challenges for designers when it comes to immersion through affective empathy is to be able to understand that character design implies the crucible of social and cultural expectations represented by graphic styles. It is not all about the quality of the graphic but more about its semantic faculties to express through color, figure, and texture the ideological content embodied by a character.

4. Fiction as a Game

Among the qualities that multiform stories have to offer, we can mention the story development from the individual perspective of different characters. Perspective is not only about the scene as a product of a character's mind and words but also as a world that is being envisioned. Hence, it comes as no surprise that every single pair of eyes that allows the player to see the game world will offer different versions of what that world could be. Even though multiple viewpoints are a useful literary resource when different kinds of information are needed, the graphic representation of the visualized places allows the narrative universe to increase its complexity in order to allow several possibilities to become perceptually present for the player.

As it was explained earlier, even when the game allows different perspectives to be told, they are articulated by a single model that endorses the coherence of the whole narrative universe to prevail. "The most gifted writers are those who manipulate the memory sets of the reader in such a rich fashion that they create within the mind of the reader an entire world that resonates with the reader's own real emotions" (Wolfe Ryan 2001, 89).

Since sales are usually the main intention pursued by the videogame industry, the themes, plots, and conflicts shown are basically the same as shown by other media, thus avoiding cognitive dissonance between what the game offers and what an audience is expecting from a narrative product.

As long as what's shown on screen keeps a short distance with the images of the players' visual imagery, the narrative can rely on the conventional sources of anxiety as well. Even when anxiety lacks a specific object, it can be visualized through socially agreed images that can operate as signifiers for this feeling; in consequence, the presence of different characters allows several sets of options for anxiety to show. As a character is chosen by a player, he or she becomes a specific door to access diverse chains of signifiers and expectations, hence contrasting ways to make sense out of the situations, the achievements and failures even when they supposedly share the same goal. "[…] the question is not whether the reader of hypertext can develop the kind of affective relations that lead to feelings of happiness or sadness when things turn out for the better or for the worse for certain character, but whether interactive mechanisms can be used to enhance this emotional participation" (Ryan 2001, 263).

For instance, the affective engagement experienced when playing with Ethan may be different if playing with Norman Jayden: The player might be offered two narrative paths to rescue Shaun, but he or she is not expecting the same motivation to be emanated from a psychic sense of loss than from the psychic need to make wrong things right by enforcing the law. Saving Shaun now shows two different faces of anxiety, therefore the same goal becomes two very different things. That's what a multiple perspective narrative is all about: the creation of different worlds of meaning through the possibility of looking at a same phenomenon with different set of eyes.

So far, the player is quite aware that most objects and places are intended to mean something other than what they are, the same as the characters. For this reason, we can feel the anxiety mood increasing since the player won't be certain if he or she is making the right choices for the story to develop as expected: Uncertainty is one of the main ways to convey an atmosphere of uneasiness and even good suspense. What hides behind

every simple object is nothing but a graphic analogy of every day doubt and query that can end up in either "A new start" or "Helpless" ending.

5. Conclusion

Narrative through interactive media responds to generational requires that readers and writers have to tell once again and by their own means stories that already exist in each culture. Even when a digital support such as a videogame might seem a sensorial surprise, this industry focuses a lot on the way the graphic images and sound are designed to be meaningful; in order to add something to what previous media offered, videogames demand other kind of immersive engagement based more on the player's choices than in solving the latent message of the literary text, even when in certain levels of the psyche they might be equally challenging.

The effectiveness of expressive elements such as visual graphics and sound thrives on their connection to the cultural systems of representation and on the narrative rules that are present in the social systems of beliefs. These narrative schemes allow the players to be certain about the environment and the actions that they might perform before certain situations; games imply a controlled suspension of the laws that regulate everyday life by offering a highly aestheticized version of human drama, suspense, and horror. This is why players can apprehend the narrative conflicts offered by the story that the videogame is narrating while getting a great deal of pleasure even when their choices take them to unfortunate endings.

Videogame design is about designing narrative involvement for players to engage through the expressive components this medium has to offer. The images shown on screen must be able to convey an aesthetic experience by pushing the player's emotional and phobic buttons, in other words, designers must create visual graphics to increase the sense of uncertainty and anxiety the players will feel while immersed in the game play. The graphic environment of a videogame must unify in the same fictional immersion, the rupture of everyday life which is inherent to any ludic activity, with the psychic need for self-preservation; all phenomena (rupture and self-preservation) convey in a single yet intense aesthetic dimension of the game.

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