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Finding Meaning through Video Games

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<div align="center">Finding Meaning through Video Games</div>

When delving into the realm of video game studies, theory, and criticism, it is inevitable that you will find compared the two major schools of thought that explore video games: narratology and ludology. Narratology is seen as a classical approach to the study of video games and uses tools like character, setting, and plot—the same methods used when studying literature and film—to derive significant meaning from the games. Ludologists criticize narratology for its limited ability to capture what makes games unique as well as captivating to players: the very act of play itself. While narratology looks at a game as a series of events, ludology looks at them as a simulation or a system that can be manipulated[1]. Both are valuable approaches to finding meaning within video games because they each represent one of the two criteria that Horace uses to define good art: imitation of past masters' successes in imitating nature and appeasing your audience[2].

The reason narratology has been used for much of the initial studies of video games is that it allows critics to compare video games to past texts we better understand. Narratological criticism has a rich past from which we can draw in order to find creative ways to analyze a

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[1] "To simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviors of the original system." The key term here is "behavior." Simulation does not simply retain the—generally audiovisual—characteristics of the object but it also includes a model of its behavior… Traditional media are representational, not simulational. (Frasca 223)

[2] Horace, Ars Poetica

video game. It is the tried and true, the type of criticism most people are the most comfortable with. The tools used in narratology are finely tuned and have been developed over centuries of analyzing and evaluating literature, the works of past masters. Narratology explains in part why video games appease their audience, but it is incapable of capturing all the levels of emotion that come from playing a game. And considering there are many video games that are completely devoid of any attempt to tell a story at all, ludology looks to understand video games first and foremost as games. Ludologists want to understand how the player's interaction with a virtual environment is significant and meaningful. They want to discover how this unique expression of audience agency within a text differentiates video games from literature and film. In doing so, the Ludologists want to move video games out of the shadow of narratology and define them through their own unique criteria.

As ludology searches for its own identity, it is important to recognize that while ludology has the potential to give new insights and analytical tools that could help better understand game play, game play is only a single part of many video games. Narrative is as much a part of many video games and should not be overlooked when it is applicable. And though it is true that both schools of thought could be used to find meaning separately within the same video game, it is much more interesting if the critic finds where narratology and ludology overlap in that game. How do the actions a player performs affect his/her perception of the character being played? What does the way a character moves through the world tell us about the setting? If we were to create a Venn diagram with narratology and ludology as the circles, these pieces that complement each other in the intersection of the diagram would be the most noteworthy meanings derived from the video game.

Though ludology and narratology are the two most popular ways to look at video games, they are not the only two. Narratology is a popular way to evaluate video games because it is a popular way to evaluate film, from which video games borrow many of their story telling techniques. But video games borrow more from film than just the way they present their narrative. Since it is a visual medium like film, video games use camera framing and movement, dialogue, sound (both music score and sound effects), acting (which includes voice acting), and color and set design as well. The two mediums are dependent on technology to some extant to capture images that help in the process of creating meaning. The visual and audio aspects of both film and video games are separate from the narrative found in literature but still contribute to the experience of the audience, making them an important part when discussing the richness of the texts.

Ludology

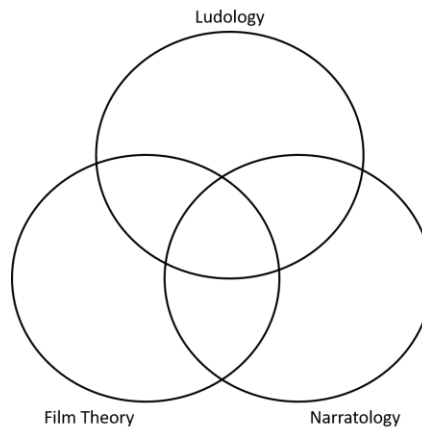Film Theory   Narratology

Fig. 1

So instead of a Venn diagram with two circles, there will be three (see Fig. 1). One representing ludology (the gameplay elements), another representing narratology (the literary elements), and the last representing film theory (the audio-visual elements). Each of the three sections will be emphasized more or less in any given game; some games will focus more on play, some on the visual and audio experience, and others on the story telling. It is also possible that there will be no clear overlap between the different categories. Choosing to focus just on

gameplay, there may not be a story, or on the other end of the spectrum, the way the story is presented limits the freedom the player has in playing and making decisions. If one element is over-emphasized in a game, it may not ruin the experience with the game, but it may weaken the impact it could have on the audience if the three elements were balanced and complimented each other. The way video games combine elements from novels and films and then adds the element of interactivity makes them a unique and complicated medium that is difficult to completely understand. Video games create meaning by using and combining the visual and audio elements of Film Theory, the storytelling elements of Narratology, and the interactive elements of Ludology.

For clarity's sake, I am going to take a moment to define how I will be using meaning in this paper. I'll start with going back to Horace and what he considered the goal for art: to make the audience feel genuine emotion. Meaning can be the experience of a cathartic release of emotions, and even if those feelings can't be expressed in language, it impacts the audience at a fundamental part of their being. I will call the inability to define emotions felt while reading, watching, or playing the sublime. Another form of meaning is information derived about a character's motivations and character attributes. If an element of art implicitly gives the audience a better understanding of why a character is acting in a certain way, that element is creating meaning. Lastly, meaning can be an insight into social functions, to help better understand the human experience and the world we live in. It can ask the audience to look at what we take for granted as normal within our society and ponder their implications, ponder the positive or negative consequences of changing the social norms. Film Theory, Narratology, and Ludology are all capable of creating each of these types of meaning.

By breaking the Venn diagram shown in Fig. 1 into its seven sections, I will explain how each school of thought is represented in video games and then how they combine with each other to make a greater impact on the player. Beginning with narratology, I will discuss how similarities in length of novels and video games allow for them to have more complicated narratives, and I will explain how perspective changes create empathy for characters in both mediums. I will then move on to how video games borrow from film's visual techniques in cutscenes and audio techniques in music. Once I have laid the groundwork for Narratology and Film Theory, I will briefly talk about a few elements that overlap between the two schools of the thought. From there I will explicate Ludology and how simulation allows players to perform actions and interact with a virtual world. With Ludology explained, I will show how the visual and audio elements of film and the story telling elements from novels can mix with the interactivity of video games. Finally, I will end with several video games that exemplify how all three schools of thought can work together to create richer meaning. Now to start at the beginning: Narratology.

Narratology

Narratology, like its name suggests, focuses on narrative—how it is created and how it is understood. This type of analysis began with literature. It moved from poetry to the novel and is the basis for the development of the tools we use when studying anything that has a story. The development of narratology started with literature, which in turn affected the way movies were created and critiqued[3]. It has taken a long time for film to move partially out of the shadow of literature, and it will probably never completely be free from comparison because of the way

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[3] Just as early film theory drew on psychology and literary theory, resulting in analyses centered on character and narrative, video game analyses are in danger of becoming dominated by film theory and other theories currently in use (and in vogue) in media studies. (Wolf 78)

films use narrative. Video games are also influenced by the narrative trends started by novels. This section will focus only on the way video games compare to written literature. The parts of narratology that are also shared with film will be saved for a later section.

A unique trait video games share with written literature is the length they can be. Movies require the development of the story to happen within a short time period (90-180 minutes), but books have the freedom to last much longer. Though it depends on the speed of the reader, books can take up to ten, twenty, and more hours to read. Books can require this amount of time from their audience because of the ability to close the book, put it down, and come back to it later (movies historically being viewed in a theatre makes this difficult[4]). Video games similarly can be put down to later be picked up again at the same location in the narrative thanks to save points. They don't have to be consumed in a single sitting. Video games are therefore able to match the length of novels. It allows them to have more plot points, more supporting characters, and deeper character development.

Character development is an important part of narrative. Interesting characters keep the audience engaged. We empathize with characters, experiencing what they think and feel. One of the ways in which novels create empathy is giving us direct access to the thoughts of a character. Video games create empathy in a similar fashion. They put the player inside the head of the character not by showing the character's thoughts, but by giving the player control over the character. The character is the player, and the player is the character. The accomplishments of the character are also the accomplishments of the player, which creates a bond between player

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[4] The invention of on-demand video streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime has seen the rise of seasons of television shows being shot like one extended movie and then broken into chapters.

and character that creates empathy for the character[5]. The player is literally (virtually) walking in the character's shoes. And just as novels can give multiple perspectives at once, so can video games. Switching the character the player is controlling allows them to create empathy for a different character and also the motivation to then help that character. In *Call of Duty: WWII* (2017), the player's perspective is switched to a French resistance soldier named Rousseau who infiltrates a German garrison to retrieve and plant explosives so the main character's platoon can enter and take over the Nazi stronghold. You play for an hour as Rousseau through a tense section behind enemy lines, and just as you complete Rousseau's assignment and a fire fight breaks out, the perspective switches back to the main character on the outside of the garrison. The player is now extra motivated to break through enemy lines and save the character he/she had just created this bond with. Rather than just showing what the character does, video games allow the player to be actively involved in the character's actions, creating empathy. Though video games share the medium's length and the ability to place the audience in the character's mind only with novels, they also borrow many important attributes from film.

Film Theory

Since they are both visual mediums, video games and film were bound to be compared. As technology has improved, video games have increasingly become more like movies. They have begun to borrow techniques from film in order to create a more immersive experience. One way in which video games borrow from movies is through cutscenes. Cutscenes are short movies in between game play where the player has no control over the action taking place on screen. They are often used to give new information about characters, plot, and setting through dialogue

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[5] Participation increased the meaning of certain choices they made. In a story form a book, they suggested, you might become invested in a character and his or her choices, but not to the same degree if you are the character making the choices and dealing with the outcomes (even if those consequences are virtual). (Ostenson 77)

and showing the character perform actions that they otherwise cannot during gameplay. These cutscenes, when done well, follow all the rules of film. They frame shots using the rule of thirds; switch between close-ups, medium shots, and long shots for dramatic effect; use perspective shots to help us know what a character is looking at; and give establishing shots to introduce the setting. Video games borrow these techniques because they have been established within the psyche of anyone who has watched a movie that these choices in camera work mean something; they are trying to tell us something about the people and places we are seeing on screen. Close-ups allow the player to view facial expressions, helping him/her to empathize with the character. Just as the camera directs the viewer to what is important in a shot, the cutscene stops the action and tells the player to pay attention to what is being said or what is going on. Video games often try to emulate film to the point where they will add affects like motion blur and a shaky frame as it pans through a scene—even though there is no physical camera that is actually shaking. It is all a part of making the game feel like a cinematic experience, to give the viewer a sense of awe and amazement.

Films attempt to amaze and give awe through their visual elements with beautifully framed scenes, colorfully saturated shots, and otherworldly, spectacular special-effect creations. These elements of film contribute to the sublime felt when watching a movie. *2001: A Space Odyssey*'s "stargate" scene (see Fig. 2) of flaring, streaming, and twisting lights and colors intersected with flashes of the contorted face of Dr. Dave Bowman create a disorienting discomfort of incomprehension that is beautiful and pleasurable to behold.
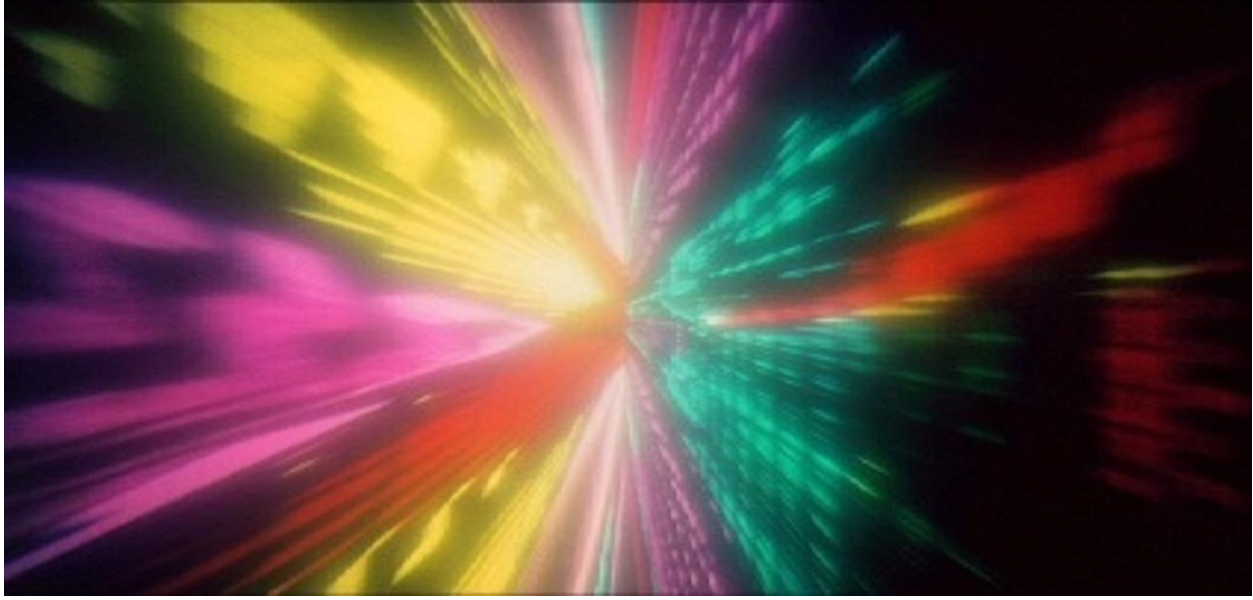
Fig. 2

Video games can also capture this visual sublimity. Open world games like *Horizon Zero Dawn* and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* create sweeping vistas that fill the screen with realistic landscapes that match the natural splendor of the real life panning shots of nature found in *Samsara*. Video game graphics continue to improve, blowing the players' minds in the way the special effects in movies like *Avatar* capture our imagination through incredibly believable computer-generated creations. And though at times we may not be able to understand or describe the emotions we are feeling while viewing these shots, the impact they have on us is meaningful. They affect us to the very core of our humanity, and we call them breathtaking.

To say it is only the visuals that impact our human psyche would do disservice to the power of music and sound design. Grand scores instill feelings of grandeur, fear, hope, love, and every other emotion humans are capable of feeling. Just as the score of a movie sets the tone for a scene, the music in a video game sets the mood for an area or section of a video game. The swelling horns of the overture in the *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* as the band of adventurers run to the bridge of Khazad Dum makes the audience's chest swell with the feeling

of heroism. In *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* the combat music triumphantly ends with a Gregorian-chant "ho humph" when the player clears an area of enemies. Sound effects create another level of immersion. Movies and video games set during World War II like *Saving Private Ryan* and *Call of Duty* would not be the same without the iconic ping at the end of the M1 Garand's clip. The sound effects help create a believable setting of both time and place, allowing the audience and player to drift more easily into a state of suspended disbelief. They help create the world the film and video games inhabit.

Film Theory-Narratology

This third section represents elements that both literature and film use in creating meaning, or the story-telling elements that film has adopted from literature. In turn, video games have adopted these elements as well. Elements such as plot structures, use of dialogue, developing characters, and symbolism. All of these elements overlap in similar ways across the three mediums. Dialogue is used to deliver expository information and develop characters. Characters chat back and forth and we get a sense of who they are and what their motivations are. Character motivations are the driving force for moving the plot forward.

Plot in books and movies are always linear. That isn't to suggest that the plot won't jump back and forth in time or hop around to different locations around the world. The stories of books and movies are linear in the sense that one event follows after another, and the "authors have only one shot in their gun—a fixed sequence of events," (Frasca 227). No matter how many times you read or watch it, the sequence of the events will always be the same for a given book or movie. Many video games have followed the structure of sequential storytelling, being broken into levels. Levels, when combined with a linear storytelling structure, are just a series of obstacles for the protagonist to overcome. The obstacles become increasingly more difficult, but

the only way to proceed and move the plot forward towards the conclusion of the main conflict is to conquer whatever challenges appear. There are only two outcomes for the character in the story: succeed or fail. This ultimatum creates the opportunity for great tension, especially in film and novels, but it does not respect the unique format of video games and the player's autonomy in a game.

Ludology

While narratology helps critics understand how stories work, ludology moves away from the notion that there must be narrative to create meaning. Video games create a new, virtual world, within which there is a set of rules that must be followed. Part of the rules in the new world are the actions the player is able to perform. The action itself is the most important aspect of a video game. Everything in a game revolves around what actions a player is able to make, what verbs a player can perform. The player's ability to act makes him/her a co-author in the events, so "as a videogame player you are not only a Barthesian reader-author through your ability (requirement?) to interpret meaning, but also through your ability to collaboratively author events," (Cassidy 296). The gaps left by game developers are much more literal than literary gaps. They set up what is possible in a given situation through the environment they build and the actions the player can perform, but it is up to the player to fill in the events. The developer gives creative powers to the player so that the player can use the in-game abilities to complete the scenarios the developer has created.

Video game developers set up a fictional simulation in which the player can manipulate variables to change the outcome of what happens in the world the developer has created. There are some elements in the video game that are set and constant. Narrative elements and visual/design elements are two things that are often constant. The more variable elements, and

the more those variable elements interact with each other, the more opportunities the player has to discover new meaning using a ludological lens. The player is encouraged to explore the limitations of the actions he/she is able to perform within the simulation and how they interact with the constant elements of the game. It is this ability to interact through variable actions that sets video games apart from films and novels.

One could argue that readers of books and viewers of movies also engage and interact with the mediums. This is correct, but only at an intellectual level. The audience can engage with the ideas of a narrative and explore what the film or novel means to them, but the way in which the player interacts with video games is different. The player acts upon the video game's system which then in turn reacts to the player, who has to again act based on the games reaction. Meaning can be created based off how the player is able to act on the world and how the world then reacts to the player's actions. Interactivity being the aspect that differentiates video games from other mediums doesn't stop at the player being able to control aspects of the experience. The text itself is reacting to the way the player engages with it in a way novels and films can't. This is because objects in a video game are more than just an abstraction, representation, or signifier of their real-world counterparts. They are more than just words that bring to mind a concept or an image that displays the physical attributes of the object. Using rules of the simulation that makes the game, the objects can express behavior. For example, it has long been established in the series *The Legend of Zelda* that if you strike the flightless, chicken-like birds called cuccos with your sword enough times, a flock of them will come and attack you until you die. Using this knowledge of the game world in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, the player can carry a cucco over to an enemy and goad the enemy into attacking the cucco, which will provoke a flock of cucco to come and attack the enemy. The player can use the knowledge

of the game world to cause the world to react in a way that benefits the player. The simulation

creates a new experience for the player through the choices he/she makes.

Some videos games limit the choices the player can make and the number of constant

elements in a game. Puzzle games like *Tetris* have very limited options of verbs the player can

perform: rotate the four-sectioned tiles and move a tile left, right, and down. There aren't any

elements that could constitute a story or visual elements that would be considered sublime. It is

plain and simply a game. It has a single system and goal that do not leave much room for

analysis, but it is still played and celebrated as a great game. Just as movies can insight the

sublime through their visuals—which is the element that made them distinct from literature—

there is a sublimity to act of playing games. There is a certain pureness to a game that provides

the feelings of pleasure, discovery, accomplishment, or frustration in the gameplay's most basic

form. Playing begins at the earliest ages and "is viewed as anthropologically primitive, linking

human nature to that of animals (Huizinga 1950). Similarly, video games are an extension of the

element in culture, which is old as the species and essentially continuous even if it is subject to

diverse cultural and historical articulations (Sutton-Smith 2001)," (Kirkpatrick 80). The sublime

in video games is like the sublime in film and the sublime in literature; it breaks down the

activity to its most basic state and connects the audience with a deeper part of their humanity, a

part that maybe can't be captured through language. That feeling is significant and meaningful,

even if it is too abstract for complete comprehension.

Film Theory-Ludology

An area where video games' cohesiveness in meaning begins to break down is in the

relationship between the actions the player is able to perform in game and what the character

does during cutscenes. These actions could be acts of violence or over-aggression in a cutscene

when the player is trying to do a pacifist run, or physical feats of acrobatics that can't be performed in the game. For example, in Bethesda Studios' Fallout 4, part of the game is to allot experience points to different types of skills. The skill Charisma allows for the player to manipulate Non-Playable Characters (NPC) through the conversations you have with them. This means you can play through most of the game ignoring the stats having to do with combat because you can talk your way out of most conflicts, until, that is, the end of the game. When the game was initially released, the ending of the main story arc in Fallout 4 requires the player to kill the antagonist of the game. There is no option to pacify him and solve the issue diplomatically (which was an option in earlier fallout games). So the way the player decides to play and create his/her character through the entire game goes out the window because it does not fit the final story element the developer decided to place at the end of the game. The player's experience is weakened "when the direction of the narrative does not correspond with a player's individual journey," (Wellenreiter 344). Discrepancies between character attributes and allowed player actions are even greater distractions when the developer gives no control over either.

In the first cutscene of Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater—a stealth game with the goal of not getting caught and where you play as the best espionage solider of all time—the main character is caught by a random band of normal soldiers. If the main character is as great as the audience is supposed to believe, why did he get caught so easily? There is a disconnect between what the game tells the player about the character, what the player is supposed to do/can do as the character, and what the game shows happening to the character. A game can have a greater impact on the player if the cutscenes and the player's choices cohesively support each other.
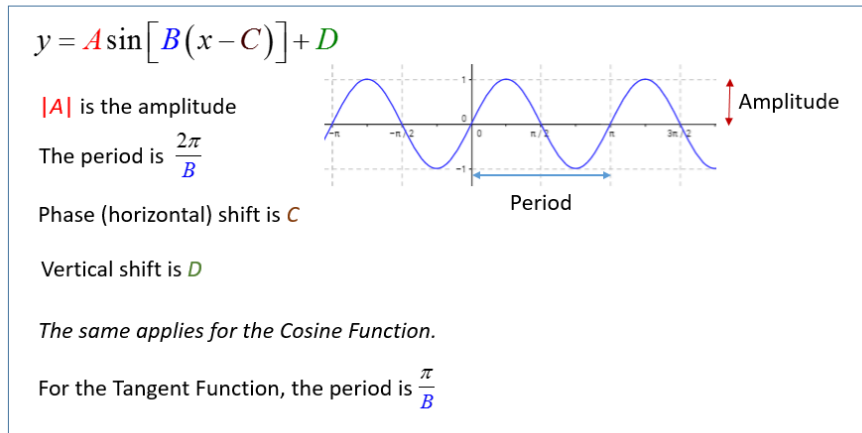
Another visual element that combines with gameplay to contribute to meaning in a game is the way the character is animated. The way a character moves through the environment helps

the player audience understand what the character is feeling that situation or what the character's attitude is towards its environment. In *Luigi's Mansion*, Luigi (the green-garbed older brother of the *Super Mario Bros.* pair) wins a haunted mansion from a contest he did not enter. Armed with a flashlight and a modified vacuum cleaner, Luigi is tasked with clearing the haunted mansion of the ghosts that inhabit it. Luigi's animation gives a lot of information about how Luigi feels about this job. His running animation is a frightful scurry, he jumps when startled by ghosts appearing, and he whistles nervously to the music as he walks through seemingly empty rooms. Compare Luigi's comic behavior to his brother Mario's platforming movements: quick, precise, confident. It is clear that the two brothers differ in more than just their taste in clothing colors.

Narratology-Ludology

As was mentioned in the Narratology section of this paper, video games can have sequenced events that act as individual story statements. But because of the agency of the player, the time and space between the narrative statements are not set as they are in movies and books. There are three ways in which the narrative statements can be expressed to respect the player's agency. The first still follows the precedent set by film and novels where the order of the events don't change, but the player has full control of where and what the character does in between each statement. If we think about the story events as two points on a graph, the two points are connected by a line in movies and novels; we are brought from one scene to another directed by the writer. In video games, the two points can be connected by any function, and most likely that function is closer to a trigonometric function than a linear one.

Transformation of Trigonometric Graphs

$$y = A\sin\big[B(x-C)\big]+D$$

|A| is the amplitude

The period is $\dfrac{2\pi}{B}$

Phase (horizontal) shift is *C*

Vertical shift is *D*

The same applies for the Cosine Function.

For the Tangent Function, the period is $\dfrac{\pi}{B}$

Amplitude

Period

Changing the values surrounding a trigonometric function will change the amplitude, the frequency, and the period as well as shift the graph so that there are more wave lengths within the two points and the height from the base of the wave is greater. This also means that you take fractions of these two values making the wave flatten out and become closer to a line but never quite becoming completely straight. This illustrates how players' experiences can be similar in between story points, but the paths they choose to traverse the game world are not likely to be exactly the same. For example, the levels in a platforming game like *Super Mario Bro. 3* has a beginning and an end, but where the player chooses to jump and what power-ups he/she decides to use will change the path taken to arrive at the end of that level. The route will be different every time.

The second way developers can respect player's agency and still have narrative statements is by changing the events from a story line to a story web. A story web would have a group of events that the player can experience, but the order in which they are experienced won't matter. It would be like a statistical plot graph with a cluster of points (see fig 3).
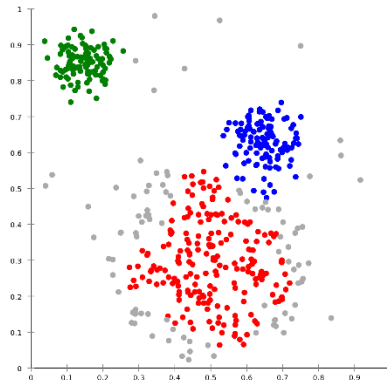
Fig. 3

The player could pick any point to go to at any time. Modernist and post-modernist concept of fragmentation and subjectivity would suggest that the player would still be able to create a meaningful narrative no matter the order in which the narrative statements were experienced. It is also possible that some of the narrative statements might not be accessible, or different options are available, based on the actions taken by the player. This is the third narrative structure to allow for player agency: the branching path. There are many games that allow the player to choose how their character interacts with NPCs. These games' cutscenes are presented as dialogue trees (see Fig. 4).
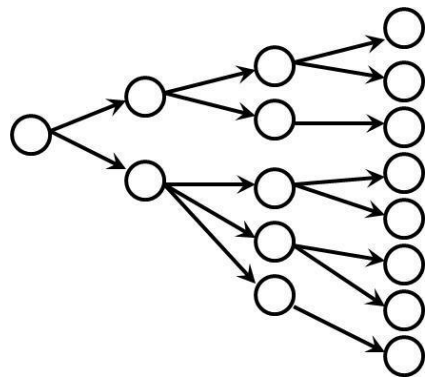

Fig. 4

After each statement from the NPC, the player can choose how he/she wants to respond by choosing an answer from a list of responses. The response the player chooses will affect the rest

of the conversation and often the way the rest of the story will play out. Dialogue trees are a

common way to have a player choose their progression through story with multiple story lines,

but it would be more interesting if games allowed the player's behavior in playing the game

decide aspects of the narrative such as the outcome of specific events or the demeanor of the

character during cutscenes. The narrative then becomes part of the simulation.

Even if the narrative is not dynamic and part of the game simulation, the story and the

actions performed in a game should complement each other. *Meteos*, a puzzle game for the

Nintendo DS, is an example of how the gameplay and narrative have the potential to work

together to create interesting meaning but ultimately fail to do so. In the game, meteors

(represented by different colored symbols) fall onto the player's planet represented by the bottom

screen of the DS. The player must save the planet by sliding the meteors up and down to match

three or more, which then turns them into rockets launching them back off the screen (see Fig.

5). Subsequently, the meteors are then launched to other planets that are also trying to clear their

sky of the meteors.

 Fig. 5

It is a pretty non-sensical premise, but the scenario brings up an interesting moral dilemma: save

your planet and doom another, or sacrifice your own planet so you are not responsible for the

destruction of another. The game doesn't ask you to ponder on this thought, though. Your goal is

still the same and the outcome is no different no matter if you even recognize the dilemma. There is no exploration of this idea because there are only two outcomes for the choices you make: win or lose. It loses the richness the story could have given the game because of its lack of choices.

Film Theory-Naratology-Ludology

Up to this point I have shown how elements of Film Theory, Narratology, and Ludology all overlap with each other in the medium of video games. Video games have taken the knowledge artists have gained in telling stories through words and images and combined them in different ways with the rules of play in simulations in order to make meaningful experiences for their audience. Not all games will use all the elements of each school of thought, but when all three work together and complement each other, they can engage the player with feelings that move beyond empathy because the feelings are derived from their own actions. One way visual, audio, lexical, and action elements all work together through their repetition within a video game.

The repetition of images, objects, or phrases in movies and novels catches the attention of the reader who then interprets the repeated elements by asking why it is important that the image, object, or phrase be pointed out several times. The interpretations create symbols, motifs, and themes which can then create meaning. Video games can also use the repetition of images and objects to create symbols and motifs, but video games are also repetitive in the actions the players are able perform. The movement animation can express attributes about characters, but the repetition of that motion becomes watered down because of its constant presence. It is ignored by the player because of over-saturation. The goal of many video games is killing, but killing becomes mundane and loses any meaning because the player becomes desensitized to the action through repeated exposure to it. The act of killing also has no meaning because there are

no consequences for the actions—besides progress through the game world. The player is pushed forward by the repetition, to continue play and to continue the narrative, and it does not ask the player to slow down and reflect on the repetition the way repeated motifs catch the attention of viewer and reader in film and literature. Video games can create motifs not by asking why are these elements repeated, but by asking what does it mean that the player is able to perform the action. Narrative and visual elements can help the player reflect on how the ability to perform an action creates meaning.

One game that illustrates how narrative and visual elements complement the player's ability to perform an action is called *Ico*. The story and goal of *Ico* is to help a girl named Yarda escape from a giant castle. One of the main game play mechanics is holding the hand of Yarda to literally pull her towards the exit. She opens doors with her magic for the player, and the player saves her from shadowy beasts trying to suck her down to another dimension. To continue to hold Yarda's hand, the player has to hold down the designated button, representing the virtual action physically with the controller. Ask any child who is required to always hold an adults hand while in public, holding a hand might quickly lose that meaning—feel restrictive even. The hand-holding action in *Ico* can sometimes feel like a burden or hinderance on progression, but by the end of the game, after all the doors opened and times the player saves Yarda, the two characters are separated. In a film or novel, hand holding might represent love (budding and/or long-lasting) or trust, and the ability to perform the action of hand holding in a game might represent the same emotions. Yet, because of the nature of the game, the action of holding hands goes beyond representation. Her absence is both visual as well as physically felt, as the vibration in the controller from the tug of her arm is no longer felt when running along. The player has developed trust in and cares for Yarda, not only for the co-dependent nature of the character's

relationship, but because the game required the player to act as one with Yarda. The visual of

Yarda and Ico with their hands clenched together, the simple narrative of depending on each

other for freedom, and the ability to perform the action creates much deeper emotions for player

than if any of these elements were by themselves.

In the introduction to *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, Solid Snake must escape

from a hospital that is being besieged by men trying to kill him. After ten years in a coma, the

muscles in his legs have atrophied and he cannot walk. Snake moves by sliding himself along the

ground using his arms. He doesn't have much control of his body, and the player doesn't have

much control over Snake. The only thing the player can do is press forward on the control stick

and watch as the character slides himself forward, trying to prop himself up on chairs and other

objects within his reach. The lack of control the player has matches the lack of mobility Snake

has after ten years in bed. The restriction is frustrating as a player just as it can be assumed that

the disability would be frustrating for the character in that situation. The introduction to *Metal

Gear Solid V* shows how visual elements (the character's slow, painful crawling animation), the

gameplay elements (players lack of control), and the narrative elements (giving the context of

recently waking up from a coma to understand why mobility is limited) all work together to

make a more meaningful experience for the player.

Conclusion

The study and criticism of video games is no different than those of any other medium. It

is the reader that derives meaning by looking through the lens of his/her unique experiences to

interpret the text. Video games provide new interpretive resources and tools with which the

audience can derive meaning, but these new possibilities also complicate the act of interpreting

the text. It is up to the critics to recognize when they should use established interpretation

techniques from Film Theory and Narratology, when they should use Ludology, and when they should use a combination of all three. Once a critic finds personal meaning within a text, it can be shared. Meaning has its greatest impact when shared by a group. Literary criticism's goal is to convince its readers to share the same thoughts and beliefs about a text's meaning, effectively growing the group that thinks about the text in that particular way. The reader of the criticism is convinced by the critic's interpretation of events, characters, symbols, and motifs as evidence of their viewpoint. Every reader of the text shares the knowledge from which these elements can be derived, and the criticism that wins them over the creates a group that has interpreted the text in a certain way, even if each reader's initial interpretations of the events left different impressions. The point of criticism is join people together into that group under the same belief about a text and eventually creating what Stanley Fish calls an interpretive community. It is within these communities that meaning is created. There is no meaning until the ideas a critic finds in a text are shared with someone else. There is no meaning until the experiences in a game are told to someone who also understands the game. Meaning is made significant when two people with similar experiences interact by sharing those experiences. The large communities popping up surrounding the shared experiences of video games reiterates the greatest truth portrayed by criticism: finding and sharing meaning stems from the human need to belong.

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