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Ewa Drab

**Techno-
logized
Culture or Cultured
Technology?
*Video Games
as a New Form
of Storytelling***

The growth of technology and the appearance of new media influence the culture and introduce new standards, which give new shapes to established cultural phenomena, such as storytelling. The first attempt at defining and explaining what constitutes the act of storytelling can be illustrated by the following dictionary definition: “the activity of telling or writing stories” (Collins Dictionary, 2014). Present in human cultures for ages as an oral process before the invention of writing, storytelling of the past differs vastly from storytelling of the present day since it has been influenced deeply by various changes, including the enormous progress in technology, manifested, among others, through video gaming.

Storytelling as “an ancient art form and a valuable form of human expression” or more precisely, in more up-to-date nomenclature “the interactive art of using words and actions to reveal the elements and images of a story while encouraging the listener’s imagination” (National Storytelling Network, 2014) always involves a narration. This is the most important aspect of storytelling, although other characteristics can be distinguished as well: it has an interactive character in terms of a bond between the author of the story and the audience, it is determined by language as the narrative is expressed wholly or partially by words, it is equally conditioned by action, which establishes the course of events present in the story, and it is based on the reaction of the audience, in reference to their imagination (National Storytelling Network, 2014).

As storytelling is focused on narratives, it is essential to look briefly at the beginnings of the study on narratives before embarking on any further analysis of the relation between technology applied in video games and the development of storytelling. As Teun Dubbelman points out in his article *Narrative in Transition. How New Media Change Our Experience of Stories* (2014), the narratives started to be analyzed independently in the 1960s and it was Tzvetan Todorov who named the study narratology (1969:10). However, Paul Copley (2005) highlights the fact that the term cannot refer to the entirety of the analysis, but should be treated as “. . . a systematic, thorough, and disinterested approach to the mechanics of narrative, an approach in stark contrast to those approaches that observe or seek out “value” in some narratives (and not others) . . .” He also emphasizes that it is “a specific way of understanding narrative that was developed out of structuralism and Russian formalism” having its early beginnings in the works of Vladimir Propp, later complemented by Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes. Within the framework of narratology the basic notions for the analysis of narratives have been coined, starting with the narrative itself. As Manfred Jahn (2005) states “all narratives present a story. A story is a sequence of events which involves characters. Hence, a narrative is a form of communication which presents a sequence of events caused and experienced by characters.” It definitely should be treated as a perfect point of departure for any discussion on modern forms of storytelling, such as video games, as it points out how in the core of new technologies-driven cultural products the old meets the new, the latter merely transforming the former and building new experiences within the structure of the narrative around it. What is more, video games follow the structure common for other forms of storytelling, namely they include story setting, story characters and story events (Dubbelman, 2014). Only the interaction between these elements change and fluctuate.

Apart from the structural and formal approach towards narratives, it is of high importance to analyze the notion of narrative as in reference to the audience. Dubbelman states firmly that it is possible to understand narratives

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as “something that communicates real or fictitious events from the past”(3). However, the progress and developments in the field excludes the existence of only one and narrow definition. In truth, the active participation of the audience in the story manifested through art or popular culture has introduced the simultaneous experience of the story. In this particular context Dubbelman refers to the logics of presentation and re-presentation (4–5), where the former describes “the idea of narrative immersion” and a feeling of witnessing the story unfolding in the moment of entering the interaction with it, the latter is determined by a sense of being re-told the events already belonging to the past. Furthermore, Dubbelman applies those rules to video games and claims that some of them are of presentational character manifested by the acknowledgment of the player or of representational character visible through the fact the presence of the player is ignored. Still this particular division may be questioned since the interference of the player in the course of action by the way of performing the tasks appointed to them, differing even in a slightest way, suggests the presence of the audience sharing certain parts of storytelling with the creators. Therefore, only the fact that the player is given an option, a choice or an alternative should be treated as an invitation to the process of storytelling.

Having analyzed briefly the theoretical background of narratives, it is crucial to look at the already mentioned connection of technologies and the evolution of storytelling in video games. It is believed that the first video game produced ever was *Spacewars* developed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1961. But the first game in the short history of electronic entertainment was deprived of any complex storyline, which remained a standard in the production of video games for many years to come. The prototype of the first game console was Brown Box manufactured in 1967 and created by a German developer, Ralph Baer, who was also the author of a four year younger gaming system called Magnavox Odyssey (Kudler 2009). The boom for the first home consoles and hit games started in the 1970s. when the ping-pong simulation *Pong* and the ATARI console were developed. The following years saw one of the most famous games in the history born, namely *Pac-man*, a simple concept of swallowing pellets or so-called pac-dots and scoring points in order to complete the level (Online Education 2013). In *Pac-Man* it was still the idea for gameplay of importance, not the story or characters. But even if the creators of various video games had in mind complicated narratives, they did not have any means to present them in the virtual context. Therefore, most of the games created before the year 1990 had simple rules whereas the story worked as a pretext for the gameplay. The only exception were adventure games, which consisted of static images with movable objects and a playable character and focused on solving riddles and enigmas in order to unveil the mystery behind the game. Hence, they always included plenty of dialogues building a complicated narrative, for example in *The Longest Journey* (1999) or *Siberia* (2002).

The example of adventure games leads to another important factor in the analysis of video games' narratives, namely the connection of storytelling and genres. Philip Hanna (2014) describes a game genre as a way of defining games “in terms of having a common style or set of characteristics, e.g. as defined in terms of perspective, gameplay, interaction, objective, etc.”. He also enumerates various genres, for instance: adventure, action, action-adventure, first-person shooter, role playing, survival horror, racing, and others. Clearly, the genre shapes the storytelling by the degree of relating

the gameplay to the story and of the interference of the player. Even if only one characteristic and one genre are taken under the looking glass, such as perspective and FPS games, it will be visible how the connection works. The perspective decides about the reception of the story, hence in first-person shooters, the experience should become more engaging and personal than in other types of games. Furthermore, the fact of perceiving the onscreen events through the eyes of a protagonist gives an impression of being a part of all three elements of storytelling cited by Dubbelman, namely story setting, character and events. Consequently, the boundaries are blurred and the illusion of control is achieved.

In the aftermath to the development of game genres and along with the progress in the technology of game-making, video games have started to aspire to the narrative complexity of films, which highlights the connection between the products of culture, such as cinema, and the technical developments. Not only does the computer serve the purpose of complementing films in the field of special effects and allowing filmmakers to show what could not have been shown otherwise, but it has also been given a function of a medium used to create stories and spark emotions, or simply build the world of fiction down to the last detail. It is vividly visible in games labeled as interactive narratives, which merge the rules of gaming with the film-like stories. The best illustration would be *Heavy Rain* (2009) and *Beyond: Two Souls* (2013), both created by the same developer, the French Quantic Dream. Both feature quasi-independent storylines and focus on the intrigue and characters, who are portrayed in details, similarly to movie protagonists. Furthermore, they also outrun cinema or books, in a sense, in the aspect of the emotional power they have over the audience since, apart from interactivity, which is present in any type of video games, they offer the illusion of liberty within the fictitious world, allowing for the feeling of having the control over the story. Therefore, the storytelling seems to turn into story-making, with players in the roles of co-authors or co-writers.

Heavy Rain is a gaming equivalent of a psychological crime novel or film noir. As it is stated on the official website of the developer, it is “an evolving thriller in which you shape the story.” What is more, it features “mature content, reflecting a realistic world setting that explores powerful themes” (Quantic Dream, 2014). Hence, the authors of the game concentrate their efforts on the narrative and the way it is presented to the audience and in what manner it can be manipulated by the players, rather than on the standard gameplay, which would involve a sort of antagonism, usually present in all games, for example manifested through combat. In *Heavy Rain* the action is scarce whereas the nature of the player’s interference remains the central element of the game.

The main intrigue presents a father whose child gets kidnapped by the Origami Killer. The son is kept in a low-located place and will be eventually killed when the rain inundates his temporary prison. The strange setup reveals to be a game between the traumatized killer and the father, who keeps getting origami figures with instructions of what he should do to get the next part of the address where his son is about to die. The game introduces the changes of perspective, namely the player controls the steps of the father, but also of a private detective, a policeman and a journalist. This particular approach towards the narrative gives a wider look at the events and fuels the *whodunit* structure. Nonetheless, this is the perspective of the father which highlights best the unique character of the interactive storytelling.

As the father is pushed to take serious decisions and act in a terrifying way, the player gets immersed in the moral and emotional deadlock the character is experiencing in the game. Furthermore, the narrative is not linear, hence, the spontaneous decisions made by the player actually shape the subsequent events and they carry the emotional significance. For instance, near the end of the game, the father must choose: is he going to swallow poison which will kill him in an hour and this way save his son or is he going to save himself and sacrifice the child? It depends on the player and the decision influences the final events which can unfold in various ways.

Another example showing how interactive narratives permit to influence the story and what is possible in a form of technologized storytelling is provided by a scene with the technology addict, the policeman. He searches the apartment and out of nowhere a man appears. The man reaches out to his breast pocket, which means he might be carrying a gun. The decision, a very fast one additionally, is to shoot in self-defense and risk being wrong or do nothing but become a possible target of an armed opponent. In a film or in a book such situations evoke excitement or fear but the reception remains passive. In games the participation of the audience is active, therefore, the doubts of the protagonists become the hesitations of the player, even if the options available are still predetermined by the creators. It seems to be a new quality in the context of storytelling, though.

The last important point to discuss in reference to *Heavy Rain* is the character of the killer. As it has already been mentioned, the active participation of the player in the course of narrative and in the actions of the in-game alter egos creates a sense of attachment, different than the urge to support the steps taken by the movie characters. In an interactive narrative the player and the protagonist go through the events together as the former is not reduced to the role of a spectator but remains one of the actors in the decision-making process of the latter. Consequently, if the playable character is revealed to be the murderer, the impact of the revelation is much bigger than in a movie or a book, even if the surprise is the same. It also influences the understanding of the character as the fact the player controls their steps allows to look into them outside of the perspective of a villain.

A very good illustration of such an approach are the words of Tzvetan Todorov, who claims in his works that the first-person narrative bestows trust upon the narrator and excludes them from being the perpetrator. He further gives an example of breaking this particular rule in the intention of misleading the reader in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* by Agatha Christie, where the killer is actually the narrator of the book. Todorov observes: "As narrator, his discourse is not subject to the test of truth; but as a character, he can lie" (1975: 83). The same trick is used by the developers of *Heavy Rain*, who make the player team up with the private detective and control his actions in order to learn his real identity in the end. Thanks to the concept of making one of the playable characters the villain, it is possible to glance into the motif of the crime. At the same time it adds psychological depth to the character.

Despite the fact that interactive narratives open up many different possibilities of improving storytelling in games as well as storytelling in general, it is still an unpopular genre. Quantic Dream seems to be the only company on the game market which focuses on such endeavors. Their next game, following *Heavy Rain*, was *Beyond: Two Souls* and it used the same mechanisms as its predecessor. By its creators from Quantic Dream it described as "a singularly unique psychological action thriller delivered by A-list Hollywood

performances.” In this case, though, the connection between films and games seems to be even more visible regarding the names of actors who played the game characters and lent their faces and mimics for the computer processing, namely Ellen Page and Willem Defoe, well-known for their achievements in cinema (“A-list Hollywood performances”, as stated in the official blurb). Apart from *Beyond* other games are evolving, yet they keep to verified solutions. The reason for it would be the reaction of the market to brisk changes. *Heavy Rain* was treated as an interesting oddity, but as a regularity it would probably discourage players who still look for action-packed rather than narrative-focused games.

The in-game storytelling has also been revised and restructured in sandbox video games, defined as “a style of game in which minimal character limitations are placed on the gamer, allowing the gamer to roam and change a virtual world at will. [It] is also known as an open-world or free-roaming game” (Janssen, 2014). In sandboxes the linearity of the story is concealed by the apparent random order of the events and by liberty in exploring the world of the game, which can be a city or a whole country. In sandboxes the narrative is influenced by the impression of total freedom, at least in the perspective of the player, who is manipulated and thinks that the story depends on his decisions. Nevertheless, the only thing which does depend on the player is the number of missions completed since it is possible to learn the story without any background and focus on trigger missions, which boost the narrative and make it unfold, or to familiarize oneself with the game’s world and extend the story with the help of additional or secondary missions. Although they do not make the story advance, they contribute to the perception of the in-game reality as well as to the complexity of the experience.

The examples of sandboxes are *Infamous* and *Red Dead Redemption*, two well-received and critically acclaimed games with gripping stories. Both offer major and minor missions, open worlds and a linear narrative hidden behind the impression of a total leeway. But this is not the veritable structure of the games which should be in the center of the analysis because this is the reaction of the player which really shows how the concept of liberties, limited even, granted by the technological advancement influence the shape of the story and how it is told through the gameplay.

Infamous (Sucker Punch, 2009) reaches out for the scheme of a post-apocalyptic society touched by the lack of electricity, which is followed by chaos, the spill of blood and the disintegration of the social structures. The player’s alter ego is a suspicious individual endowed with a gift of operating electrical discharges, who faces an unwanted mission of cleaning the city from the aggressive gangs sprouting after the apocalypse and using the situation to their advantage. Further, in the course of action, it is revealed that the protagonist is the only human being able to end the terror and restore electricity. The character can move wherever he wants within a fed district as in the districts where the current is still out he cannot recharge his powers and will certainly fall prey to the adversaries. Nevertheless, no wall nor obstacle is placed to keep the protagonist in one place, yet in some locations it is impossible to survive without the progression of his skills. In this manner, the authors subtly limit the player’s freedom without interfering directly in their gameplay.

In order to continue the main narrative, it is essential to complete the main missions, indicated on the game’s world map, hence, in this particular context, the narrative cannot be deemed special or unique, apart from highlighting

its interactive nature, standard in most games. But the number of secondary tasks to choose from allow for a sort of customization since the choice whether to start an additional mission or not, the number of such completed missions and the ways of completing them expand or limit the narrative and the gameplay, thus determining the final experience and contributing to the individualization of the game. There is also one more element in it – it is the player's decision if they want to learn the rest of the story or just wander and admire the virtual reality.

A very similar experience is provided by *Red Dead Redemption*, which is another sandbox game (Rockstar, 2010). In the Rockstar production it is not a city making for a gaming area, but a part of American land bordering with Mexico in the times of Wild West, i.e. at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. The former outlaw, John Marston, is forced by the federal agents to hunt down the gang he used to be a part of. He then visits different towns of Wild West, travels into the mountains and gets involved into the local Mexican conflict. The game provides the player with a liberty of travelling wherever they wish to on the horseback and of staying in towns by paying for accommodation or on the roadside by camping near the campfire. Again, mobility and latitude influence the gaming experience rather than the narrative itself, yet the manner of presenting it hinges on such gaming liberties, unachievable in any other form of storytelling. Moreover, the same rule as in *Heavy Rain* applies to *Red Dead Redemption* making the attachment to an ambivalent protagonist a key factor in the perception of the tragic finale of the game. It is also extremely interesting to learn that the open-world game structure loops the narrative by never really ending it. As narratives in novels or in cinema need definite closure, it is unnecessary to end the game. Where one story is finished, the other begins, though it is not told in the game. Still, though, it is possible to travel through the American land and return to the character's farm. The world of the game lasts, just as the real life does.

The above-mentioned sandboxes add one more feature to the process of shaping the storytelling with the use of technology. Only in video games the player is able to choose sides and become the guardian angel and the savior of the mankind or a megalomaniac villain drunk on the wielded power. In *Infamous* the way the player treats the common man and uses the gift of the protagonist is reflected in the possible development of the character and the attitude of the people towards him. In *Red Dead Redemption* reputation is everything as it can make the gameplay a series of gunfights as a consequence of becoming a wanted man and an enemy to every party. It is the will of the player which path is to be chosen and, although these two routes in the game's world are predetermined, leaving the decision to the player makes everything undetermined. Finally, the game finds another advantage over other forms of storytelling by making it possible to be good or evil, terrifying or admired.

The same strategy has been applied to the games in the *Mass Effect* series (Bioware, 2010–2012). It follows the steps of commander Shepard in the space odyssey in the attempt of saving Earth and other planets and civilizations from the eradication brought upon the galaxy by the ancient race of Reapers. This action RPG in space allows players to make spontaneous and very fast decisions with one click of a button, which determines the character of the game's main hero. Decisions are also made through dialogues and the way of having key conversations with other characters. Just as in *Red Dead Redemption* it is reflected in the protagonist's reputation and the alternative progress of events. In *Mass Effect 2* Shepard's face is reconstructed through the means of plastic

surgery and his or her deeds are mirrored by the scars being the aftermath of the operation. If Shepard commits to evil by abusing power and turning his/her back on the weak, then the hero's face remains furrowed by terrible marks, yet if the protagonist chooses the good, the outcome is that the skin becomes smooth and delicate.

Mass Effect adds more to the liberties of storytelling in video games in the context of the main character being an integral part of the narrative. The game is constructed in a way to allow for both female and male protagonist and, furthermore, it gives the player an option of designing their very own, unique character. The opening of *Mass Effect 2* swiftly conceals Shepard's sex and looks by the use of a unisex armor and a helmet whereas the plastic surgery makes it possible to introduce the Shepard of the player's choice. In the menu of the character's creation it is to determine the skin color, the shape of the face, the haircut, etc. What in literature happens in the imagination but always within the limits of the author's description and on the silver screen is already determined by the appearance of actors, in the game is a play of whim. In consequence, the perception of the story is filtered through the image of the protagonist, which differs in each version of the individualized game. Moreover, the relationships within the story, are also established with the reference to Shepard's actions and chosen sex. In truth, the creator of the game themselves pride themselves on the interactive storytelling, stating that "*Mass Effect 3* offers a unique opening narrative to immerse you in the storyline and characters, quickly and easily preparing you for the beginning, middle, and end of a galactic war for survival" (BioWare, 2012).

The conducted analysis, as brief as it may seem, leads to clear conclusions regarding the development of storytelling via the development of technology, which are presented below:

The more advanced technological means of presenting a narrative are, the more complex the story becomes. The ongoing discussion whether to classify video games as art suggests that the artistic quality of games might be equal to any other products of culture. It means game developers aim at presenting stories, similarly to filmmakers and novelists, but they deprived of tools necessary to narrate in the frameworks of the interactive environment, they could not do until now. Hence, the developments of narratives in video games have been in works for at most two last decades, opening new paths and becoming a gateway to a new quality of storytelling.

Modern video games use basic elements of storytelling, such as setting, characters and events, yet their interaction with the audience differs from other narratives. The bond between the player and the game could be treated as representational or presentational, yet it seems that the participation of the player in the process of storytelling make the presentational perspective prevalent.

Genres influence greatly the nature of storytelling in video games as they shift focus from the gameplay to story or other way around. Therefore, the player may feel more or less engaged in the events presented in the game. However, the player's participation will always make the video game storytelling more *active* and dynamic than other forms of narratives. Furthermore, genres determine perspective whereas perspective intensifies or levies the experience of in-game storytelling.

Interesting examples of video games' storytelling being close to the participation in story-making are interactive narratives, such as *Heavy Rain* and *Beyond*, which demonstrate a close resemblance to films due to the fact they are pre-acted by professional actors, and sandboxes, for instance *Infamous* or

Red Dead Redemption, where the liberties in exploring the setting for the story partially shape the narrative itself.

Important elements of storytelling in video games also are: choosing the nature of the protagonist, who can become good or evil, choosing the number of mission completed and the way of completing them, creating the character from the scratch as a unique alter ego of the player, and choosing the dialogue lines in reference to the decision-making process, crucial to the course of action.

In consequence, all the above-mentioned conclusions seem to be a perfect start for another study and a deeper analysis of the nature of storytelling in video games as well as of the evolution of in-game stories, characters and worlds.

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