FABULAE LUDENDAE

An Empathic Analysis of the Videogame Narrative

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To my father, for introducing me to videogames and being a great dad.

If these people tell this story to their children, as they sleep… Maybe someday they'll see: a hero is just a man who knows he is free.

- Protoman, 'VI: Sons of Fate', *The Protomen,* The Protomen

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Preface

When I was working on this thesis, I have often asked myself why I chose videogames as a subject. Videogames had long been my primary source of escape and relaxation from my academic studies, a cozy bed that I could return to when the work was done. And yet, as a student of literature, I have long felt that the videogame story has been underappreciated, dismissed as just a part of aesthetic paint on a challenge. Alternatively, the videogame is even seen by some people that do not play games at all as a subpar product of quality, only aimed at those that lack the attention span to pick up a book or are looking for something to quench their bloodthirst. The videogame story, in short, is wrongfully considered low-brow or, at best, mid-brow – a distinction that is itself highly problematic.

As I asked myself why I chose this subject, I first felt an obligation to this medium that has played such a huge part of my life. I am among those of the first generation that had parents who grew up playing videogames. For as long as I can remember, my father had been playing videogames and I watched, eventually getting to play myself. My grandfather, too, had picked up *Tetris* and dabbled in puzzle games. As for myself, the earliest videogames that I got to play were either the videogames that my father was playing, like *Age of Empires* or *Rollercoaster Tycoon*, or those that were aimed specifically at children – *Sammy's Science House* has a main theme that I can still remember 20 years later.

What interests me, is how some of these videogames have been life-defining. *Age of Empires*, set in the classical period, was instrumental for me in developing a taste for history in general and the Romans in particular – later, due to the enormous influence of the medieval era in videogames, albeit highly romanticized, that interest broadened again. Now, I am not suggesting that videogames are a prime source of information on history. Instead, I suggest that those things that attract our attention in our youth, be they videogames, series, novels or anything else, form us as individuals. This is not a new nor bold claim, but it is noteworthy that, when considering videogames, society tends to focus on its aggressive and bloodthirsty elements instead of the narratives they tell or the periods or persons they represent.

As I learned how to read, I started interacting with other videogames. Instead of simple experimenting, I could interact with the story. However, growing up in the Netherlands, I encountered another problem: the Dutch did not necessarily translate videogames, instead relying on their English skills. As I got *Pokémon Red* from my grandparents when I turned seven, I had to learn English, which I did with some help from my mother. Videogames made me an autodidact in English, sparking an additional interest in

different languages[1]. I needed to learn the language because I was curious in what the game was telling me. What they were telling me, was a story.

As I started this research, I felt convinced that story could provide a clean split in two types of videogames, an assumption that, it will turn out, was false. This story could then be compared to literary standards, predictably being among the likes of Young Adult or Child literature, due to what I assumed is the primary group targeted by videogames. Again, I was wrong. Story, I believe now, is omnipresent when playing videogames, something that I should have known if I looked at my own youth just a little bit more critically.

With my father, we often played a racing game called *Fatal Racing* together. The goal was to reach the finish line first, but additional points were given for the number of competitors that you had 'killed' during the race (they would miraculously turn out to be okay for the next race). As the game was somewhat hard, my father and I opted to take another route. Instead of racing, we would wait at an opportune spot, and take out as many competitors, who came racing at us at breakneck speed. This way, we would win by process of elimination, while scoring all the additional points. Moreover, we had given the other competitors names that had meaning to our family. So, it was us two against the rest. Is this a story that the videogame itself presented? Perhaps not, but *Fatal Racing* did provide us with a platform to build our own story, to act and to create some of my best childhood memories.

More story-oriented videogames provided actual narratives that would make the player feel invested, that raised the stakes and urged the player to play. Moreover, these stories, like those found in literature, sparked emotion. So, when I kept asking myself why I chose this subject, I answered myself that second, the videogame is so much more than what is often thought about the medium. I felt the need to answer, for myself as for many others, if videogames can actually tell stories in the way literature can or if those stories were simply a backdrop in order to sell more copies.

I expected as much because videogame story, as mentioned before, gripped me. During my teenage years, my relationship with videogames became problematic. I played way too often and too long, shirking any duties I had toward the household or school. At that point in life, my father, who had introduced me to the medium, must have regretted that decision a million times over. Moreover, the situation at home deteriorated as my mother

[1] This causes me to have some difficulty with pronunciation, it should be said – I still often pronounce 'paralysis' as '*pa-ra-LIE-sis*' or 'elite' as '*EE-light*', both common words in the videogames I played. Additionally, as a consequence, I have a strong tendency to play all videogames in English, as any other language just feels off, somehow.

succumbed to alcoholism, which prompted me to escape even further in videogames. By playing games, I felt that I could help others and that I could actually *do something* about the situation presented by the games. I felt reassured that I mattered, that I amounted to something and that others, albeit fictional, appreciated my presence, even depended on me. Perhaps more importantly, I could escape the situation at home.

I believe that the videogame story can be emotional and resonate with its players. Twice, during those hormonal and difficult teenage years, videogames made me cry. One of those instances that I want to share as an example was while playing *Megaman Battle Network 4.* The game is set in an alternate future where the digital world has become a parallel to the real world. In that virtual world, people can act and navigate by using their Netnavi's, a sort of combination between AI and an avatar, that can battle to destroy viruses and compete with each other in tournaments. One of those is MegaMan, operated by the games' protagonist Lan.

At one point, they must face off against JunkMan, who was created haphazardly by the accumulation of data garbage. In the events leading to the battle, JunkMan hijacks MegaMan's avatar and is, eventually, forced to rescue MegaMan from the digital garbage heap. There, MegaMan finds out that JunkMan is missing his 'Kindness.exe'-program, and offers it to JunkMan, who in return destroys it just before their fight, claiming that he does not need their pity. As MegaMan defeats JunkMan, JunkMan starts to disintegrate, telling MegaMan that everyone considered him a monster which prompted him to act as a monster. He tells MegaMan and Lan that they had right all along, and that, for once, JunkMan just wanted to feel loved. He had hijacked MegaMan due to the strong bond MegaMan and his operator shared. What JunkMan missed, however, was not the kindness-program, the empathic ability to feel, but simply kindness from the world. The teenager enraged with everything around him, the boy who was losing his mother and the player who was invested in the story came together at that particular moment somewhere in the middle of the night and made me feel more than I could handle.

However, videogames do not only produce sob-stories. They make players feel validated, they give agency to the player and videogames bring people together. The motto of this thesis comes from a music group that wrote their first records based on the *MegaMan*-series as well, spinning the rudimental tale of its first games into a dystopian tragedy. The videogame business is among the biggest industries in the world, and people from all ages play videogames. Worldwide tourneys are organized with prize money rivaling that of actual

sports. The videogame is hugely successful and increasingly pervasive in our society – let's not forget that the videogame is only a little over 50 years old. The medium is still young.

So above all, when I asked myself why I chose this subject and line of reasoning, I did so because it had caught my attention. The emotion JunkMan's tale evoked was a combination of my specific interests and situation at that time, and yet I have heard so many stories of people being gripped by the stories of the games they played. This thesis is then, perhaps, a critical reflection on a lifelong engagement with videogames that is without a doubt shared by so many others like me. As I have seen the 8-bit videogame evolve into 4K-Ultra HD, I have seen myself grow from an analphabetic child into a young researcher-to-be. I believe that the videogame will continue to grow in importance, and therefore I feel that it is paramount to consider what stories it tells, and how those affect us. Neither the videogame nor me has stopped developing and I am very curious to see where to the future might lead. But for now, there is a question that must be answered first.

- *Nils Lommerde, March 2021.*

Introduction

A concerning trend among people of all ages, and of numerous nationalities, is the apparent decline of interest in literature. Reading is seemingly becoming less and less popular, not in the least place in the educational system. However, literature and the arts are often considered important for personal and societal development. Martha Nussbaum, for example, considers literature an important part of a person's empathic education, as it is one of the main ways people learn how to put themselves in the shoes of another a crucial component for democratic citizenship (Nussbaum, 2010, pp. 108, 112). To convey empathy, a narrative seems necessary, as reading a dictionary does not afford the benefits that Nussbaum identifies. Is it then perhaps so that not literature is important, but that any narrative vehicle can offer literature's advantage?

Moreover, if it is narrative that conveys empathy, can *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II* offer the same advantages as, for example, reading Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* does? Although the first videogames were not narrative masterpieces, preferring simple stories or relegating the story elements to a manual, their narrative aspect has steadily gained importance. The advent of the digital RPG, or Role-Playing Game, brought story to the forefront. As the name implies, players are even urged to play the role of a character. Surely this should lead to an empathic interaction between players and videogame story?

Given the popularity of the videogame and the ubiquity of story therein, the focus of this project will be to explore the link between narrative, empathy and videogames. This is not only to further the understanding and consideration of videogames in society and in academia, but also to answer the question: are videogames a medium of narrative and empathy, like literature and cinema before them, and how exactly? What narrative devices are used to elicit empathy, that force a player to identify with the characters or the story?

Narrative and videogames go hand in hand, even if this might not be clear at first sight. Additionally, narrative is not reserved for intense roleplaying games or games that target a hardcore 'gamer' public: even the most casual games frame their gameplay inside narrative elements. *Candy Crush Saga*, for example, frames its basic puzzle gameplay inside a narrative framework. The goal of the game is to match three pieces of candy to eliminate those pieces from the board. However, the game adds characters and goals to motivate players: they assume the role of 'Tiffi', a young girl, and are helped by a 'mr. Toffee', who explains the game to her. Then, Tiffi can help the people of the imaginary realm in which *Candy Crush Saga* is set by completing different puzzles.

The urgency of answering the question of empathy in videogame arises from the current position of videogames in culture and academia. This position is troublesome: in society, videogames are often regarded as violent, enabling real-world actions such as threats, harassment and abuse, which are exacerbated by similar motives in videogames (Paul, 2018, pp. 21, 71). It is for this reason that I will refrain from identifying the people playing videogames as 'gamers', as this term is claimed by 'hardcore' or 'true' fans of the 'real' games, games that usually have a strong competitive or military influence in their design and gameplay.

This group is predominantly white and male. The 'gamer' subculture is known for being a breeding ground of toxic behaviors, such as misogyny, xenophobia, homo- and transphobia (cf. Paul, 2018). It should be thus be noted that this subculture represents only a part of videogame players. Nowadays, some estimates suggest that over 2,4 billion people play videogames, with most of them living in the Asian Pacific area and being predominantly male (Gough, 2019). By opting for the term 'player', I hopefully convey that a) not everyone who plays videogames subscribes to the stereotype of the male, white, teen gamer and b) that there are more videogames that merit attention than the few large competitive or military games that are immensely popular, such as *Call of Duty, League of Legends* or *Minecraft*: the videogame market is as diverse as the people who play videogames[2].

In academia, most research done on videogames seem to be either focused on the societal/social effects of the videogames or on the interactive aspects of videogames (the 'gameplay'). A notable exception to this is research that focuses on 'art-games', games that have been designed with other aims than purely commercial or entertainment interests, such as games designed for educational purposes. However, the attraction of some games lies not in their premise nor in the worldbuilding or storytelling, but in competition against an AI or another player. As these games produce a winner and a loser, they can be called 'zero-sum' videogames. That does not mean that these videogames do not contain any form of narrative, however.

We must consider the role of narrative in videogames. Is it a mere backdrop against which challenges unfold, or does it place the videogame as a medium in a tradition of

[2] Furthermore, a 2016 study by Rochelle Cade and Jasper Gate suggests that the average age of US-based videogame players lies around 35. Additionally, 33% of the player population is female aged eight-teen and above (Cade & Gates, 2016, p. 71). To do justice to the diversity of players, I will refer to singular players with the gender-neutral pronouns they/them.

human storytelling? If the latter is the case, do videogames serve the same purposes we dedicate to literature, by triggering emotional responses or reflection from a player? The aim of this research is to explore whether there are empathic processes in videogames and reflect upon the crucial but problematic status of the videogame story: as a medium that is often described as violent and meritocratic, what does it mean when videogames, ever growing in popularity, elicit empathy, encouraging players to place themselves in the shoes of another?

In the first chapter, I will start out by discussing the evolution of fictional storytelling, to show that it should not be surprising that narrative elements pop up in videogames. Secondly, I will give a broad overview of what is meant with empathy in literature, all the while being wary of related but contrasting terms such as sympathy and reflection. Lastly, I will sketch the outlines of the ongoing debate between ludologists, who see videogames as games, and narrativists, who see videogames as a vehicle for story, on the narrative in videogames, raising the question if videogames should even be considered (primarily) as a narrative vehicle.

The second chapter will present an answer to that specific question, by reimagining the videogame as a new narrative vehicle. By combining elements of both ludologist and narrativist approaches, I will show how the videogame can be considered a) as its own vehicle and not as a digital extension of either game or text and b) that narrative elements are impossible to reject in videogames, as games are built upon narratological foundations. I will pay special attention to some of the objections that ludologists make and some of the qualities that make videogames unique, such as the interactivity of the medium.

If the videogame is a narrative vehicle, then it should elicit empathy. In the third chapter, I will take a closer look at empathy, sympathy, and reflection: three different affective responses to texts, according to Emy Koopman. I will adapt the research into fictional empathy for the videogame, taking Koopman's *Reading Suffering* as a framework but equally considering terms that are proper to the videogame, such as the digital space in which the player can act, to see how interactivity and choice work together to create an empathic, immersive world for the player to act within.

In the last chapter, I will consider the videogame story as a whole, by showing how certain narrative frames are omnipresent in videogames, while others are shunned entirely. This results in a consideration of the videogame as a narrative medium that has its own properties on the one hand, and a reconsideration of the role of the player as having agency with regards to empathy, sympathy and reflection on the other hand.

Narrative empathy = videogame empathy?

Story is universal. We expect to find a story when buying a book or streaming a movie. We encounter narratives in our daily lives, from politics to advertising and from social encounters to introspective thought. A story can be understood as a representation of events linked by a chain of actions, reactions and consequences. If the story is imagined, in part or wholly, we consider it fiction.

Given the ubiquity of story, it should not be surprising to find story in videogames, too. In the first part of this chapter, I will explore the importance of narrative for humanity. An evolutionary approach of fiction proffers an explanation of why we encounter narrative across many different media. As will be shown, fiction urges the subject to place themselves in the shoes of the other. The second part of this chapter will therefore be dedicated to a broad overview of research into narrative empathy, which will serve again as the main theoretical framework for the analysis of the videogame as a narrative vehicle. The third part of this chapter will discuss several takes on storytelling in videogames. Even though videogames do incorporate narrative, there has long been a debate about whether videogames are actually a narrative medium, or whether narrative in videogame is only of secondary value. In this part, I aim to show both sides of the argument before I position myself in the next chapter.

Why do we tell stories?

The stories we tell seem everchanging. What is continuous, however, is that humans tell each other stories. Brian Boyd argues for an evolutionary approach of storytelling in *On the Origin of Story*. He explains that fictional storytelling specifically is a human universal and is moreover only seen in a select number of other animal species (Boyd, 2009, p. 9). The human mind can "construct a story on meager hints, to fill gaps and infer situations" (p. 10), recognizing story even if there is not any explicit storytelling done[3].

To Boyd, storytelling is an art, and art is cognitive play, a "set of activities designed to engage human *attention* through their appeal to our preference for inferentially rich and therefore *patterned* information (p. 85). He distinguishes cognitive play[4] from competition or 'closed games', such as chess or soccer, in that cognitive play is 'non-zero-sum': experiencing a story does not determine inherently a winning and a losing side. It aids in the progress of all

[3] The notorious "six-word story", allegedly written by Ernest Hemingway, comes to mind: "For sale: baby shoes. Never worn". Extreme brevity is also the core of literary subgenres or competitions known as 'flash fiction' or 'twitterature'.

[4] Play in this context should not be seen in as a game, but as a broad term for everything that is make-believe.

those that engage with the medium, be they creators, authors, publishers, readers or watchers (p. 87). The human mind, Boyd continues, is shaped through the universal of story to recognize patterns. These patterns have a twofold importance for any narrative vehicle or work of art.

Firstly, the recognition of a pattern transmits more information than the vehicle alone could achieve. However, Boyd remarks that if a pattern becomes all too common, we fail to pay any attention to it (p. 90): it becomes, for lack of a better word, boring. Patterns, secondly, must therefore adapt to survive: "an *unpredictable combination of patterns* repays intense attention and can yield rich inferences (p. 90)". This happens on all levels of art. From the medium to the (re)presentation, from the style to the status, trends can be recognized and the rise, fall and resurgence of genres can be traced throughout history. In other words, just like biological creatures, so too do artificial structures and cultural products adapt, evolve and prosper.

The evolution of narrative media has gone roughly from oral culture to script somewhere, first, in the third century BC, only for script to (eventually) become a mass product with the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century AD. In the nineteenth century, photography evolved into film, which quickly became a vehicle for story. A hundred years later, the invention of the personal computer was quickly accommodated for relaxation and play, with the first 'interactive fiction videogame' *Zork*[5] being released in 1977, five years after *Pong*, first released in 1972[6]. In short, humanity has either never ceased inventing new media with which to tell stories or, more likely, is stunningly capable of adapting technological inventions for narrative needs. The videogame, furthermore, has been readily available for only 60 years, and is already becoming the center of one of the biggest global markets – that is still growing.

If fiction is constantly evolving, both in form and in medium, then what is its primary drive? What does it offer that keeps humanity interested? For Boyd, fiction creates and thrives by soliciting its reader's or hearer's attention (p. 392). To capture attention, fiction needs to ceaselessly vary (and balance) between predictable and unpredictable patterns. Too

[5] *Zork* is a textual adventure game that has the player type in simple commands such as "stab troll with sword" to convey actions.

[6] A few 'videogames' or 'electronic games' claim precedence over *Pong*, such as the *Nimatron* (playing Nim, 1940) or *Bertie the Brain* (Tic-Tac-Toe, 1950). However, these were one-off machines, mostly used to show digital progress, instead of commercial releases. *Spacewar!* (1960), circulating amongst programmers, could be seen as the first 'modern' videogame in lieu of *Pong*.

unpredictable, and fiction becomes intimidating or chaotic; being too predictable, adversely, results in a loss of attention through sheer boredom.

One of the most important ways fiction captures attention is through an appeal to our social intelligence (p. 382): "stories, whether true or false, appeal to our interest in others, but fiction can especially appeal by inventing events with an intensity and surprise that fact rarely permits. Fictions foster *cooperation* by engaging and attuning our social and moral emotions and values, and *creativity* by enticing us to think beyond the immediate (pp. 382- 383)". Fiction proffers situations that are out of the ordinary for the human mind to reflect on and that actively engage its audience in placing itself in the figurative shoes of the other. In other words, empathy is crucial to the working of fiction.

Standing in another's shoes

Martha Nussbaum fiercely advocates for this empathic use of fiction, art and play as being of utmost importance in personal and societal education in *Not for Profit* (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 96). She considers the capacity to place oneself in the shoes of another (and to not see the other as a tool or a threat) as "a key sign of growing confidence in the developing self" in early infancy (p. 98). Sympathizing with the other is a form of 'narrative imagination (p. 95)', which she define as "having the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of the person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have (pp. 95 - 96)".

This capacity to empathize, although partly innate in the human baby, is nurtured through play (p. 97), such as fiction: "instruction in literature and the arts can cultivate sympathy in many ways, through engagement with many different works of literature, music, fine art, and dance (p. 106)". She recognizes a need for empathic and sympathetic education, with empathy referring to the capacity to place oneself in the shoes of the other, for 'positional thinking' (p. 36), and sympathy referring to the capacity to recognize their needs, desires and wishes as mentioned above.

In fiction, however, a unique conundrum arises. Although a reader can empathize and indeed sympathize with the other, this other is not real. As early as Aristotle, theoreticians consider that fiction must imitate reality, then, through a process called *mimesis*, for the story to be believable enough to place oneself in its drama (Aristotle, 2008, p. 19). In 1908, empathy was first offered as translation for German *Einfühlung*, in-feeling, a term that is often

accredited to the Early German Romanticist Novalis[7], a term that was used to illustrate the emotions humans could place into objects (Lanzoni, 2018, p. 2). Today, empathy refers to "our capacity to grasp and understand the mental and emotional lives of others. It is variably deemed a trained skill, a talent, an inborn ability and accorded a psychological and moral nature (p. 3)", as Susan Lanzoni explains in *Empathy: A History*.

What is interesting in the history of empathy, is how its direction seems to have changed. Where *Einfühlung* went from subject to object, it is now commonly understood that the object influences the subject (p. 14). It is the text that makes the reader feel like they empathize with a character, it is the film that immerses the public in its scenes. Empathy, then, can also be understood as "to empathize meant to lay aside one's self and to temporarily live in another's life (p. 157)" – an experience that, in a word, resembles immersion. Lanzoni concludes that empathy "offers an oblique and sometimes direct challenge to the idea that we are enclosed selves, sharply defined against the world and against others (p. 280)".

Empathy should not be seen as purely positive. Anthropologists Nils Bubandt and Rane Willerslev warn that empathy is essentially neutral (Bubandt & Willerslev, 2015, p. 9). While it can serve to evoke sympathy (p. 8), it is also a means enabling, to take an extreme example, torture (p. 12): by imagining what would hurt the other the most, the torturer knows what to do. Furthermore, humankind can be conscious of the empathy it elicits, and produce 'tactical empathy': empathy fabricated with a goal, be it to soothe, to deceive, to mimic or to convince (p. 8). If two persons can evoke 'tactical empathy', then what does this mean for the produced cultural artefact that is fiction? Surely, a knowledgeable storyteller[8] knows how to evoke certain emotions[9]?

We should beware, in any case, that empathy is not a synonym for sympathy, nor for doing moral or ethical 'good'. It is the crucial error that Greg Currie, for example, makes in considering that fiction might make readers less empathic (Currie, 2016, pp. 58-59): there might be good reasons to perpetuate wrongful actions. A character might believe he is doing

[7] Pseudonym of author and philosopher, amongst other things, Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg (1772 – 1801). He used the term in his posthumously published *Die Lehrlinge zu Sais* in 1802 (Curtis & Elliott, 2014, p. 359). Robin Curtis & Richard Elliott examine a few other possible origins, as well as giving more historic context to the term, in "An Introduction to *Einfühlung*".

[8] "To tell stories", in a certain way, is also something both young children, politicians and many others are asked not to do, yet they seem to insist in doing so, as telling those stories can sway their audience.

[9] Several literary genres are essentially based around the emotion that they evoke: horror, love stories, detectives. Is this a reason for which they are not considered highbrow, simply because they wear their emotional manipulation on their sleeves?

the good thing[10] or does the wrong thing to dissuade (other) negative consequences[11]. Lauren Wispé's 1986 distinction between the two clearly explains the difference:

> in empathy, the empathizer 'reaches out' for the other person. In sympathy, the sympathizer is 'moved by' the other person. In empathy, we substitute ourselves for the others. In sympathy, we substitute the others for ourselves. To know what it is be like if I *were* the other person is empathy. To know what it would be like to *be* that other person is sympathy. In empathy *I* act '*as if*' I were the other person. In sympathy I *am* the other person (Wispé, 1986, p. 318).

Empathy, it seems, is a displacement, sympathy a replacement. Empathy makes the subject ask: 'what would I do?', whereas sympathy is answering that question with 'I would have done the same'. Without empathy, sympathy is not possible. In lieu of Wispé's distinction, I propose that the one follows the other. However, that begs the question: what happens when the subject rejects the actions of the character, and instead concludes that they would have done otherwise?

Emy Koopman signals the existence of a third 'affective response' besides empathy and sympathy in *Reading Suffering*: reflection (Koopman, 2016, p. 19). Reflection, she argues, solicit a long-term as opposed to empathy's short-term action (p. 19). She designates reflection as "the conscious experience of having thoughts and insights about oneself, others, society objects, the human condition and/or other aspects of the world we inhabit (p. 105)".

Literary texts, i.e., narratives that are more than expository, trigger reflection through their ambivalence. As certain 'gaps' are left, Koopman explains that "the reader needs to fill [these gaps] with her interpretation" (p. 115). This reflection has a binary outcome. On the one hand, by thinking about different interpretations of the text and, in doing so, about different takes on the story, the reader places themselves in the text's 'debate', for lack of a better word. This thought process evokes an introspection, placing the reader inside the text, or, in an empathic manner, in the shoes of the text's character (p. 115). On the other hand, the reader might be so immersed in the discovery of a text's meaning that they forget altogether to reflect upon their own lives, escaping, as it were, in heuristic immersion (p. 115).

Reflection is not a cognitive alternative to empathy and sympathy. Rather, the three work interdependently. Each can trigger or influence the other. However, the three are, in a hierarchal structure, not equal. As I proposed before, the cognitive-emotional process starts

[10] Consider the Count of Monte-Cristo from the eponymous novel, who survives through and is driven by his vow to exact 'justice' and vengeance.
[11] Marguerite Blakeney delivers the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel, who is, unbeknownst to her, her own husband, to the authorities in an attempt to save her brother in *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.

with empathy, "what would I do in this situation?", with the sympathetic response being "I would have done the same". Reflection upon the fictional situation might make the reader of fiction consider other choices, or when presented with a real-life parallel, consider the consequences in the story: "I would have done otherwise". These moments are not fixed. On the spur of the moment, a reader might first agree and later disagree with a character, or vice-versa. However, as Koopman's notes, this is the effect of reflection: reflection is the long-term introspective effect of the activation of empathy.

Empathy, sympathy, and reflection. These are all mechanics that generate attention, and also recurring words when discussing the importance of narrative. This threefold distinction is also at the core of E.M. Koopman's dissertation *Reading Suffering*, which I will be using as a foundation for the analysis of affective narrative in videogames in the fourth chapter on empathy in videogames. I will delve deeper into her distinctions, to see in what way they are applicable to the videogame narrative, or to reconsider the model to account for the unique aspects of the videogame medium. However, this presupposes that the videogame is, indeed, a narrative medium.

Press start to story

The question, "should we consider videogames as narratives" has been around ever since videogames started moving from arcades to our living rooms. It is therefore interesting that videogames are missing from the aforementioned theoreticians' account of narrative as well as empathy. What separates them from the arts that Nussbaum mentions repeatedly? Is it a question of age of the medium, being relatively young? Is it a question of status, videogames lack the age-old allure of poetry and literature[12]? Or is it the lack of contemporary recognition in the educational system, and does Nussbaum specifically target those media that already have an established, although diminishing place in the educational curriculum? In this second part, I will outline the debate on whether videogames are a next step in fictional storytelling or not. The debate between narrativists like Janet H. Murray, who say videogames are fictional narratives, and ludologists, like Jesper Juul, who consider videogames not the next step in fiction, but in a tradition of game-playing (Laas, 2014, p. 31).

At first sight, it might appear that videogames are not narrative media, because specific games might not include a 'real' story (*Minecraft*), the player is left to their own devices and can opt to ignore the story for long stretches of time (*Grand Theft Auto V*) or because the story presented lacks any depth (*Pokémon*). However, Janet H. Murray considers

[12] Even if Nussbaum argues against the supposed superiority of 'highbrow "Fine Art"' (p. 117), the mentioned elements of art worth teaching are all part of high-brow vehicles of narrative.

videogames a next step for fiction in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. Her account, it should be noted, was written in 1997, and she rightly considered the videogames during this period as a digital incunabulum[13], a narrative vehicle not yet of technological maturity[14] (pp. 28 - 29). She sees narrative elements in several videogames as 'thin', sometimes even harmful to the experience as a whole (p. 52). However, she is less intrigued by the current developmental state of videogames than by their potential for digital, interactive storytelling (p. 54).

Murray argues that the videogame is (suited to become) a "symbolic drama", in which the player is always the protagonist (p. 142), an important observation that will be important in the next chapter. Nonetheless, Murray also recognizes that the story and the challenge of the videogame do not necessarily need to overlay each other. She argues that for story, we only need to pay attention[15] while for videogames we need to overcome challenges (p. 140). Moreover, some videogames offer multiple endings or branching side-plots – how can one consider all these as a single story?

Videogames defy traditional storytelling by muddying the way forward. Instead of going from page to page in a linear sequence[16], the narrative is shifted, halted, disrupted or takes a side road (p. 173). Oftentimes, the player needs to act in a certain way for the story to continue, not unlike a reader who must turn a page. However, the fact that the way forward is opaque, does not mean that there is no story to speak of: "at the end of the game players are able to see the whole action of the *story, including their own part in it, not from the stage but from the perspective of a spectator at the top of the arena* (p. 180)". The videogame, to Murray, is the new medium for not only *immersive*, but also *interactive* storytelling. In fact, the very procedural essence of story, starting at A and ending in B, makes it a perfect fit for videogames (pp. 186 - 187). To her, story elements change a game, for example, "from a challenging puzzle to an evocative theatrical experience (p. 53)".

This focus on story, however, is challenged by others, who see in the videogame not the next step in story, but the next step in game-playing. They argue that the videogame experience is not established by its story, but by its rules (Laas, 2014, p. 45). Others, such as

[13] A Latin word, meaning 'wrapped in clothes' and referring to the first printed books. It should be understood as "books [that] are the work of a technology still in its infancy (Murray, 1997, p. 28)".

[1414] If 1977's *Pong* is the advent of the graphical, commercial videogame, at the time of Murray's writing the videogame was 20 years old. Now, it is 49 years old, close to the 50-year period that Murray identifies as the end of the incunabulum as the technology matured (Murray, 1997, p. 28). However, that does not mean that the videogame is on the verge of crystallizing its technological form – even if the timeframe would prove comparable, it was not for another century that *Don Quixote* lauded in the foundations of the European novel (p. 29).

[15] Attention being at the centre of storytelling, according to Boyd.

[16] The videogame can therefore be traced in a tradition of discontinuous reading, which seems to have fallen in disuse but, as Eve Tavor Bannet notes, seems to have been the norm for centuries (Bannet, 2017, p. 176)

Rune Klevjer, point to the imbalance between static narrative and dynamic interactivity, that make a narratological approach to games difficult if not impossible (p. 34). This approach is often called the ludological approach to videogames, for its tendency to see the videogame primarily as a game.

Jesper Juul, for example, provides a ludologist example in *The Art of Failure*. He explains how the videogame interacts with the player's emotions not by its story, but by the challenge it provides (Juul, 2013, p. 9). The videogame is determined by its rules: it delimits what a player can and cannot do, and, moreover, in what fashion and to what extent (p. 24). The challenge must be cleared within the confines of these rules. Successful game-design presents these rules clearly but not in an overbearing way, Juul demonstrates, and unsuccessful game-design poses a challenge that the player does not know how to overcome (pp. 15, 63).

For Juul, the main reason to play videogames is to overcome challenge in a playful manner. We can safely feel frustrated and angry with a videogame, knowing that it has little consequence in 'the real world' (p. 44). Juul refers to the Aristotelian principle of catharsis, the purging of negative emotions through a work of art. For Juul, failing in a game possibly results in bitterness, rage or depression, until the challenge can eventually be overcome: videogames "provide a space where we can struggle and fail. [That] is the *art* of failure (p. 124)". Through a cycle of failure and improvement, videogames teach us "to reconsider. Failure connects us personally to the game; it proves that we matter, that the world does not simply continue regardless of our actions (p. 122)".

Do videogames attract our attention through interactivity or through storytelling? This question lies at the heart at of the debate between ludologist and narrativist approaches of videogames. What is the essence of the videogame? Today, the two approaches still split apart the way academics see videogames, as Oliver Laas[17] explains it. Videogames possess a core, a set of rules and boundaries that govern the game's universe as well as a shell, in which the aesthetics of the world, including its narrative, takes place (Laas, 2014, p. 32). Which of the two is more important, however, is still up for debate and, importantly, both parties seek to establish that their take is the base of the videogame. Laas, for example, while trying to reach a compromise between the two parts, still concludes that the narrative is optional (Laas, 2014, p. 58).

[17] He attributes the terms of 'core' and 'shell' to Espen Aarseth.

Some efforts have been made in the last decade to overcome the debate between ludologists and narratologists, however, or rather to bypass the debate altogether without providing a meaningful answer to what that essence that sets apart the videogame from other media in fact is. The most important development with regard of how we see videogames is probably the idea of the Future Narrative. Following the eponymous work of Christopher Bode and Rainer Dietrich, it is often claimed that videogames are a prime example of Future Narratives, that is, narratives that are not set in stone in the way that most novels or films are (Bode & Dietrich, 2013, p. 11). The Future Narrative is instead a mode of storytelling that takes a scene and offers different possible outcomes, for example through choice[18] (p. 17).

A Future Narrative is, therefore, a narrative whose outcome is (seemingly) not yet fixed, there is an option for the reader to influence the outcome (p. 17). The Future Narrative exists of nodes and edges, taken from social network theory. The nodes represent the moments of bifurcation within a story, the edges the causal link between theses moment. For Sebastian Domsch, this means that the Future Narrative is especially suitable to consider the videogame. To him, the videogame is possibly the best proponent of the FN, as "the appeal of the videogame lies in their promise of agency […] All games are therefore necessarily non-unilinear, since true agency implies choice, and choice implies differing outcomes (Domsch, 2013, pp. 3-4)". In short, he (amongst others) considers the videogame a medium of rules within which both the player and the story can and must act, as rules are what narratives and games have in common (p. 14).

In the next chapter, I will reconsider the ludological-narratological split and argue that the split between the 'core' and the 'shell' is not as clean as their proponents proclaim it to be. Furthermore, I will argue that the solution that is proposed by Future Narratives, that the videogame is a medium of choice, is problematic at several levels, and therefore unsatisfactory. By incorporating research on the structure of narrative into the analysis of videogame story, I will argue that the videogame is essentially a narrative vehicle, while keeping its unique quality intact. Furthermore, I will not endeavor to reinvent the narratological wheel, but rather to demonstrate that the elements of structural narratology are present in the digital world. Following this reconsideration, I will argue that it is through story rather than through its rules that a game can elicit empathy from a player.

[18] It should be noted, however, that Bode and Dietrich do not see choice nor agency as a must for a Future Narrative; the Narrative itself might show different situations. In the episode "Remedial Chaos Theory" of *Community*, for example, a situation is revolved through the roll of a die, resulting in seven different possible scenarios which are all shown.

The Storytelling Videogame

Is the videogame primarily narrative? The uneasy standstill between ludologists and narrativists discussed in the previous chapter, where both parties merely recognize the other's existence exposes a problem in videogame research. Neither party is considering the videogame as a whole. When considering only a part of the videogame, both parties will find what they are looking for. By relegating the story to the second plan, ludologists can focus on the mechanics behind the game. Alternatively, by not considering the game's mechanics and how they interact with the player, narrativists can see the videogame as a story, although in a way that is almost indistinguishable from research into literature or cinema. Neither approaches the videogame as a unique cultural artefact in their quest to define the essence of the videogame[19].

By splitting a videogame into a mechanical 'core' and an aesthetic 'shell', an illusion is created that can be altered without impacting the other. This holds up when researching specific parts of a videogame, but the mirage shatters if we investigate the working and presentation of videogame. If the rules of the game are changed, the way the player interacts with the aesthetic world also changes. Even something so simple as changing the button a player must press in order to talk to a Non-Player Character, or NPC[20], this mechanically changes how the other buttons are mapped, but it also changes the experience a player has while playing. If interacting with the NPC Toad in *Super Mario Bros.* could only be done by performing a complicated string of inputs, the player would most likely skip interacting with the character altogether – especially if his message ("the princess is in another castle!") is already implied by finding Toad and not the lost Princess at the end of the level. This changes how the player sees the world. Whereas previously the player would feel invited to freely interact with NPCs, complicating the inputs would logically mean that the player would come to see the proposed game in terms of 'where do I absolutely have to interact, and which interactions can I simply skip?'.

[19] As for the why this debate become so prominent, there seem to be no direct sources. However, Espen Aarseth's refutal of narratological analysis of videogames ("Underlying the drive to reform games as "interactive narratives," as they are sometimes called, lies a complex web of motives, from economic ("games need narratives to become better products"), elitist and eschatological ("games are a base, low-cultural form; let's try to escape the humble origins and achieve 'literary' qualities"), to academic colonialism ("computer games are narratives, we only need to redefine narratives in such a way that these new narrative forms are included" (Aarseth, 2004, p. 49)), amongst others from the same article, is a recurrent quote that seems to have set a lot of bad blood, with narratologists fiercely defending their point of view, resulting in academic trench warfare for a number of years with neither position willing to compromise.

[20] A character controlled by the game or a passive character.

Although one could argue that this still is mechanical, and therefore part of the core, it evidently changes the interaction between the player and the shell, the aesthetic world within which the player acts. In contrast, aesthetical changes do not appear to impact the mechanical core. Isn't it so that, if one were to change the color palette of a game, nothing much would change in how the game plays? Although this is true, the output of color is a process dictated by code, and therefore technically part of the core[21]. The shell, therefore, is always dictated by how a videogame is programmed, thus the shell is always a product of the core.

The links between the core and the shell in videogames, a distinction that allows ludologists and narrativists to focus on their respective parts of the game, are so significant, that I believe that they should not be examined. In this chapter, I will firstly explain why I believe that core and shell cannot be two distinct halves of a videogame. Secondly, I will argue that it is what is now known as the shell that is of utmost importance for players. However, I will account for the specific arguments that Jesper Juul and Espen Aarseth, among others, have made in favor of a ludological approach and show that these arguments can be do not clash with a narratological approach. Therefore, I will analyze the way in which videogames and their stories are build up by approaching them not from a presentational, but from a narratological point, in which I will give special attention to the role of the player. Lastly, I will present my arguments of why a videogame should be considered a narrative vehicle, without falling into the same trap as the narrativists in not considering the interaction between player and medium nor the challenges that players have to overcome in order to move forward.

Masking the Core, Altering the Shell

The distinction between the core and the shell is only interesting for those who do not see the videogame as a unique cultural artefact. In order to express the way these two parts are linked together, I will discuss a videogame that, I believe, clearly demonstrates the interconnection: *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*.

This videogame tells the story of a young hero, Link, who is transported to a mysterious world, called Termina. There, he finds out that in three days' time, the moon will crash into Termina. Link sets out to free four giants that, together, can catch the moon and throw it back into its orbit, while at the same time helping the world's inhabitants. Three days,

[21] One could argue that the videogame could then not be separated in two parts, but in three, with an additional part for 'coding'; however, this addition is moot as the core and the shell both need to be programmed into the game.

however, proves to be too short a time: initially, Link fails. However, just before it is too late, Link uncovers the power to travel back to the start of the First Day, resetting the events that have since passed while keeping what he has gained in the meantime.

The game illustrates the differences between core and shell, because the technology used is, for 2021's standards, dated. While it is one of the first games that offers varied dialogue options for the NPCs, the character's lines are dictated by the in-world clock. For example, the character known as the Swordsman is adamant that "tonight, he shall cut the moon into pieces!" until midnight of the final day, in which case he can be found, huddled up, sobbing to himself "I don't want to die!". Additionally, if the player approaches him while wearing a mask[22], he will acknowledge the mask and tell the player to remove it if Link wishes to be trained in the way of the sword.

The effects in the shell (dialogue) are coded by predetermined triggers in the core. As the time passes a certain point, the dialogue changes. Time in *Majora's Mask* is the limit within which the player must complete his tasks and is part of the world's mechanics and rules; therefore, it is part of the core[23]. However, the interaction goes both ways. Not only does the passing of time indicate a change in the aesthetic[24], but it is simultaneously a way of telling the player to hurry up, that time is running out, that they are reaching the limits set upon them by the game's rules.

The case of the mask is more interesting. The change to Link seems to be aesthetic, and the resulting dialogue is also aesthetic. While it is true that the coding is done in the core, there is a more important link between the core and the shell in this case. Throughout the game, Link collects several masks. It turns out that a significant number of these masks replace the action performed by the action button. Pressing this button usually results in Link swinging his sword, but when he dons a mask, this action is oftentimes replaced by an action that is unique to the properties of that mask. The Giant Mask, for example, turns Link gigantic, after which pressing the same button results not in a swing of his sword, but instead in a punch. The core, i.e. the actions Link has at his disposal, is recognizing that the current aesthetic choices, i.e. wearing a mask, would not allow Link to use his sword and thus cannot be instructed by the swordmaster.

[22] Masks play an important role in the videogame.
[23] The Moon destroying Termina is, of course, aesthetic and thus part of the shell.
[24] In the final few hours, not only dialogue changes: the hue of the overworld and the music changes as well to a haunting tone (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e056R97svz8).

Moreover, with most masks on, Link's 'move-set[25]', is altered to a further extent than prohibiting the use of his sword. Donning a mask is a way of changing the game's core: the actions normally accessible are altered. One mask allows Link to run at double the speed, another to talk to animals, a third to float over extended stretches of air, another to swim and dive without running out of air… These are all mechanics that can be part of any game's core, of how a player can tackle the challenges at hand (cf. Juul, 2013, p. 24). By changing the aesthetics, the game is communicating that something in the core has changed.

In restricting these gameplay options to masks, the game ensures two things. The first is that the player eventually has access to many different actions with which to solve puzzles or defeat enemies. If all these options must be always accessible, the player's controller, with which they control Link, would need an extravagant number of buttons. Instead, by linking core-based actions to a mask, the action of putting on a mask changes not only Link's appearance, but also the 'meaning', as it were, of the gamepad's buttons.

Secondly, as these masks are restricted at first, they are significant rewards for completing certain tasks. Not making use of the masks means that the player is limited and cannot solve all the puzzles, as their move-set is limited[26]. However, out of the 24 wearable masks, only four are forced upon the player, of which three are required to finish the game. The reason why a player would want to collect the unnecessary, remaining 20 masks – to engage in non-necessary parts of the story - will be explained in the next chapter, where I discuss of the role of empathy in videogames.

The Cinematic Turn

The split between the aesthetic and the systematic is artificial, then. Claims that the shell is merely there to serve as eye-candy are as guilty of denying videogames a part of their whole as claims that videogames are purely telling stories. Consider Espen Aarseth's 2004 take on chess, where he claims that it would not matter if chess had its normal royal theme or were modeled after *The Simpsons*: it would be played the same (Aarseth, 2004, p. 46). Not only does Aarseth not acknowledge certain *other* contextual clues[27] that the game at hand is, indeed, chess, but he also denies that generations of players modeled chess-sets after cultural phenomena – that chess is, in fact, as much a cultural artefact as it is a game [28].

[25] The different options the player has at hand to tackle different tasks.
[26] A limited move-set is not necessarily a bad thing: many games have limited move-sets for their characters but invent tricky situations to experiment with those sets.
[27] The chequered board, the position of different figurines with a row of similarly looking pawns in font, the opposition of two different colors, amongst others.
[28] This last point is derived from Stuart Moultrop's reaction to Aarseth: (Aarseth, 2004, p. 47)

When transposing this take to videogames, there are two imminent problems. First, Aarseth's explanation does not consider the digital-visual capacities of the videogame. If one plays the 1993 version of *Star Wars Chess*, to take an actual chess clone videogame, it becomes clear that the videogame does more than 'just play chess with *Star Wars*'. When different pieces take each other, for example, an animation is triggered depicting the battle between those two pieces. Secondly, this animation is a 'story'. If the white pawn, R2D2, takes a black pawn, a Stormtrooper, we see the black pawn attacking first – it is the aggressor. However, being a Stormtrooper[29], it misses the frightened R2D2 several times, before the small robot holds up a little mirror in front of the soldier's laser gun, thereby defeating the villain not by outpowering him but by outsmarting him. Furthermore, a lot could be said about the representational choices made, such as the basic premise that white represents the heroes and black the villains of the *Star Wars* franchise[30].

Mathieu Triclot, for example, compares the videogame with cinema in *Philosophie des Jeux Vidéo*, stating that both formats share the usage of a screen as well as an 'image discourse[31] (2011, p. 69)': both media convey their essence through the uses of images. The videogame is, as the name implies, a game that must be played on a screen. Since the 1990S, the relation between videogames and cinema is even further imbued with the advent of new graphical possibilities, most notably games in 3D (Triclot, 2011, p. 74). As a result, the videogame makes increasingly more use of cinematic techniques and cut-scenes.

A cut-scene is an interruption of player agency during which the game can focus on other aspects by showing these in the form of a short movie clip or text, often in support of a narrative (Triclot, 2011, p. 74). In *Super Mario Bros.*, whenever the player defeats the evil Bowser at the end of a castle level, the game takes over and makes Mario walk toward Toad, who tells Mario that 'the Princess is in another castle' before warping the player to the next level. Player agency is limited in this instance to pressing a button to indicate that the player has read the dialogue, even though a part of the action shown (walking towards Toad) is something that the player could do themselves. The use of the cutscene here is to acknowledge the players' feat of defeating the boss, as well as to egg them on to another level.

[29] Famously known for their bad aim.
[30] In fact, the chess game itself has been seen as an allegorical game ever since (and probably before) Jacobus de Cessolis' *De Ludus Scaccorum*, a treaty written somewhere in the 13th century.
[31] Mieke Bal considers the comic also a product of images (Bal, 2017, p. 4).

If one compares videogames to non-digital games, it seems that the videogames offer an augmented experience. In *Star Wars Chess*, the pieces, although two-dimensional, are animated, seem to live, act with each other under the player's commands. This is all squarely located in 'the shell' if I adhere to that distinction for a moment[32]. Approaching the videogame from an either/or-perspective, I stress, is approaching only a part of the videogame. It is, as the name implies, both video and game.

Does this mean that the videogame is simply interactive cinema[33]? No. While the videogame does make use of strategies found in cinema, going as far as to emulate viewing the action through a lens rather than through an eye (Brooker, 2009, p. 125), it has developed its own language and conventions, such as the isometric, the third-person or the first-person view, which would at most make the videogame similar to art-cinema if it is to be likened to cinema at all (p. 128). The videogame is cinematic, certainly, but it is no movie. The videogame resists, then, both identification as an evolved form of game and cinema, although it takes elements from both media, as it equally does from other storytelling media. For example, text is also frequently used in videogames to convey dialogue or objectives, but does that mean that the videogame, like literature, has a textual discourse and should thus be considered as a text? Or does it mean, as I believe, that it uses text to convey meaning, most particularly in the form of a narrative? Narrative is the common denominator between videogames, literature, cinema but also imagined play, drama and other forms of art. Is it, then, not a good idea to look at the underlying mechanics of narrative, and to assess whether a narratological approach helps to consider the videogame in its entirety?

The Structure of Narrative

So far, I have argued that the videogame is its own unique medium. However, almost all videogames, especially those that are single-player and non-zero-sum, tell stories. Those that do not are either very old[34] or focused on competition, which refocuses the goal of the videogame. Instead of putting experience or relaxation in the foreground, a zero-sum videogame prioritizes competition. Even then, some of these games, such as *Star Wars Chess*, employ small, storied segments. In more recent times, these games often even have a

[32] It is, for example, possible to turn the animations off in *Star Wars Chess*.
[33] Or does this mean that we should consider interactive cinema, such as *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018) consider as videogames?
[34] And even then, one could easily find story elements in the paratext: 1995's *Fatal Racing*, for example, seems to be such a non-story videogame, focusing only on racing. In the game's manual, however, it is explained that the winner of the no-holds barred motor sport wins enough renown that it will dominate the coming year's automobile industries market.

complete single player "story mode". For example, in *FIFA 2021* as well as other games in the series, the player must start small and eventually become a star player in the game's "career mode" (cf. Paul, 2018).

However, multiplayer interaction, be it competitively or cooperatively, will be left from consideration as this study is primarily interested in the interaction between the medium and the player. That does not mean that player-to-player interaction cannot be narrative, however, as competition often meets the criteria of narrativity I use in defining the videogame story[35]. Multiplayer games are most often built like single player games, with non-player characters and a limited playing space, but are different in that they allow for more than one player character within the game. It is important to note that player-to-player interaction does not necessarily has to be competitive. Many videogames have complete modes for cooperation, such as *Portal 2*. Accounting for the social interactions between these players within the context of the videogame as well as outside it is at the one hand something that narrativity alone cannot satisfyingly do but negating these player interactions seem to negate the essence of the multiplayer game. As such, although what will be said about the single player game holds true for the multiplayer games as well, it is important to note that the multiplayer game goes one sociological step further by analyzing not interactions between player and medium, but between two players through the medium. Therefore, I limit myself, for the time being, to discussing videogame as a single player affair.

Zero-sum and non-zero-sum, multiplayer and single player games do share something that is true, it seems to me, to the entire videogame genre: a narratological base. Narratological, in the sense that games are made up of the same characteristics that create stories, too: time, space, characters, action… Mieke Bal's *Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* offers an insightful enumeration of these elements of story. Although I have used the terms 'narrative' and 'story' indifferently until this point, Bal does not consider these words synonyms. She defines the story on three different levels: the 'narrative text', the 'story' and the '*fabula*':

> A *narrative text* is a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee ("tells" the reader, viewer, or listener) a story in a medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof. A *story* is the content of that text and produces a particular

[35] In fact, within e-sports, the competition between certain players or teams of players have reached levels of meta-story, with 'good guys' and 'villains' that might make one think of rivalry between football teams or the storied facets of wrestling. One such example is professional *Super Smash Bros.* player Juan 'Hungrybox' Debiedma, who was ostracized for playing the game in a manner deemed 'lame', and therefore took on an arrogant and boastful 'heel' (evil) persona to taunt opponents and the audience.

> manifestation, inflection, and "coloring" of a fabula. A *fabula* is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors. […] These key concepts imply other ones. Take the last one, the fabula, for example. Its definition contains the elements "event" and "actor." An *event* is the transition from one state to another state. *Actors* are agents that perform actions. They are not necessarily human. To *act* is defined here as to cause or to experience an event. (Bal, 2017, p. 5)

Bal's distinction in narrative recalls those of the Russian Formalists. Boris Tomashevsky[36], for example, proposes in his 1925 paper *Thematics* a two-way split: story (*fabula*) and plot (*siuzhet*) (Tomashevsky, 1965, p. 87). The paper, importantly, lacks any connotation of the vehicle by which the narrative is provided. While Bal's distinction seems therefore more readily applicable to narrative, as text – or literature – is not the sole source of narrativity, I do want to add one notion from Tomashevsky to Bal's three-fold split: the motif. The motif is the smallest narrative element, that usually consists of one actor and one event (p. 88). In *the Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*, such a motif would be, for example: 'Link gets a new mask', 'a new day commences', 'the Moon crashes into the earth'.

This 'irreducible element', as Tomashevsky calls it, is, in fact, reducible. From his example "Evening comes (p. 88)", one can distill an actor and an event: the evening and its arrival[37]. To summarize, a narrative exists of events and actors. These can be linked together in a motif, wherein an actor instigates an event or, alternatively, an event impacts an actor: 'person A defeats person B', 'person A rescues person C'. A causal sequence of motifs forms a *fabula*: 'by defeating person B, person A rescues person C'. This *fabula* can differ in size, from this small example to plots that would take multiple pages to explain. The coloration of the *fabula* is what gives the narrative its identity, and this presented identity is the story. This story can be 'by defeating the evil Majora, Link rescues the world of Termina', in the case of *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*, but also: 'by defeating the evil Bowser, Mario rescues Princess Peach' in *Super Mario Bros.*

Fabulae Ludendae

To Bal, the videogame can be a narrative text that conveys story; she makes no assumption about a specific form. Therefore, in the same vein as Boyd has suggested[38], is it not

[36] Whose article predates Boyd's argument that art must capture attention by nearly 85 years in saying that fiction, above all else, must be interesting (Tomashevsky, 1965, p. 85)
[37] Note that this motif, as well as many others, consists solely of a subject and a verb: the base of any meaningful phrase.
[38] i.e., that humankind projects story onto every medium.

unreasonable to expect story in videogames. However, some videogames offer little story, such as *Candy Crush Saga*. In the case of *Candy Crush Saga*, the actors are merely screen-dressing to give the actual game, a spin on the tile-matching puzzles, more of an identity, a story if you will. Yet, the developers have chosen to do so by using humanoid characters that are easily identified with and that act according to certain character stereotypes. So, if videogames *can* contain a narrative, does this automatically imply that all videogames can also be studied using the instruments of narratology?

Assassin's Creed Odyssey offers an interesting example. The videogame puts the player in the shoes of a Spartan mercenary, the child of Leonidas I, during the Peloponnesian War. The game is rife with characters and events, adapted from history. However, the videogame also claims a certain historical value, and, amongst others in its series, offers an extensive encyclopedia on the time at hand. To accommodate educational intent, the game then offers a mode in which all story and gameplay mechanics are taken away, so that the player can roam through the world without having to fear for events that may or may not be suitable for a younger audience, such as fights to the death, assassinations or warfare.

What this 'educational mode' does, essentially, is offering the world without any extras to the player. They can roam freely to 'experience' ancient Greece. However, by removing the plot and removing the challenges, one should ask themselves if this educational mode is still a videogame, or if it is, in fact, a digital museum packed within the videogame. For narrativists, it is no videogame because there is no story to interact with, merely a world in which one can trigger specific pieces of information. *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* could be an interactive index at best, but there is no causality between the information offered. To ludologists, the game offers no challenge and thus there would be nothing left to 'play'. In other words, for a videogame to be a videogame, there needs to be something that can be played – there need to be actions and consequences.

The causality between actions and consequences, however, is paramount, and that is where narratology comes in. The actions within *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* are tied to its story. You are not merely a random person, you are the child of Leonidas; you are not a mere citizen, you are a mercenary. These are the bases of your (combat) skills within the game. The player is constantly making motifs. They defeat an opponent; they go to the next town; they speak with this or that person. The causality might not be set in stone for the videogame itself, but the player links these events together through their choices.

Furthermore, the causality between events that you or other actors initiate might only be imagined. In *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, the plot is put in the foreground. However, some

videogames that have been discussed before, are less narratively inclined than this example. They do, however, present actors and events. The player must do something, and there are always opposing actors, or opponents (Bal, 2017, p. 171), to try and foil them: the player must be able to lose the game. Is it then so, that when only the elements of the *fabula*, actors and events, are present in a narrative text, the *fabula* itself is automatically implied? The videogame case seems to suggest so, with people inventing causality between events, perhaps unconsciously. What is more important, however, is that all videogames have actors and events, and therefore motifs.

If we consider that these motifs can be linked together ("the enemy attacks *because* I came too close"), the videogame has a *fabula*. As a result, I argue that any videogame is a narrative vehicle, because the elements of the *fabula* are always present. Even if the *fabula* told is light, or put on a backburner, or even entirely absent, the player interacts with the game as if it had a *fabula* – that is, as if there are causal or logical elements linking the motifs together. As a result, while any given videogame might not be a narrative in and of itself, any played videogame, through the intervention of the player as an actor within the game, becomes a narrative.

It does not matter, then, if this causality is reached through the aesthetic shell or the systematic core. If the next event is brought in by achieving the next plot point or by beating several non-descript enemies, the player will link it to their previous experiences within the game, thereby progressing through the game and its (at least imagined) *fabula*. The emergence of a new geometric shape in *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved*, in which the player controls a shape to defeat endless hordes of oncoming other shapes, implies the existence of a last enemy to be introduced; the pseudo-resetting[39] of the three-day period in *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* implies that the player can eventually prevent the moon from crashing down. The videogame is a narrative vehicle, even if, sometimes, the causality is merely implied. In those cases, it is up to the player to construct the narrative by linking the various elements together.

Moreover, the focus on the split between core and shell seems to be a question of the game's *story*, in the words of Bal: the presentation of the *fabula*. Approaching the *fabula* from the way in which it is represented is taking sides with the narrativists. It is preferring the aesthetic over the mechanic or what is shown over what is happening. Inversely, approaching the *fabula* from the means of progressing or triggering the events is siding with the

[39] In that the player holds onto certain important items that will render the next three days earlier and give the player access to new areas.

ludologists. In this paragraph, I have remarked several times upon the importance of the player's input and experience. What ludologists did recognize in the videogame *fabula* is that specific input is needed for the *fabula* to unfold. The causality between different actors or events is not something that unfolds naturally within a narrative vehicle. Actions must be made. They acknowledge that to read a book is to turn its pages. Similarly, to 'read' a videogame is to play it; in any story, the *fabula* must be acted out.

Player characters and non-player characters

Another split must be made to ensure that Bal's approach fits the videogame narrative without losing parts of the medium's identity. As shown in the example above, the videogame necessarily has two categories of actors. The actor as partaker in the *fabula* and the motif, and a subset of those actors that are controlled by the player. However, what does it mean when one actor can move seemingly freely from event to event, or resist continuing? Or are players forced to adhere to the *fabula*, and is choice a mere illusion?

An actant can be understood as a single actor, but also as a group of actors with similar goals, power and desires. Actors, and those again in subjects and objects, with the subjects wanting something from the objects (Bal, 2017, p. 167). The difference between actors and actants, in short, is that the actant can be virtually anything, while an actor is exclusively a singular but not necessarily human being[40]. This is a motivation for other events and what drives the *fabula* forwards. It is important to express motivation in terms of desire, as the intention can be resisted or troubled by exterior powers (p. 168). The hero might want to marry the prince, but he is betrothed to someone else, for example. Bal therefore indicates the existence of powers/senders and receivers (p. 169), where powers can grant subjects objects, such as a queen who can issue a duel for the hand of her son. The queen can then 'give' her son to the winner.

In that particular case, the queen is both object and power, as she 'gives' the winner the prince; she is also subject, as she wants to organize a duel between the suitors. The hero, likewise, is object to the queen's plans, but similarly subject in his own quest for love and conditional receiver if he wins. The prince, then, is here represented only as object. Moreover, every actor is part of an actant, a driving force in the *fabula*; however, a group of actors with similar goals, such as a comedy troupe that provide entertainment during the duel by bemoaning the fate of princes everywhere, can also be represented as a single actant. Finally,

[40] Weather, for example, can be an actor if weather is given a certain measure of agency or accountability.

it should be noted as before that neither actor nor actant need to be a character or human; a cultist, anonymous institution, for example, might back the other suitor in order to seize power through marriage.

These distinctions are directly applicable to videogames and help us to understand how they tell stories. In *Final Fantasy: The 4 Heroes of Light*, amongst many other JRPG's[41], the four eponymous heroes all have their own desires and arcs, and are actors, actants, subjects and objects at the same time. However, they are rarely 'power' and almost always receiver: it is through other actants within the story who tell them what to do for certain rewards, be they materialistic (in the form of gold) or rather abstract (in the form of saving a village from a witch). As the story progresses, and the four heroes get closer together and more unified in their goals, the group becomes more and more a single actant consisting of four separate actors.

What is interesting, then, is that in videogames, the divide between a single player character and a player group is oftentimes muddied. Although the player begins as a single actor named Brandt in *The 4 Heroes of Light*, he quickly allies himself with three others, sometimes controlling one or a subset of these four, and oftentimes all four at the same time. In cutscenes and narrative arcs, the same happens. There is a constant switch between which actors are part of the actant and which take a backseat. This is not only true for this particular game, but for many games in which the player controls a group of characters.

The actant that is controlled by the player, which is called the Player Character (PC), is therefore an actant within the *fabula*, and not placed beyond or outside of the story events. In other words, the protagonist of *Super Mario Bros.* cannot suddenly decide to partake in *Megaman*; the actant's actions and choices are delimited within their own game and thus within their own story. Now, the PC is set apart from the NPC in two important ways. First, as Murray notes, the PC is always the protagonist of the story[42] (Murray, 1997, p. 143); the game is focalized through the eyes of this actant[43], although a game can shift perspective[44].

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[41] A Japanese Role Playing Game, named for the country of origin, is usually a grand tale about a group of friends who save the world. *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest* are probably the biggest franchises in this genre, but numerous other games can be categorized as such are inspired by this genre. They are prime examples of narrative in videogames, as most RPGs are (the Role-Playing suggests indeed that there is a role to be played out within a story).

[42] This holds true for multiplayer games, where, interestingly, any player is the protagonist in the same world at the same time. This is usually achieved by offering non-multiplayer quests that each player can complete independently.

[43] Sometimes, an outside narrator exists that recounts the events of these characters, which *technically* frames the focalisation.

[44] For example, to show what the villains are planning, or, as is the case in *The Last of Us Part II*, by presenting another, opposing narrative.

Secondly, the PC moves in differing degrees of freedom through the story, whereas the NPCs are coded to perform certain actions with certain triggers. It is the PC, for example, that decides when it goes to the next stage or area, when they talk to an NPC or when they engage with a particular part of the world. Day-and-night cycles are usually put on a certain timer or are linked to certain areas, as well. Traversing *Pokémon Sword & Shield*'s Galar Region for the first time seems to take place in a single day, as the cycle progresses with the player; after the story has been completed it mimics real-time. Some of these can restrict the PC from moving all too freely; the Moon in *Majora's Mask* condemns the PC to act with haste. Although the PC can choose whether or not to accept the tasks before him, certain choices come with certain consequences. The Moon, in this case, is a power acting upon the subject. This degree of freedom differs from game to game, even from motif to motif, and is what we have come to call 'interactivity'.

Inter(re)activity: The Player and the Character

To Murray, interactivity, plot and freedom are parts of a whole: "the more freedom the interactor feels, the more powerful the sense of plot[45]. Since plot is a function of causality, it is crucial to reinforce the sense that the interactor's choices have led to the events of the story (p. 207)". Interactivity is what sets the PC apart from the NPCs. Being controlled by an external factor, the player, the PC does not act according to the game's script, but rather the game's coding interprets the player's input as script. Therefore, the PC is a dynamic and variable actor, situated amongst static NPCs[46].

It is, however, important to note that this freedom is limited in several ways. As said before, the PC cannot be transferred from one story to the other. The number of actions and ways to progress through the story are rather limited by the options and the rules the game sets upon the player (Lavigne, 2018, p. 16). In fact, in almost all conversational cases, the PC is limited to either silence, letting the player imagine the response of their characters, to a set answer-and-reply dialogue, rendering the conversation into some form of a cinematic cut-scene stripping away player agency or, finally, to a set number of answers. Actions in the game may or may not have lasting consequences – some options chosen by the player might not have any effect at all, while others might change the ending of the story.

[45] In the terms of Bal, this would be the *fabula*.
[46] This is a key concern when discussing Multi-Player Games, as the amount of dynamic characters, influenced even further by external factors such as rankings or consequences of losing, renders any non-sociological approach an approach that is only focused on parts of the whole.

Carlen Lavigne, for example, considers *important* choices, "a combination of player control and meaningful change – 'agency' and 'transformation' – [to be] required for successful 'interactive drama'" (pp. 16-17). In her analysis of *Heavy Rain*, in which she considers the representation of people of color and of women, the difficulty of considering only important choices and differing outcomes is made clear. She resorts to an enumeration of multiple possibilities without considering the entirety of the story told. In narratological terms, she contrasts the different *fabulae*, but is the videogame as a whole not *one* story? In fact, Lavigne identifies that oftentimes, videogames with different solutions seem to have one 'true' ending (p. 15). Why do we, however, consider any particular variant of the story as optimal[47]?

The solution presented by Toby Smethurst and Stef Craps in "Playing with Trauma", then, seems more elegant. While acknowledging that interactivity is indeed a key concept when talking about videogame narrative, in that it is commonly seen as what sets the videogame apart from other narrative media (Smethurst & Craps, 2015, p. 271). They argue that all narrative vehicles are interactive, if we understand interactivity as an action of comprehension between the subject and the vehicle – if we see interactivity as the engagement one makes in order to understand what is (re)presented, be it through film, literature or art (p. 272). Instead, they plead for the term 'interreactivity' because the videogame is the only medium that actively changes through the input of the player:

> [Texts] can be interpreted differently, and the cultural status of the text is subject to change over time, but the individual reader proceeding through a novel is powerless to affect how it turns out, beyond the questionable expedient of skipping chapters or prematurely putting down a book in order to avert a sad ending. Games, on the other hand, do allow the player varying measures of agency within the fictional world. […] The game reacts to the player's input both on a moment-to-moment basis (e.g., the protagonist immediately responds to the player commanding them to move left or right) and in the long term. The latter is evidenced most simply with a Game Over and/or a high score screen that reflects the player's performance or, at the other end of the scale of complexity, with repercussions that only become apparent further down the line, as other paths through the game are opened or blocked off due to the player's earlier decisions (p. 272).

[47] Except for those games, of course, which offer an overarching finale after having beaten several of the other endings, such as *Octopath Traveler*, which I will later discuss.

The PC, and therefore the player, Smethurst and Craps seem to imply, is an actor within the *fabula*, but one that has a certain amount of agency outside of the vehicle. The vehicle reacts to the player, and in turn, the player keeps interacting with the medium. It should be noted that, as Lavigne suggest, there seems to often exist 'one true ending', however, what Smethurst and Crabs argue is that a player can choose another ending that satisfies their personal tastes[48].

Furthermore, Smethurst and Craps do away with the suggestion of important choices. In their analysis of the videogame *The Walking Dead: Season One*, they notice that certain, difficult choices offer little in the form of agency or transformation. At most, the player's actions would influence the current cut-scene but would eventually and irrevocably turn back to the main progression of the story: the choice presented is a false choice (p. 283). However, Smethurst and Craps argue, it would take multiple playthroughs[49] of the same game to discover that the choice offered was false, by actively choosing the other option. In a single playthrough, there is no simple way of detecting that the choice made has no influence whatsoever, unless the game actively disregards that moment of agency:

> The narrative branches that the player does not travel down but perceives as possibilities are just as important to their understanding of the story as the events that actually play out on the screen. One could reasonably field the argument that this overarching antinarrative or phantom narrative is even more powerful than the narrative itself, since it colludes with the player's imagination to create might-have beens that the game's developers could not possibly have anticipated or included in the game (p. 283).

In other words, Smethurst and Craps argue, first, that the unique aspect of the videogame is not that it engages the player, as other narrative media do that as well – instead, the videogame narrative, in varying degrees, react to the player. Secondly, and most importantly, they do away with the idea that choices made by the player through the Player Character must be meaningful for them to create a suggestion that the PC is an actant *with agency* in the *fabula* at hand. The mere illusion of choice and consequence is enough to give the player everything they need to imagine the story as it would have played out otherwise – not unlike Boyd's observation that minimal information is enough to convey story.

[48] This becomes more difficult in videogames such as *Octopath Traveler* or *Sonic Adventure 2*, in which the 'true ending' is locked behind the completion of other, 'false' endings.
[49] A playthrough is the act of playing 'through' the videogame once.

The Videogame Tells Stories

The moment the player is presented with a choice between two options, two parallel motifs are created: ‘the PC agrees’ or ‘the PC disagrees’; or: ‘the PC goes to X’ or ‘the PC goes to Y’. In *Octopath Traveler*, for example, the player is initially offered the choice between eight individuals, each with their own narrative. It is, although difficult, entirely possible to complete a single character’s narrative without interacting and teaming up with the remaining seven characters. Additionally, the stories themselves do not change any more than the order of meeting these eight characters, as the narratives are contained within the one individual to which the narrative is tied. It is not until the very end of the game, that is only accessible by clearing all eight stories, that the stories overlap. From a narratological stance, the choices made do not matter, as they all, eventually, must be cleared, all *fabulae* must be acted out, to complete the story.

In terms of player experience, however, it makes all the difference, and each playthrough might be different from any other. The choices made impact directly how the player approaches the game. Choosing the warrior means that the player must stock up on healing items until they unlock a healing character; inversely, if they pick the healer first, they must find another means of dealing damage. Even if all *fabulae* must be acted out, and thus the order per se does not matter for the narrative, it is rather important for the way in which the subject experiences the story.

Again, the difficulties of approaching a game from a purely aesthetic or a purely mechanical point of view are brought to the fore; it is only by reconciling the two in acknowledging that, yes, the PC is a part of the story, given choices in the form of motifs. However, one must also see that the story interreacts through the player input and is given meaning through the system of rules that the game creates (which is to say, for one game pressing X might mean attacking, in the other it might mean jumping) and that the game limits the player in their freedom. Games excel in giving “free movement within a limited space (Smethurst & Craps, 2015, p. 280)”. This free movement, then, is not only mechanical, in that the game simulates a world in which the player can act. It is also narratological, in the sense that players can choose how to progress through the story. The causal links between motifs, and thus the creation of the *fabula*, are in the hands of the player.

If one considers the videogame as a Future Narrative, the influence that the player has on the progression and the outcome of the story is made central. In the example above, the experience of the videogame is, for example, altered depending on the choice. I have, however, two qualms with this approach. The importance they adhere to choice is, firstly,

problematic. Bode and Dietrich argue that a playthrough of a game and the resulting interaction with the story constitutes a story, and not the game's story itself (Bode & Dietrich, 2013, p. 74). Even if they acknowledge that the construction of story happens throughout the playthrough and not only after completing it, but they neglect the fact that many videogames do, in fact, tell stories and many stories are essentially linear.

Although the illusion of choice is often created through phantom narratives, it is important to consider which story the videogame tries to communicate before looking solely at the interpretation of said story. One could correctly argue that intent and interpretation are often star-crossed lovers (Rose, 2018, p. 6), but prioritizing interpretation over intent is, in essence, arguing that the presentation of story is of no consequence at all. It should be all the more interesting, however, to see what and how story tries to convey it meaning and examine how interpretations differ from this intention.

Secondly, by giving utmost importance to the player's actions is to make them diegetic in practice, which they are not: the players are not inside the videogame, although the player might be persuaded to think so. After all, do the players decide what options they have, or does the videogame present the player with those options? Moreover, the player is not an actor within the *fabula* nor within the story. Bode and Dietrich do acknowledge this point, but instead point towards an avatar that is virtually the same as the player (p. 43). I have shown, however, that the actant that is the PC can take many forms, even multiple, and partake in the story. But is it true that the PC is simply an extension of the player? A narratological approach seems to suggest that it is not. Domsch's suggestion that play and story in videogames have rules at their base (Domsch, 2013, p. 14), resonate with the idea that the shell is a form of communication for the core. In fact, Domsch notes that games have "a strong tendency for diegetic legitimization of rules to the coherence of the [videogame] (p. 23)". However, although his explanation accounts for a reconciliation of narratological and ludological arguments, it does not provide an explanation of how the videogame or the videogame story actively engages the player.

I argue, then, that the videogame is a unique narrative medium, but a narrative medium nonetheless. To focus on the presentation in terms of story, as narrativists do, is to be blind to how the story is represented, within which there is a constant back-and-forth between player and videogame. Moreover, this alternating pattern is not so much an interpretative one, but a string of choices and inputs. The consequence of such an approach is that many videogames, which do not put story on the forefront, are eliminated from the equation on seemingly arbitrary grounds, for when does a videogame possess enough 'story' to be

considered interesting? In contrast, to focus on the mechanics underlying the videogame and to the challenges presented to the player, as ludologists do, is to see the game not as a cultural artefact, but as a mere piece of code, as a set of rules. The videogame is, however, an aesthetical product designed to be enjoyed, not only from a challenging perspective, but increasingly to tell stories to augment the stakes. If not, the development of the videogame would have halted somewhere in the 90's or the early 00's, when 3D-gaming crystallized. Ever since, there have been no major revolutions in single player games, and yet we keep producing newer, better, larger, more impressive stories.

In this chapter, I hope to have demonstrated how all videogames contain *fabula*, and that therefore story is present, whether explicit or implicit. A good friend and videogame enthusiast interjected, when discussing these ideas, that "surely, *Tetris* does not have any kind of story?". And yet it does: the blocks falling and stacking, and only clearing away when a full line is reached, are actors and events as present in any *fabula*. The motifs, the smallest combinations of actor and events, are easy to define: blocks falling, blocks stacking, blocks disappearing or the blocks reaching the top. The causality, as a movement through time, between motifs is clear. One is free to imagine whether (if any) *Tetris* is representing a particular kind story, but the medium interacts with us. How the game interacts with us, however, differs according to the player. One might see a reward in clearing a line, others might feel anxious as the screen slowly fills. The videogame interacts with us emotionally. In this case, it is hard to say if *Tetris* is also empathic, as there is no clear actor whose position we should take; if any, it is probably a screen that does not want to be full. But in many other games, these actors are present and thus it is necessary to understand how the videogame is not only a vehicle of narrative, but equally a vehicle of empathy.

Empathic Videogames

In the first chapter I explored several arguments on the importance of fiction and the role empathy plays therein. However, the question of narrative in videogame required some more attention. Now that I have demonstrated why the videogame is a medium that conveys narrative more than anything else, it is time to consider whether videogame stories, just like other stories, also engage the audience's attention and offer a simulation, not only of a world but also of empathy, similarly to other narrative vehicles (cf. Boyd, 2009; Nussbaum, 2010). Do we stand in the shoes of our Player-Characters, and if so, how and why do we this?

Considering empathy in videogames serves a threefold function. As I have argued in the previous chapter, the videogame functions like a narrative by the existence of *fabulae*, even if the causal links between different motifs are sometimes implicit instead of explicit. If this assumption is correct, the videogame puts the player indeed into the shoes of the PC and gives them a role to act out. That is the first function. Therefore, if videogames act like narrative, do they also elicit empathy like narrative? Second, the consideration of empathy in videogames, an interreactive medium, presents us with the possibility of empathic choices: are the players' choices and the way in which they interact with the videogame influenced by their empathic feelings? Third, if videogames are indeed empathic, it is paramount that we consider what kind of stories videogames tell. The image of the violent, bloodthirsty videogame is many a parent's nightmare, driving fears that their children will turn into likewise aggressive and toxic human beings, something to which 'the gamer' stereotypically has already succumbed (cf. Paul, 2018). If empathy nonetheless leads to social (personal) growth, then does that not give the player a chance to experience in a safe environment to what result certain choices might lead?

Empathy, sympathy and reflection are, unfortunately, notoriously difficult to define, as they interact and depend on one another. In this chapter, I will therefore first elaborate on the distinctions and notions of empathy, sympathy and reflection as explained by Emy Koopman. I will also add other notions, such as apathy, antipathy and identification, to define my understanding of these terms and, thus, how I will be using them going forward. Secondly, I will focus on the interesting role of the PC as the protagonist in videogames, and how empathic identification is operationalized through interaction and the status of the player within the story. Lastly, I will consider the concept of immersion in videogames, bringing it in contact with the themes of empathy, inter(re)action and the aesthetics of the videogame.

A Terminology from *Reading Suffering*

Emy Koopman explains that it is difficult to distinguish between the terms 'empathy' and 'sympathy' in practice, although the terms have a theoretical distinction (p. 17). Whereas empathy means to feel *with* someone, sympathy is more about feeling *for* someone. The distinction between the two, according to Koopman, is that "empathy [is] feeling someone else's feelings, sympathy [is] feeling concern for another without feeling what the other feels (p. 17)". In other words, empathy is placing yourself in someone else's shoes, something that is not necessary to feel sympathy. This distinction means that one can feel sympathetic towards another, without first placing themselves in their shoes.

The problem with this definition comes, as Koopman demonstrates, when this is translated into a practical situation. If a subject feels for a fictionalized character, is this emotion the result of an empathic recognition of the other's troubles and wishes? Or is it rather the result of a sympathetic acknowledgment of their needs? Koopman also introduces the idea of 'identification' at the same time, which she defines as 'taking a character's perspective combined with recognizing similarities (p. 17)'. Identification, then, further muddies the notion of empathy by sharing the same factor of recognizing the other but takes it a step further by blurring the boundary between the subject and the object. The term is also contrasted with absorption, which Koopman distinguishes from empathy, sympathy and identification in that '[absorption] is not a feeling towards characters but a feeling of being immersed in the narrative world, experiencing it as vivid (p. 17)'.

Empathy, sympathy, identification and absorption are four terms determining the affective responses, the emotions, that are triggered within any subject. For Koopman, these four terms are more or less synchronous, as the subject can feel any of these four at the same time when interacting with a narrative, which can be a reason for the overlap in definition. One can feel both empathy and sympathy for a character, or either. One can identify with a character, it seems, to whom one is neither empathic nor sympathetic. Koopman calls identification, sympathy and empathy narrative feelings[50] (p. 16).

For Koopman, the practical solution to overcoming the difference between empathy and sympathy is to combine the terms into one broad definition of feeling with/for a character with whom the subject does not identify. Identification, then, seems to be set apart as a form of "seeing oneself as similar to [characters] (p. 104)". In other words, identification is a union

[50] In fact, when talking about empathy in fiction, Koopman notes that it is indeed different from empathy with real persons, because of which she later posits the term 'narrative empathy (p. 104)'. As I am exclusively talking about fiction, however, and the two processes are similar, I chose to utilize the term as is.

between the fictional other and the self, whereas empathy/sympathy is felt for someone we do not see as ourselves. With identification, the subject typically imagines or acts with a certain degree of self-preserving or self-serving behavior, even if these wishes and desires have been copied from a character (p. 105): we 'take their role', as it were. It is unclear, however, if we can empathize with characters with whom we identify. Koopman merely suggests that identification and empathy/sympathy are "theoretically distinguishable" (p. 50).

Empathy itself can either be 'affective', or 'warm', meaning emotional, unconscious, instinctive, and 'cognitive' or 'cold' empathy referring to rational, conscious, and reasoned empathy (pp. 18, 104). The two variants work interdependently and the separation, to Koopman, is artificial, which leads her to seeing an 'empathic reaction' as the result of both, in varying degrees (p. 104). Koopman suggest that therefore there is no use in separating 'affective' and 'cognitive', or 'warm' and 'cold' empathy from each other. These reactions, it should be noted, can differ from person to person, according to personal tastes and experiences (p. 112). Fiction, through narrative and aesthetic feelings[51], can bring about empathic reactions nonetheless (p. 114). It is moreover useful to consider that empathy can be the fruit of rational analysis, instead of purely based on emotional resonance.

Identification and empathy/sympathy should, ideally, lead to reflection. Koopman explains reflection as "people's conscious thoughts and insights about oneself, others, society, and life in general (p. 20)". Narrative feelings can lead to reflection (p. 282):

> Generally, we can assume that some of the mechanisms which supposedly lead from reading to empathy with others also lead to reflection. The simulation of being someone else that is encouraged by the narrative structure can also lead to thoughts about what it is like to be such a person. The freedom to imagine different worlds without having to act on them that fictionality allows for cannot only help us indulge in that world, but possibly also bring insights from that world to everyday life (p. 115).

Reflection, then, seems to be the wished-for outcome of empathic reactions, not unlike the arguments made by Boyd and Nussbaum. Reflection, Koopman explains, also spans more time than empathic reactions, possibly up to weeks after reading a text (p. 282).

Koopman's analysis, however, has two points that must be reconsidered before it can be applied to videogames. First, the scope of the research is different. Koopman is interested in an empirical inquiry into empathic and reflective responses to literary narratives and

[51] Similar to narrative feelings, but these are not the result of characters or events, but rather of the way in which these are presented: the form and presentation of a text impacts the subject as much as its contents. I will come back to this term at a later point.

specifically in ‘sad’ books; my study is neither empirical nor interested in tragic literary texts. As a result, whereas bringing together empathy and sympathy was feasible for Koopman, I feel the need to distinguish once more between the two. Alternatively, whereas Koopman could focus on a few select works, I aim to instrumentalize empathy for all videogames. In other words, I need to make specific what was abstracted, and abstract what was specified.

From Empathy to Sympathy

Koopman’s theoretical distinction between empathy and sympathy rests on the assumption that one does not need to have empathic feelings for another to feel sympathetic towards this person (p. 17). Therefore, as noted above, empathy and sympathy can occur at the same moment, according to Koopman. The issue with this assumption is that this either means the subject knows the other’s desires from another source, or that there is another, external reason to feel concern for this other, for which one can feel sympathy. I suspect, however, that one must first feel empathy before one can feel sympathy.

If the subject knows what the object wants and aligns themselves with them, it is necessary to know how exactly one came to recognize these desires without, apparently, placing oneself in the shoes of the other. As Koopman notes, empathy can occur for affective or cognitive reasons. The reader might instinctively feel what the character wants, but the character might also state his or her needs outright. Alternatively, if there are external indicators from which the reader sympathizes with the character, it seems that there is a level of identification: ‘I would not want to be in these circumstances’ or ‘in these circumstances, I would need this’. One can imagine someone who lives in poverty or is about to be attacked by a monster, for example. However, the sympathy seems to be reached either through empathy or through identification. The question then becomes how one can feel sympathy or identify without first going through this empathic step.

For Suzanne Keen, empathy is therefore not synchronous but a preliminary step to sympathy (Keen, 2006, p. 208). This means that, before one feels sympathetic, one first feels empathic. Sympathy, then, seems to be a follow-up feeling towards empathy. Initially, the subject feels what the other feels, or rather, feels *with* the other. Based on that insight, the subject can then feel sympathy, or feeling *for* the other: they choose, albeit subconsciously, to support the other’s feelings (p. 209). However, this implies the existence of a moment of choice: when offered an affective input, the subject reacts empathically. If this can lead to sympathy, this could also potentially lead to the opposite reaction. Keen indicates ‘personal

distress' as a counterbalance, which she describes as "an aversive emotional response also characterized by apprehension of another's emotion" (p. 208).

Personal distress, however, seems a very specific negative of sympathy. As noted in the first chapter, empathy is also a key component of torture, for example (Bubandt & Willerslev, 2015, p. 12); empathy is not in and of itself ethical. Now, torture (or in emotional terms: hate), like distress, is a specific outcome of empathy. An umbrella term for all these reactions could be 'antipathy'. Yvonne Liebermann offers this term as an opposing term to sympathy. She explains that feeling sympathy for one character could lead to antipathy for the other, as their desires and wishes might be diametrically opposed (Liebermann, 2019, pp. 58, 60).

This all presupposes that any affective input automatically leads to an empathic reaction. A subject, for whatever reason, can miss the trigger or simply not respond. In these cases, the term 'apathy' might be a fit description, as there is a general lack of any emotional response whatsoever. This then leads to a schematic approach of affective signs in texts (fig. 1). If there is an affective input, the subject can react to it by either refusing or accepting it. The subject is consequently presented, often unconsciously, with a similar choice: if they were in this person's shoes, would they support or reject (the emotions of) this character? The action one undertakes from there varies and is potentially unlimited in range, as shown before, from offering help to torture.

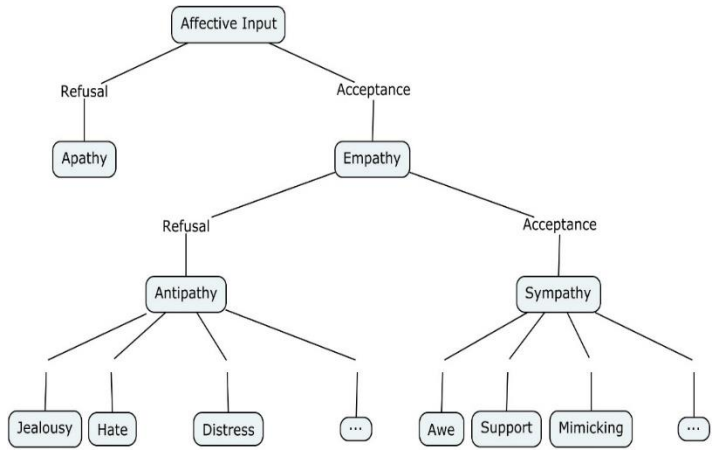

Figure 1 Empathic Reactions

To feel sympathy with any character, it is thus necessary to first feel with the character, to understand what he or she wants, and then to align oneself with this character. That is not to say that antipathy is a failure of an empathic medium. There are numerous fictional characters that are created to be hated or that we love to hate. Oftentimes, these characters are opponents, in narratological terms (Bal, 2017, p. 171). In the videogame *Sonic the Hedgehog*, for example, the goal is to progress as quickly through the stages. At the end of each stage, the player needs to fight doctor Eggman, an engineer in a mechanical monstrosity. However, he is not merely a literal opponent that Sonic must defeat to progress. Throughout the stages, Sonic is attacked by robots that have little forest animals, like rabbits and small birds, trapped inside them by doctor Eggman. Not only is the doctor an opposing force, but he also displays a

tendency to see others as mere tools to be used for his own goals at best, and to abuse animals at worst. Defeating him is therefore even more satisfying – we feel justified in overcoming this detestable villain. His actions evoke antipathy, which in turn makes the player more sympathetic to Sonic's cause. An antipathetic opponent strengthens the sympathy we feel for the opposed actant (p. 171).

Interactive Empathy

The unconscious choices the reader makes when it comes to empathy are amplified in videogames. As Smethurst and Craps have noted, it is not an actual meaningful choice in videogames that makes the interreactivity[52] between videogame and player so prevalent for the medium, but in fact the illusion of choice. In the example from the videogame *The Walking Dead: Season One* that they give, at a given point the player has to choose between a father and a son when attacked by zombies (Smethurst & Craps, 2015, p. 282). Although the choice does little in terms of the plot (the outcome is more or less the same), the player is given a difficult choice.

Smethurst and Craps argue that this moment is made 'meaningful' through the creation of a 'what-if-scenario', a phantom narrative. Because the player is led on to believe that this choice has lasting consequences, as they do not see the outcome of the other choice, the player is tricked into thinking the moment offered a real choice, instead of a false one (p. 283). However, that seems to be circular reasoning: because the player believes x, they think x. Smethurst and Craps then argue that, after the illusion of interreactivity is established, the player is led to respond more empathically to affective input, as they are complicit through the choices they have made (p. 286). In short, they put the choice before the investment: meaningful choices lead to empathic investment in videogames.

I would argue the opposite, however. Because the player must make an empathic choice, they become invested in the videogame and are given the idea that their choices are meaningful. If the choice presented is not emotionally interesting, there is no reason to prefer either option or to wonder what would happen if the other choice had been made. The interreactivity between videogame and player does not begin *after* the choice has been made, but the moment the choice is given. It is the videogame, not the player, who takes the reins. It is the videogame, after all, that delimits the space in which the player can freely act.

[52] The game's story responds to input from the player and the player reacts to the game's output.

In *We. The Revolution*, the player is given command of a judge in France's court system during the French Revolution. This judge must balance the differing factors in his social and professional lives, from drinking and gambling with colleagues to being a good father to his sons, while passing judgement that is both moral and 'correct' in the political landscape of *La Terreur*. Consequentially, the player sometimes must make the 'wrong' decision in the short term, to ameliorate his position in the long run. Some of these questions are meaningful, in that they profoundly alter the story that is told[53].

Because the game comes down to a balancing of reputation with several factions and the game can eventually be completed, there is an optimal way of progressing through the game: in fact, several walkthroughs[54] exist that tell you exactly which options to pick to ensure that you will not succumb to the people or the revolutionary forces and find your own neck under the guillotine. Purely rationally, then, the game could be approached with such a walkthrough in hand or by picking the option that adjusts the balance in your favor without ever considering the case at hand.

Such an approach would defeat the purpose of the game: it is by considering moral implications against these statistics of reputation that the game becomes interesting. The game creates these moral implications not only against a background of ethics ("this person did not do this crime"), but also through the factions at play. In the very first case, you are to judge your own son, who assaulted another child that insulted you, the father. While it is undeniable that your son was mistaken, the circumstances were extenuating. He handled in defense of your and his honor. Through the link between father and son, and the fact that the son handled in sympathy with you, we are led to feel first feel empathy for the son ('you acted because you felt') and henceforth sympathy ('I understand why you felt this way') or antipathy ('You acted hotheadedly and therefore must be punished'). The choice of how to deal with the kid depends on the player's reaction to the empathic input. In other cases, such as the judging of king Louis XVI, deciding to pronounce the accused not guilty could very well end up making the judge lose his life and the player the game. In that case, as the player stands in the shoes of the player character, – as well as a desire to move forward within the game – the situation will likely push the player towards condemning the king.

[53] Both in the meta-story as in the story itself: it is entirely possible to save King Louis XVI from the guillotine, albeit by sentencing him to jail as 'citizen Capet'. In the story itself, your reputation with different factions gives you access to other cases or solutions as you play along, although all cases that 'must' be completed will be handed to you either way.

[54] A walkthrough is a guide designed to explain how to progress through the game step by step.

Empathy & the Player-Character

Feeling empathy for the player character is interesting as the player character's identity oftentimes is left vague or is even non-existent. In the case of *We. The Revolution*, the identity of the judge might differ between two playthroughs from 'a well-meaning but clumsy judge' to 'a scheming power-hungry maniac' through the choices of the player. In fact, it is difficult to say that the player feels sympathy for the PC, in this case, as the story focalizes through the PC: the player experiences the story from the point of view of the character. This union between player and PC procures a specific form of empathy and sympathy: identification. The player projects themselves through the player-character upon the world. Consequently, the player empathizes with the PC, as they put themselves quite directly in the shoes of the character. In the same vein, the player sympathizes with the PC, as their feelings, wishes and desires are ideally the same. Even if this is not the case, the player imposes their will on that of the PC, as the player is the one in control.

If identification is theoretically different from empathy (Koopman, 2016, p. 50), I argue that it functions nonetheless through affective input. As I have shown in fig. 1, acceptance of the affective input leads to an empathic response. The question is now: is identification a reaction to empathy, as are antipathy and sympathy, or does the subject need to sympathize with the object beforehand, making identification a form of sympathy? I argue that, through different means, both answers are correct.

In cases where the PC is an empty vessel, as Mathieu Triclot suggests, that serves as an avatar through which the player acts (Triclot, 2011, p. 85), the player is free to project their wishes and desires on the character without any barriers. In *Hollow Knight*, the PC is a small knight-like bug without a name that is perpetually silent. Although the game imposes different tasks and options for the player, the player is relatively free in how they explore the world. The player can project their questions, curiosity and ambitions on the PC, that does not resist this characterization in any way. A courageous player might tackle stronger foes before rationally advisable, while careful players might postpone getting into unfamiliar situations, if possible.

Alternatively, if the desires of the PC and the player align within the story, the player recognizes and accepts the feelings of the PC, and through that alignment can identify with the PC. In *God of War*, the bloodthirsty warrior Kratos sets out to kill the Greek Gods in a plot of revenge. The alignment comes from the fact that Ares tricked Kratos into killing his own wife and daughter for the God's own benefit. The Gods are represented as antipathetic, Kratos as sympathetic, and thus killing the Gods is most likely the desire of the player as well

as that of the PC. Furthermore, if identification is achieved through projection, the alignment of goals creates sympathy for the PC in the eyes of the player (fig. 2).

In many videogames there is a distinct difference between the PC when the player is in control, and the PC in cut-scenes. *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, for example, interchanges cut-scenes and player-agency almost seamlessly. For example, the game makes use of continuous cinematic interruptions before and during the final battle. Before the battle, main character Cloud and his friends are forced off a precipice by the antagonist Sephiroth. In this cut-scene, Cloud falls amongst large chunks of debris, separating him from his friends, while slashing through train compartments as if they were made from cardboard – a physical feat not normally available to the player. During the battle, in which the player acts, Cloud reverts to a player avatar whose actions are controlled by the player. Throughout the struggle, Sephiroth gains the upper hand multiple times, during which a cut-scene interrupts the action to show how he threatens to defeat Cloud and how, subsequently, one of Cloud's friends is reintroduced to save him and help during the continuation of the battle.

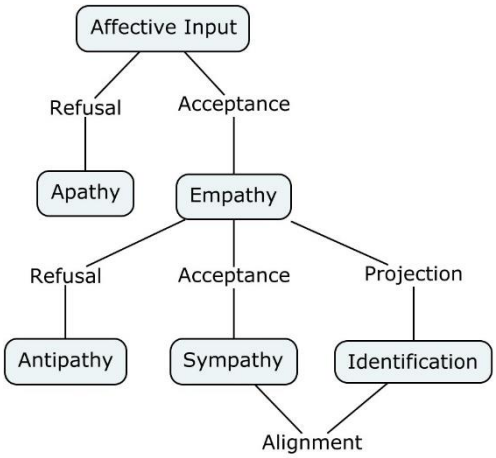

Figure 2 Antipathy, Sympathy and Identification as results of Empathy

The cut-scenes here are used to show more impressive feats than the player normally has access to (the ability to slash through metal would make quick work of any location the player previously has visited) and to explain how Cloud is separated from his friends before being reunited with them. Every cut-scene serves a narratological purpose. Additionally, by the way in which the cut-scenes are employed the stakes are continuously raised, as Cloud is by no means an average human being, as shown by his strength. However, the boss character far outclasses him, and it is only through the assistance of his friends that Cloud has any chance of overcoming Sephiroth. The use of cinematographic material that strips away player agency is used to imply that these actions and this situation are out of the ordinary for the game. The cut-scenes also imply that Cloud is a brave character with quick reflexes and a lion's heart that can overcome any obstacle, albeit with the help of his friends. This in turn emboldens the player to continue and to not give up in the face of overwhelming danger (and equally presents this overwhelming danger in a 'safe' way, as the player-character is saved time and again).

For Triclot, the player is transformed into a spectator as soon as the cut-scene starts until the player is given back control. Interesting, then, is the role of the cut-scene. Triclot identifies its primary uses as a vehicle for a story as well as gratification for the player (Triclot, 2011, p. 75). He considers the videogame as "*du cinéma, avec quelque chose en plus* (p. 79)" as the player is actively engaging with the medium instead of passively spectating it. This something is interactivity to him, or interreactivity to Smethurst and Craps. The latter two adapt Newman's 2002 distinction of 'online' and 'offline'[55]; players are online when they are given direct control and they are offline when the game has taken control away from them in dialogues or cut-scenes. When offline, affective input is mostly given as it would be in cinema or literature (Smethurst & Craps, 2015, p. 283).

In the example of *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, the power of alternating between the two is clear. The offline cut-scenes raise the stakes for when the player is online, as well as explain narratological events (Cloud getting separated and subsequently being reunited with his friends). Some efforts have been made to merge offline and online modes, with the introduction of Quick-Time Events, in which the player must quickly respond by pressing either one or a sequence of buttons to successfully perform the special actions portrayed in the cut-scenes[56]. Another option is to have dialogue on screen or spoken when the player is online.

To Triclot, inter(re)activity causes a deeper immersion into the videogame than a film could provide by giving the player a certain range of options and choices that gives them agency in the fictive world in which they find themselves (Triclot, 2011, p. 96). Perhaps paradoxically, then, he notes that the videogame's advanced immersion does not lead to further understanding or empathy with the videogame's characters when compared to film. Rather, it seems to often fail in deepening the emotional investment of the player, as the player character is not seen as a fully developed character, but rather as an avatar of the player (p. 85).

It seems then that the narrative or empathic shortcomings of the player-character in the active medium of the videogame can be augmented with these short, story-driven morsels of

[55] Cf. (Newman, 2002)

[56] For example, in *Marvel's Spider-Man*, Quick Time Events are employed to show off Spider-Man's reaction abilities. In a boss fight, as Spider-Man and the boss character Fisk fall down multiple stories while continuing their fight, there are multiple QTE's that determine who has the upper-hand. However, this also means that the player can fail several QTE's without losing the fight. I consider this being offline, however, as the buttons pressed do not correspond to the actual abilities Spider-Man usually has. Additionally, among even more indicators, the focalization of the game is different during these scenes, being more cinematic than when the player is actually in control.

film or dialogue. By taking away the player agency, the game creates a chance to create characteristics for the Player-Character. As the player being online hinders the PC from developing their own characteristics, the offline player can sit back and see the character come to life in a cinematic or textual way. In response, because the player now knows that this PC is brave or is absurdly strong, because they know that he must come home to his son or because he wants to be kept in high esteem by his colleagues, the player feels emboldened in the choices they must make. The player will face the boss, they will condemn someone who might not be guilty.

This is, again, the interreactivity between the player and the videogame, as the way in which the PC is portrayed offline influences the decisions the player makes when online. This is not done by directly altering the player's state of mind, but indirectly by showing the player how the PC would react, and then giving the player control over that same character after creating a precedent of action. If Cloud had fled from Sephiroth in the cut-scenes, the player would most likely take the hint and take evasive measures because the game tells them that this character should not be encountered. I therefore do not fully agree with Triclot's affirmation that videogames elicit less empathy than films. They might, however, offer less *sympathy* for their empty avatars at first, but thereby they offer more possibilities for *identification* (through projection) with those same PCs. The online player, who identifies themselves with the PC, sees what the PC does when offline and internalizes this action. Heroic input elicits heroic responses.

Immersion and Worldbuilding: Aesthetic Feelings

The videogame not only communicates with the player through its characters, though. The space in which the player can move and in which the story's characters act, is just as important. This environment is usually called the game world, which takes many forms and provides many ways to move within its boundaries. Murray categorizes four essential characteristics of a 'digital environment':

> When we stop thinking of the computer as a multimedia telephone link, we can identify its four principal properties, which separately and collectively make it a powerful vehicle for literary creation. Digital environments are **procedural, participatory, spatial, and encyclopedic**. The first two properties make up most of what we mean by the vaguely used word *interactive*; the remaining two properties help to make digital creations seem as explorable and extensive as the actual world, making up much of what we mean when we say that cyberspace is *immersive* (Murray, 1997, pp. 71, emphasis added).

‘Procedural’ means that there is a reaction for any action in the digital space. ‘Participatory’ means that for any reaction to occur, the player must input actions in the digital environment. The third property, ‘spatiality’, is the one in which videogames differ most from more passive media. Videogames invite the player to move in their ‘landscapes’, often “shaped into a dramatic enactment of plot (p. 83)”: the player, Murray argues, is given incentive to move both in space and in time by participating in the story. These spaces can range from *Tetris*’ rectangle field to enormously and intricately crafted open worlds, such as the one found in *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt*.

Additionally, the ‘encyclopedic’ nature of the digital provides a possibility “to represent enormous quantities of information in digital form [which] translates into an artist’s potential to offer a wealth of detail, to represent the world with both scope and particularity (p. 84)”. The videogame is seen as encyclopedic, as it contains many different outcomes and choices for the player to make at any time, even as basic as “do I go left or do I go right?”. Inputting any combination of buttons leads to a particular outcome within the videogame. These actions are the key to accessing specific parts of the game. By overloading the player with several options, an option outside of the game’s possibilities (such as siding with the enemies firing at you) is less likely to pop up in the mind of the player (p. 89). If given the choice between a red or a blue pill, it is hard to imagine at that moment the existence of a third, hidden, green one. The encyclopedic and spatial properties make the game immersive, in that they displace the player into its own space, system and story.

Murray defines immersion as “the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality […] that takes over all of our attention (p. 99)”, with the main difference between videogames and other media that, because videogames are a participatory medium, the player must first learn how to participate (p. 99). Immersion as Murray defines it is very similar to Koopman’s idea of ‘absorption’ or ‘transportation’, which she distinguishes from empathy, sympathy and identification as it is a feeling directed not necessarily to characters, but more so to the narrative world (Koopman, 2016, p. 17). It should be noted, then, that the game world is also the primary example of where we could find a videogame equivalent of aesthetic feelings that work in liaison with narrative feelings such as empathy.

Koopman explains that aesthetic feelings differ from narrative feelings in that, “while narrative feelings are about the content of a text, aesthetic feelings are directed towards the formal (stylistic) features of the text, such as images, contrasts and perspective, and include a heightened interest in the form, finding it good, striking or beautiful (p. 17)”. The game world is not only a systematic (or core) element, an empty space in which the player can move. It is

also aesthetic (shell): it is particularly capable of coloring the *fabula* and turning it into story, as the design helps tremendously in rendering a game unique, in giving a game identity. To a certain point, one could also argue that the design of the game world influences the design and actions of the characters.

If one compares *Mario Kart 8* to *Forza Horizon 4*, they might seem similar in their gameplay, as both games are racing games. *Mario Kart 8*, however, quickly presents itself as a 'fun' game. From the cartoony designs, gravity-defying roads and other unrealistic elements, to floating boxes that give the player homing turtle shells to launch at the opponent and trip them up, the game quickly establishes that this is a more relaxed take on the racing genre. *Forza Horizon 4* does the opposite. By taking real-world cars and tracks, and optimizing the graphics to look realistic, it presents itself as a more serious simulation of real-world racing.

This changes how the player approaches the game. Whereas *Mario Kart 8* is more lighthearted, *Forza Horizon 4* is a more serious game that takes some practice to grasp, which is already hinted at by the graphics. In real-life, after all, driving a car is also a skill that must be developed. What it also means, is that interfering with the other racers in *Mario Kart* is encouraged, while colliding with others in *Forza*, because of the game's 'realism', is punished with damage to the car. This can be extrapolated even further with a third example, *Fatal Racing*, in which courses are filled with jumps and pit falls, and where points are accorded both to placement as well as the number of other cars that are destroyed by a racer. In this case, the racing game becomes a racer-to-racer combat around a circuit. The game encourages this by portraying the circuits as deadly, implying that partaking in the race is a potentially lethal endeavor anyhow and by according points per 'fatality'.

Of these three examples, *Forza* is probably the least empathic and *Fatal Racing* the most, because of the degree of interaction between different participants and that interaction's consequences. However, all three games are successful in creating worlds that make sense of the games' aims and are therefore immersive. They convey a certain idea about racing, a racing world as it were, that a player can lose themselves in. The aesthetic choices impact the way the game is played on the one hand – it helps convey the idea and the rules of the game. On the other hand, these choices frame the narrative elements of the story: space, time, plot and characters are all part of the world. As Koopman explains, aesthetic feelings can reinforce narrative feelings (and vice versa) (p. 114).

Design and worldbuilding are not the only aesthetic elements of the videogame. From the paratextual elements[57] to the case in which the game comes, these all leave impressions on the player and their expectations. More importantly, within the game itself, music is almost ubiquitously present, which furthermore is oftentimes linked to plot and "tells" the player how to feel, as Isabelle van Elferen explains: "nondiegetic music provides emotional characterizations of onscreen persons, places or situations. [...] Music intensifies audiences' experience of onscreen events (Elferen, 2013, p. 6)".

Through the process of immersion, I believe this to be true not only of music, but everything that surrounds the game's story. If the player has the feeling they participate in a digital space and not act outside of it, the events that are presented will be experienced more intensely, as the barrier between player and medium is broken down or obscured. This process can be likened to that of interreactivity, where the player is also given control within the world. A game that is successful in convincing the player of both its narrative through interreactivity and its aesthetic through immersion will therefore be a medium that is doubly capable of capturing the player's attention. According to Boyd, creating and holding the subject's interest is the first step for any form of successful art (Boyd, 2009, p. 395).

Likewise, immersion into a videogame amplifies affective responses to the game's story. If the world matches the story that is being told, the player is more likely to be absorbed into the story. However, I have discussed several factors that influence a player's affective response to a videogame at this point. Between interreactivity, immersion, identification and empathic reactions, the potential for videogames to be an empathic vehicle is certainly present. At the same time, the balancing of all these factors needs to be examined more closely. What does it mean when the protagonist is always the PC, and often a character-poor avatar? What does it mean that the player must be able to act and overcome different challenges? In short: what empathic stories do videogames tell?

[57] The videogame manual has been a very decorated item in the first decades of the videogame industry. Filled with artwork and references to in-game locations, these booklets often were the only place where one could find story, especially when the storage space of the cartridges was still extremely limited. For *Fatal Racing*, for example, one could find out that the prize for partaking *and winning* of the deadly competition was an industry-wide renown for the car's fabricant. Sadly, as videogames become more costly to produce, means of including manuals digitally or to include them as tutorials within the diegetic world, the videogame manual becomes increasingly more basic and rarer.

A Call to Action

The videogame is a narrative vehicle that develops narrative and aesthetic feelings, such as empathy, identification and immersion. The story that the game tells is not as clear-cut as that of a novel. Sometimes, the story is imagined by the player who imagines causal links between events and actors, which they can interpret as a plot. Sometimes, the narrative offers differing branches, that a player needs to choose between. And sometimes, the videogame only offers choices without any particular consequences, in which the story is predetermined but the player is absorbed into an illusion of narrative choice.

However, the player does have agency. They can act, they must overcome obstacles, they must progress in the videogame's story. What does this mean for the narratives told by the videogame? It seems that a number of story types are more suited to be adapted for the videogame, while others create problems. We can imagine, for example, that a work of literature such as Homer's *Iliad*, with its setting of war and heroes, can be translated relatively easily into a videogame structure of levels and bosses, as for example in *A Total War Saga: Troy*. In contrast, Racine's *Phèdre* has not yet received any videogame adaptation[58]. Is this purely because its incestual themes are too heavy-handed, or is there not enough possibility to act within a tragedy?

In this chapter, I will take a closer look at the types of videogame narrative that one can encounter, and what this means for the videogame as a medium of empathy. In order to do so, I will first argue how narratives in videogames are built up, while accounting for various degrees of agency by way of meaningful choices or lack thereof, resulting in phantom narratives. Secondly, I will argue that the videogame story as a story in which the player can act, always has a call to action. Therefore, I will specify five different types of narratives that can account for almost all story in videogame and will link these five classifications to one or more of the terms that have been discussed until this point, such as sympathy, identification and immersion. Lastly, I will discuss how this affects the way the player interacts with the videogame as a medium that, if the assumption that empathic feelings irrevocably lead to reflection is correct, pushes a player to think about themselves or others.

[58] The name Phaedra itself does however pop up from time to time: she appears as part of Theseus' myth in *Immortals Fenyx Rising* and as a horse-shapen (!) colossal boss character in *Shadow of the Colossus*. As a matter of interest, videogames borrow heavily from a cross-cultural mythological-fantastical foundation, even if it is only by way of names. The swords 'Excalibur' and 'Masamune', for example, are in many games among the strongest swords a player can obtain.

Capturing Videogame Story

The number of stories in videogames is possibly as high as the number of videogames itself. Moreover, as I discussed in *The Storytelling Videogame*, the story is not always presented linearly. If the player is given a choice that results in a different outcome, à la *Heavy Rain* that has seventeen different outcomes (Lavigne, 2018, p. 15), the causal sequence of events branches. Similarly, if the player is given the choice from which point of view they want to experience the story, a videogame provides opposing or sometimes alternating plots. In *Sonic Adventure 2* the player can pick either the 'Good' or the 'Dark' route; if they pick the Good path, the Dark characters will appear as narrative opponents.

Furthermore, a videogame does not necessarily provide a single quest. In fact, many separate their stories in main and side quests, with the main quest being the overarching or prioritized story, and the side quest branching off. For example, a player may encounter someone who needs to have certain materials to build a new cart but is too busy to collect them themselves. Although this is hardly material to write an entire game around, it is a way of developing certain Non-Player Characters as characters with wishes and goals with whom the Player-Character can interact. It is also a good way for the player to trade in a number of collectible items for experience points or more valuable rewards or to be sent to a new location that will not be visited during the main quest, thereby deepening the immersion into the game world.

Typically, to finish a game, the main quest must be completed while the side quests are optional material, although completion of all side objectives might reward the player with bonuses. It is therefore possible to have multiple main quests in a single game, as the case of *Sonic Adventure 2* illustrates. In order to open up the final, third part of the game in which the heroes and the villains must work together, both main quests must be completed. This is an example of what Carlen Lavigne designated as a 'true' or 'best' ending (p. 15), as it continues from the conclusion of both possible routes. One should be wary, therefore, of suggesting that finishing a single main quest equals finishing a game, as oftentimes a game necessitates multiple playthroughs to experience all the endings or main quests, depending on the depth of the choices. Videogames often muddy this distinction, by showing the credits and eventually "the end" after the completion of a main quest, before continuing the game[59]. As an aside,

[59] *Octopath Traveler* provides an astounding 8 screens that display the word 'the end', even before the eventual endgame itself is unlocked. The implication is, of course, that a single story line has concluded, but it is confusing nonetheless.

there also exists a variation of the side quest that is typically placed after the story has concluded, which is called the post-game.

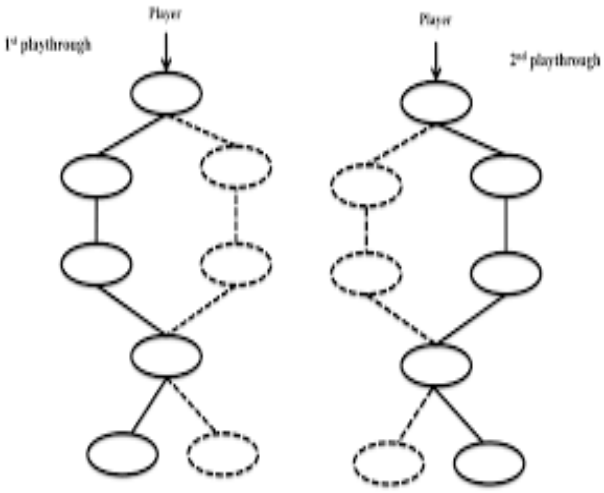

Figure 3 Narratives between playthroughs *(Ladhenperä, 2018, p. 155)*

The distinction between quests can be rendered even more opaque if the choices that are given to the player are illusions, the so called 'phantom narratives'. A phantom narrative results from a choice that might not impact the story in any meaningful way except, perhaps, for the dialogue following directly on that specific moment, yet as I discussed in *The Empathic Videogame* it can heighten empathic feelings in the videogame. To visualize a game's narrative structure, then, one could employ the method that Christopher Bode and Rainer Dietrich developed in *Future Narratives*, in which they visualize stories as networks: the moments of choices are the nodes, the causal links between them are represented by edges (Bode & Dietrich, 2013, pp. 69 - 70). Linda Ladhenperä gives an example (fig. 3) of differing playthroughs, where previous experiences influence the choices made (Ladhenperä, 2018, p. 155).

I argue that, in order to capture the videogame story in its entirety, it is more efficient to not take the moments of choice, but to take the important moments within the story and link choices to those moments. What is considered important is dependent on the individual story, but it could either be cut-scenes, the unlocking of certain skills that helps progression, defeating boss characters or something else entirely. The benefit of this approach is that nodes can more accurately compartmentalize a story without overcentralizing the moments of choice. One can see a similar process unfold in figure 3, as not all the nodes that Ladhenperä shows are moments of choice. In fact, only two of them are. As a result, one could project a videogame story as I have done, in a very basic way, in figure 4. This approach provides a

Figure 4 A Videogame Story Sequence

way to visualize everything a videogame has to offer, story-wise. It should be noted that for larger, more complex games these models rapidly become quite cumbersome, but there is merit in being able to visualize the narrative structure while accounting for moments of branching.

Something interesting happens, then, if we overlay these nodes on the world of the videogame. If we take *Octopath Traveler* again, for example, the game provides a natural contender for what qualifies as a 'major story event'. The game is divided among eight main characters who each have four chapters in their narrative arc. In figure 5a[60], one sees that these chapters all take place in different places, in fact, in cities and towns. If we then trace the individual paths the characters take (fig. 5b), we see that they all move over large parts of the world and that there is a certain movement outward, with a lot of crisscrossing throughout the map. In fact, we could link all first chapters together, and we would see an inner circle; if we do the same for chapters 2 & 3 and then for 4, we see three circles (fig. 5c). Movement in *Octopath Traveler*, then, seems to be outbound and circular, away from the relatively safe haven in the middle. There is not only a temporal story told, but also spatial.

Similar spatial stories arise if this is done for other videogames. In *Super Mario Bros.*, which has a hub-style level select world, the player discovers that all 'worlds' consists of three levels with an additional castle level at the end. Movement on the map goes from left to right, identical to Mario himself in the game, which gives a feeling of progression. In *Pokémon Sword & Shield*, movement goes zigzaggingly from south to north, mimicking the way the player eventually rises to the top. Videogames utilize their digital space not only to tell a story *in*, but also to tell a story *with*.

In *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, the game starts 100 years after a calamity ravaged most of the land. Indeed, the player can find ruins, abandoned posts and destroyed remains of mechanical enemies throughout the world. In *Xenoblade Chronicles*, the world consists of the frozen remains of two warring deity-like figures which are proponents of the ongoing conflict within the game. It seems that, because of the spatial agency that players have, videogame worldbuilding necessitates symbolism and diversity[61] in order to achieve immersion, as the player is not only constantly present within this space, but also interacts with it.

[60] A character is represented by the first two letters of their name, the number is the chapter that takes place at that location, with 1 being the first and 4 being the last.

[61] In fact, it is common to see videogames visit a range of climates (or cultures) that are placed in a lineair sequence. In *Breath of the Wild*, for example, a desert is enclosed by snowy mountain peaks on one side, and by a tropical rainforest and sandy beaches on the other.

Figure 5 Movement in Octopath Traveler*'s Story*. From top to bottom: a) the locations of the chapters; b) the paths of the characters; c) concentric progression.

Most dominantly in the open-world videogame, the world needs to be intricately crafted or risk feeling monotonous outside of the 'important plot spaces'. This can also help to convey the tone of a videogame, such as I explained when discussing the racing games *Mario Kart 8*, *Forza* and *Fatal Racing*, whose aesthetic choices communicate the idea of the game. This is not the same as what Domsch considers to be a storyworld, as that is the ensemble of space and story in the videogame (Domsch, 2013, p. 2). One could call what I am describing a worldstory, instead: the story that the world itself tells.

The 5 Empathic Archetypes of Videogame Story

Although not all videogames may contain a worldstory, however, I have argued before that all videogames contain the seeds for narrative in that they provide actors and events. Moreover, the *fabula* that can be presented as different stories are concretized as soon as the motifs, consisting of an actor and an event, are causally linked together. In the case of the videogame, the player must have room to act within the story, or more precisely, to act out the story. Thus far, I have suggested that empathic responses are at the base of this action, but how exactly does empathy elicit action?

It is my belief that, through affective input, the player is called to action. This can be both for the game in its entirety, or for a specific side quest. I recognize five distinct siren calls that are, for some, irresistible to answer in videogames. It should be noted that these five foundations of videogame story are not exclusive. They can interdependently bolster or weaken one another, as I will demonstrate. There is also no strict hierarchy between these forms, as the way that they resonate with the player is player dependent. Furthermore, throughout the game's story, the call-to-action can shift from one point to another due to the progression of the story. What might start out as a simple question to investigate could lead to the discovery of a world-ending threat.

Request

The simple question mentioned above lies at the heart of the most direct way to call the player to action. Through a simple request, the player is asked to do something. This can be any number of things and can vary in scope. For example, a childhood friend can ask you to accompany her to the town's fair (*The Legend of Zelda: Minish Cap*) or a renowned professor asks you to do fieldwork for him *(Pokémon Red & Blue*). The request is a specific form of a motif:

- Actant A asks Actant B to do X.

It should be noted that the player, in this case, is Actant B and thus that the power lies outside of the player's hands: it is something else that demands this of the player. This motif can, subsequently, be answered in a number of ways, resulting in different *fabulae*. This list is by no means exhaustive:

1. Actant A asks actant B to investigate a situation.
2. Actant A asks actant B to retrieve something that has been lost.
3. Actant A asks actant B to assist A with the specific skills that B has for the situation.

These are *fabula* instead of motifs, because they imply a more causal link between this specific moment of request and other plot-events that are yet to happen. Similarly, these are not yet stories, in that they can be aesthetically altered for a game's purposes without altering the *fabula*. For example, example 1 is both the start of *Resident Evil* and *Professor Layton and the Spectre's Call.* In *Resident Evil*, a horror-game, the player is tasked to investigate the disappearance of a missing squad and the game quickly turns into a survival from zombie-like attacks. *Professor Layton*, on the other hand, features a much more lighthearted story in which the player is summoned to a town to investigate rumors of a ghost attacking the town. While both games have a similar underlying *fabula*, their presentation could not be more different.

Moreover, all three examples provide a means to continue. It is very unlikely in the videogame story that, for example 1, all answers will immediately be given or that the lost item of example 2 will be found in the next room. A request, then, is often an opening to a specific plotline. It is also an easy form to present side quests, with NPCs asking the player to collect something for them.

Whether the player accepts the request is an empathic question. Acceptance of the request is achieved through either a warm response to the pleading of the NPC (for example, a mother who has lost her son in the nearby woods) or a cold response to the reward offered (for example, a large amount of gold pieces in trade for an item). It is therefore important to consider who makes the request. In the case of *Resident Evil*, the request is made by a non-character instance, which troubles the empathic response. It is not surprising that the request therefore is quickly put in the background while other mechanics, like survival or curiosity, take over the main empathic investments.

In *Professor Layton*, however, the request is seemingly made by Layton's friend who remains a constant actor in the story. Although this story, also, changes to other mechanics, the basic request remains standing and provides the backbone to the story. Layton (and in turn, the player) wants to help and solve the mystery, even in the face of danger. Note that the request does not have to be made specifically: example 3 lies at the heart of *Castlevania*, in

which Simon Belmont, a vampire-killer, sets out to kill the vampire Dracula, as his family is known for combatting evil threats[62].

Consequence

Acting in the face of danger can also be its own call-to-action: if the player does not act, they or others will suffer penalties. These consequences can range in severity from a fine to death. The consequence can interestingly not be captured in a single motif, as it implies a certain action and reaction, or rather, a failure of action:

- If actant A does (not) do this, X happens.

Actant A most often is the Player-Character. If the PC is, however, not A, it is most likely a request from A to the PC, which fuels the empathic response to the request. In *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*, for example, the PC is a lawyer that must successfully defend their clients in often hopeless situations, or else they will be sentenced to death, raising the stakes. The consequence is also the main proponent of plot-light videogames, such as *Geometry Wars* or *Tetris*. If the player does not immediately act, they will lose the game. A consequence can thus be a forceful way of engaging the player with the medium.

Consequences facilitate identification between the Player and the PC: as the player does not want to die in the game, he must act to 'save' the PC – their story roles automatically align. We can thus identify with the little shape in *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved*, even if the game does not immediately present us with a strong narrative. This is also a core principle of shooters[63], like *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. Because the enemy attacks and will kill the PC if no countermeasures are taken, diplomacy is not an option and thus the player no longer has to think about whether killing in response is the ethical solution. The game does not offer such a solution to the situation.

Several (larger) *fabulae* that might be derived from the fundamental action-reaction could be:

1. If actant A does not stop actant B, B will conquer or destroy the world.
2. If actant A does not reach actant B in time, something will happen to actant B.
3. If actant A wants something, they must do as actant B wishes.

Consequences not only lead to a sense of identification but can also evoke empathic feelings. If actant A is the PC, the way the player feels towards actant B is in line with the position B

[62] This does resemble the archetype 'responsibility', and in fact, both might work very well in conjunction: Simon Belmont feels responsibly because of his lineage, and the people of Transylvania reach out to him.
[63] Games that have players aim and shoot guns in a warfare simulation.

takes to A. In example 1, B is an opponent and the player will likely feel antipathy at first, although new information might offer new insights. In *Bravely Default*, for example, the opposing forces that stop the PC-group from reawakening the crystals, that the player believes will ensure the survival of the world, turn out to know that the crystals will spell doom for the world[64]. Sympathy is created for both the PCs and the NPCs, as they will often depend upon the PCs to be saved from doom, as is the case in *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*.

In example 2, A is sympathetic to B and wants to ensure their safety, for example. In *Final Fantasy IV*, both 2 and 3 are present in the same moment: the protagonist's love-interest is kidnapped and must be saved in time before she is executed (2). However, this is only set in motion after the PC refuses to go along with the plans of the villain, who tries to use the kidnapped love-interest as leverage (3). One should be careful to see purely material rewards, as discussed in the request as a 'consequence', however. If the material is not scarce enough in the story, there is only a limited number of things a player is willing to do for it. A story about becoming extremely rich, such as in *Wario Land: Super Mario Land 3*, is however a consequential story – this is underlined by the fact that the player never gets to profit from these riches as the game ends when PC Wario gets his wish fulfilled.

Responsibility

Sometimes, the consequences of a dire situation have already taken place. Someone dear to the PC has been murdered, or the environment in which they live is no longer hospitable to them. In these cases, the call-to-action stems from a feeling of responsibility to the new situation, however, the way in which it is answered is very different according to the situation. It can either be through revenge, through restoration, or occasionally, through both.

- Actant A feels responsible for past events.

This can be resolved in various *fabulae*, such as:

1. A must exact revenge on B.
2. A must restore the situation to what it once was.
3. A must retrieve what he lost.

In *God of War*, PC Kratos sets out to exact vengeance on Ares (1), who tricked Kratos into killing his own wife and children. By portraying Ares as highly antipathetic, Kratos

[64] In a reversal of consequences, the players are encouraged to see through with the awakening of the crystals in order to unleash the evil, world-destroying creature Ouroboros and kill him in the true ending. The false ending means that the players align themselves with the previous opposing forces and destroy one of the crystals, which in turn renders Ouroboros unable to fulfil his plans. It is however hinted that this method only provides a temporary respite.

becomes a sympathetic character with whom the player can identify, even without questioning the ethics of revenge. However, revenge is not the only solution to a new but uncomfortable situation. In *Ori and the Blind Forest*, PC Ori is forced away from his home after a cataclysmic event razed the forest he lives in, and his guardian dies of starvation. With no food nor ties to home, Ori sets out to find, presumably, a better place to live, and along the way figures out his role in the cataclysmic events that have taken place – so he continues his journey to restore the forest in the way it once was as he feels responsible for what happened. Sympathy for Ori is created by his situation, in that he is at first all alone and hungry, after having lost his guardian. The player likely wants to help the little creature. When it turns out that Ori set the events in motion that led to the downfall of the forest, he is given a chance to 'atone' for what happened and restore the forest. Another common story of responsibility is the search for people who are lost (3), as happens for example at the start of *Fallout 4*, in which the PC's son has been kidnapped.

Responsibility is a strong empathic hook for a story, as there usually is a strong interdependence with consequence. If Ori does not restore the forest, many more will die of starvation. It also projects sympathy on victims and antipathy on perpetrators that might not even be present. A son that needs to be saved or a wife that needs to be avenged is only logical if those familial ties mean something to players. It is therefore likely that most of these relations occur within the (semi-)familial or romantic spheres, or only occur after a certain time with the victim has passed. Although responsibility and consequence are close together, they differ in that responsible plots often follow the outcome of a consequence while a consequence plot is trying to stop that from happening in the first place. A videogame that mixes these two points can be a very daunting experience, as is proven by *The Last of Us*, a survival horror game in which Joël, a father who has lost his daughter in the chaos, must protect another teenage girl from an increasingly violent and dangerous world.

Competition

Many videogames are based around competition and becoming the very best at the end. These includes sports and racing games, but also encompasses several games from other genres. The goal in these games is to rise to the top and defeat all the competition, and thus puts emphasis on skill. The basic motif that goes with this call-to-action goes as follows:

- Actant A wants to be the best.

It should be noted that most of the competitive narratives stop once the PC reaches this goal. If there is a postgame in which the title must be defended, this becomes from that point on a

consequence-based narrative: if the PC loses, they lose their position. The different *fabulae* that this archetype provides usually encompass the significance of the competition:

1. Actant A wants to be at the top of a ranking.
2. Actant A wants to attain a single goal far away.
3. Actant A wants to be better than a rival.

I have specifically chosen the verb 'want', as these narratives usually stem from a desire. Ranking-based games (1) offer a range of opponents that can be defeated once or multiple times, with many among them being mostly non-descript.

A clear example of this kind of narrative can be found in *Need for Speed Underground*, in which the PC starts at the bottom of the street racing circuit and, through the help of friends that they must eventually defeat, too, rises to the top. The difference between this and the second example, is that the main goal in the second example is more abstract: instead of a name on a board, the goal is a certain state. This happens a lot in simulation-type games. In *Rollercoaster Tycoon*, the player is tasked with producing a certain revenue and number of guests by the end of a period and in *The Sims 4*, not typically known for its story, the player is in fact presented with the goal of succeeding in socio-economic terms[65]. The third example is interesting, because the competition often is reciprocal. The PC wants to defeat the rival, but so does the rival, so the two push each other to new heights. The rival often starts at the same point as the PC and is present throughout the entire story,

The challenging narrative is usually not the most empathic, as in many of these games the player is urged to choose from a range of teams or characters. Sympathy can be evoked in the cases where the PC is a singular unit, as in *Need for Speed Underground* or *Pokémon Sword & Shield*. In those cases, identification is quickly established as the goal of players and PCs are aligned. In fact, as these characters are often relatively empty vessels (both protagonists are completely silent, for example), identification might be based on projection, as the game creates a goal to attain, and a vessel with which to do so. Many videogames that are zero-sum games, in that they define a winner and a loser, both single-player and multiplayer, are a mix of challenge and consequence. The player is focused on defeating the other. At the same time, they know that if they fail in being better than the other, they will lose. Narratively, there can be consequences for failing. In *No More Heroes*, the PC aims to be the top assassin, which is done by battling other assassins to the death.

[65] In the case of *The Sims*, many players interestingly opt out of the objective and pursue their own goals.

Curiosity

A last empathic hook is based on curiosity. This can be both narrative and aesthetic: a game in which amnesia plays a role or in which a world already has succumbed to something evil long ago can evoke questions from the player. In fact, curiosity as an empathic response cannot be easily captured into a single, basic motif, because it is not an action. It is a question the player asks the game: why? How? Where? Of the five attributes, curiosity is the only one that is not operationalized purely through narrative feelings[66], although it certainly can be. It is, however, also an aesthetic feeling.

A game's world that is interactive pushes a player to consider what they can and what they cannot do. In *Minecraft*, for example, the player is dropped at random in an enormous world with little to no hints of how they can progress. This sandbox form invites the player to investigate and check what they can or cannot do. The player can build a house, travel across the world, mine deep in search of valuable stones without the videogame telling it to do so. Curiosity about how a player can interact with the world results in experiments and imaginative gameplay: can I build this? Can I go there? The player is incessantly asking themselves and the game questions that are only answered through experimentation.

Curiosity must be rewarded, however. In *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, the player is likewise dropped into an open world. The objectives of the game are clear and the endgame is immediately accessible for those skilled or stupid enough to hazard running the gauntlet. However, due to the way that the world is built, the player is incentivized to explore: what they can see, they can climb. The player is furthermore not told where to go, except to circumvent the central area of the game for the time being, as it is extremely dangerous. Moreover, in many nooks and crannies, the player can find valuable items or collectibles (over 900 'korok seeds' are hidden throughout the game). By exploring, the player comes across numerous people and races that need the help of the PC, with those pertaining to the main quest being introduced with specific cut-scenes instead of standard dialogue, setting them apart from the rest. Behind every forest or across every stream, there is something new to be discovered, leading the player on and on. Curiosity, by virtue of being a response to aesthetic feelings, is intrinsically linked to immersion.

However, curiosity is also fickle. A PC having amnesia, for example, asks the question how the PC has lost his memory. It also equalizes what a PC knows of the world they live in, and what a new player knows. The amnesiac narrative has been done so often, however, that it

[66] One could argue that it is also true for competition, but I argue that competition in a game is still competition between actors and therefore between protagonists and opponents.

rarely elicits an empathic response anymore. Similarly, if a game world only offers repetitive rewards, the incentive disappears: the Korok seed quest of *Breath of the Wild* is something only the most hardcore enthusiasts complete. Besides, an open world does not automatically provoke curiosity. Oftentimes, being faced with a specific roadblock evokes the same reaction, as it makes the player question how to bypass that obstacle. Overcoming obstacles, Juul theorized, is akin to a feeling of catharsis[67] (Juul, 2013, p. 124). I, personally, distinctly remember a feeling of excitement and wonder when I figured out to overcome a certain obstacle whose solution was conveyed in text – I did not yet speak English at the time - in *Pokémon Red*, 20 years ago, and I could finally continue my journey, wondering about what would be coming next.

An Obligation to Action

The five empathic attributes Request, Consequence, Responsibility, Competition and Curiosity, I stress, are not exclusive, but instead constantly work in combination with each other, in subgroups or all at once. The best way to visualize this, would be in the form of a radar graph (fig. 6), a model in which the narrative is plotted by how it scores on the principles. If one were to do this for a large number of videogames, it might even offer valuable insight in different genres of videogames. The sports genre, predictably, scores high on Competition, while shooters are very consequential.

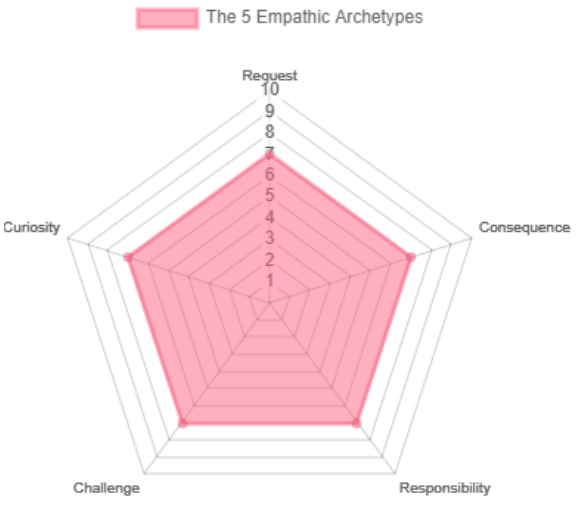

Figure 6 The 5 Empathic Archetypes in a Radar Graph.

All story archetypes have one thing in common: they urge the player to act. As Juul argues, games inherently promise players that they can succeed and overcome the obstacles put before them (pp. 69 - 70). Acting in videogames means, then, bringing the story towards the 'right' conclusion[68], of passing the challenges that the videogame put forward to decide the outcome in favor of the PC (and the player). This might very well be the reason that *Phèdre* has not yet had a videogame adaptation.

[67] If this is actually is a form of catharsis is a debate that Juul does not consider, except by mentioning that there has been a long tradition of debates around the term (Juul, 2013, p. 125).

[68] This does not mean that the conclusion is ethically correct, but it does mean that the conclusion is in line with overcoming the obstacles: at the very least, the conclusion might be bittersweet, where a sacrifice has been made for the 'greater good'.

If we consider the tragic mode to be a mode of failure (Eagleton, 2020, p. 26), the tragic story cannot deliver on the videogame promise that, in the end, the player can resolve the narrative. Inversely, the videogame is not able to satisfyingly convey all sorts of narrative. The kind of story that it cannot transmit, however, is the kind of story that is particularly suited to combine "both the experience of feeling and the experience of learning", according to Koopman (Koopman, 2016, p. 330). The idea that videogames are an empathic vehicle in the same sense that 'sad stories' are, is therefore flawed.

That is not to say that videogames do not incorporate tragic themes of loss and failure. The risk, however, is that story and gameplay will collide instead of work together. In *Metroid: Other M*, protagonist Samus is an intergalactic bounty hunter who picks up a distress signal from a space station. There, she meets up with former team members. While exploring, she kills numerous alien lifeforms seemingly in cold blood. The problem arises during the cut-scenes, mostly told through flashbacks: Samus is traumatized by the events of a prior game, where she lost a baby alien lifeform to which she was attached. This causes her to regularly freeze up while reexperiencing traumatic episodes. The problem in this game, however, stems from the fact that this only happens when the player is offline. As soon as the player is online, the PC returns to a stoic, coldblooded killer.

Megan Condis considers this "mismatch between game mechanics and story" as ludo-narrative dissonance, a term coined by game designer Clint Hocking in 2007 (Condis, 2017, p. 186). The PC online and offline in *Metroid: Other M* are difficult to reconciliate; the choices she makes do not correspond with the choices a player would rationally make[69]. As the videogame gives the player agency, it binds itself to an active story mode wherein actions must constantly be possible for the player to play. Condis describes the same effect in *Fallout 4*, a survival game set in a nuclear apocalypse. The protagonist must save his kidnapped son by becoming a warlord in the Wasteland, but at the same time the player is intrigued by the huge open world that is available to him (pp. 185, 186). Two empathic archetypes are vying for dominance: Responsibility and Curiosity.

That does not mean that the videogame could never tackle difficult themes. As mentioned above, *The Last of Us* is a horror-survival game that combines consequences with responsibility by making the PC responsible for a teenage girl in a world where a zombie-esque virus rages and humanity is plunged in an apocalypse. Several difficult themes are discussed within the game. The PC loses his wife and his daughter; the teenage girl is at one

[69] For example, she puts herself in danger out of a misplaced feeling of loyalty towards her former commander by not activating a heat resistant armor, until the commander gives her permission.

point sexually assaulted by a cannibalistic gang member. She then traumatizes herself by brutally murdering her assaulter. The ending is bitter-sweet, as the PC manages to save the girl from being sacrificed for science (her body might offer a cure for the virus), hence fulfilling the promise of overcoming obstacles, but at the same time condemning humanity perhaps to the virus that ravages the world. I feel like these darker themes and their graphical depiction can only exist, however, in the frame of a psychological horror game that, as the genre implies, actively seeks to shock and unbalance the player. Furthermore, a long as the player is online or will be online again, they can act in order to prevent events from happening or to restore wrongful actions. It is only in the final moments of the game, when the player is definitively offline, that the balance is made up and the PC betrays the girl's trust (albeit to comfort her – thus in a bittersweet way).

Another possible method can be found in *Celeste*, a platforming game in which a girl, Madeline, climbs a mountain. Throughout the game, a darker version of herself, identified as 'a part of me', confronts her. Madeline's insecurities also give form to monsters. The whole videogame is a metaphor for anxiety issues, which the player can overcome by finally climbing the mountain and accepting her darker self as part of herself. One could argue that the representation of psychological themes as a metaphor offers a solution to the impasse of the tragic mode and videogames, allowing the medium to explore internal, non-action themes while offering a game to equally play. However, if this is not done carefully, one risks oversimplifying or trivializing serious issues[70].

Reflecting on Videogame Stories

The videogame is a narrative and an empathic medium, that constructs story through empathic responses such as antipathy/sympathy, identification and immersion. However, does this also mean that the videogame story leads to reflection? Although the empathic responses are at the fore when it comes to videogame story, it is necessary to remember that a player acts within the story through a PC, an avatar, as it were. This can both help and damage the reflective potential of the videogame.

The active role that the PC has within the story can, theoretically, help the player to reflect critically upon the story and themselves by reducing the feeling of resistance to the empathic input. Koopman suggests that resistance, originally a Freudian term, is an

[70] One example that sparked controversy stems from *Playing History 2 - Slave Trade*, an educational videogame aimed at a school-going public. The game, in a bid to show how inhumane the slave trade was, developed a game mode which had the player stack as many slaves as possible on a single ship in a *Tetris*-esque way. The mode was later removed.

unwillingness to engage with painful material (Koopman, 2016, p. 208). However, as the player is promised that all obstacles can be overcome, this resistance to a confronting narrative is countered by the gameplay elements, which gives the players a chance to be successful (Koopman, 2016, p. 286). Juul considers the videogame as a safe place to learn how to cope with failure (Juul, 2013, p. 122). It is true that when a player fails to clear a certain hurdle, they can try again. However, the hurdle that must be cleared is a hurdle that is designed to test the player's intelligence or skill (p. 66) instead of their empathic feelings towards another.

This implies that, if the videogame triggers reflection, this reflection is first and foremost self-centered. The results of Koopman's empirical research into tragic literature offer a few results supporting the idea that the reflection caused by videogame narrative, although empathic, does not extend to the other. First, she explains that empathic distress leads to reflection (Koopman, 2016, p. 224). In the videogame, this distress is most likely a call to action that, moreover, can be dealt with by the player's actions. If a thought-process is initiated at that moment, it is most likely the creation of a plan to tackle the problem at hand.

Secondly, she argues that "identificatory reading was associated with under-distancing (p. 266)". In other words, identification is to place oneself too close to the text; the result is that identification in sad stories can lead to too much distress, which hinders reflection (p. 225). But what happens when identification, through an avatar, is used to immerse the player in the game? Under-distancing in literature can indeed result in being overwhelmed by the narrative (p. 338), which is, in fact, the effect of immersion (but perhaps taken to an extreme). Importantly, identification and immersion both are shown to have no effect on reflection in Koopman's study (p. 323). Reflection is further hindered by the fact that most videogames only offer limited choices within their worlds, or even phantom narratives. The example of *Call of Duty* comes to mind, where the player is not incentivized to reflect upon the pile of dead bodies they leave in their wake, because the game offers the player no other solution. In short: even unethical choices that must be made can be justified by considering that this is the way forward that the medium itself has proposed.

I suggested before that the tragic mode is difficult to adapt in videogames, but it could equally be that the effects of such a videogame might be altogether too disconcerting because of the lack of distance. In videogames where tragic themes are discusses, however, it either causes friction between the gameplay and the story through ludo-narrative dissonance (*Metroid: Other M*), or the game in question is a horror-game that seeks to shock or unbalance its audience (*The Last of Us*). Although the use of metaphors can help videogames to explore

serious issues, it is again by switching away from a passive, inflective mode to an active, challenging mode. Perhaps that is what Mathieu Triclot meant when he said that videogames fail in deepening empathy for its characters (Triclot, 2011, p. 85). It is not that the videogame is not empathic, but that is tells other stories than those typically associated with deep empathic responses.

That is not to say that the videogame is entirely incapable of eliciting reflection. Most importantly, there are still moments in which the player is offline that function just like other narrative media. While this might result in a clash between gameplay and narrative, this does not mean that the player does not react to the distressing cut-scenes. The story on display is still told. Furthermore, reflection on the self is also important. Moreover, I believe that Juul's assumption of cathartic challenges goes further than overcoming obstacles. The videogame makes the player feel special, in that he can indeed prove his worth by facing challenges and failure. This is bolstered by the empathic story archetypes, as the player can help, protect and be appreciated by the NPCs. They can rise above the competition or fulfill a duty towards the game-world and its denizens. In that sense, it seems that the empathic story is not only meant to be a specific presentation of the *fabula*, to render a videogame unique or to provide an aesthetically pleasing backdrop to the gameplay. The narrative makes the difference between overcoming obstacles because the player *can* and overcoming them because you *want to* or, in some stories, because you feel like you *must*. The empathic story is meant to give meaning to the videogame's challenges and to the player's actions.

Conclusion

How does the videogame encourage the player to stand in the shoes of the other? First, this happens quite literally, because the videogame protagonist is another person than the real person who plays the games and who decides the protagonist's actions. The videogame protagonist is therefore not a protagonist as one might find them in a novel, where the chances are that it is by far the most developed character. Instead, it is the opposite: the protagonist in the videogame is often an empty husk, an avatar that the player can inhabit as a genie inhabits a lamp. That is, for at least so long as the player is online and in control. Sometimes, the story of the videogame needs its character back, and forcefully puts the player offline to pretend that the Player-Character is a character like any other.

This duality of the PC seems indicative of the debate surrounding videogames, where ludologists and narrativists came to separate answers to the question: what is a videogame? The narrativists argued that a videogame is primarily a narrative and should be considered as such. In contrast, the ludologists in contrast argued that the videogame is first and foremost a game that must be played. For the narrativists, the PC was imminently offline while the ludologists argued that it was incessantly online. Christopher Bode and Rainer Dietrich and those who adapted the idea of *Future Narratives* offered a way out by combining both approaches and suggesting that the videogame story is an interactive story which can only be fully interpreted by considering the player's choices. The problem with that approach, was that it synthesized the player with the PC, which are two different entities. The answer to the split, I argue, can be found through empathy.

If the PC and the player are two different entities, they are approached through the concept of identification, which happens when the extradiegetic player and the intradiegetic PC are aligned in their goals. To accomplish this, the player must first place themselves in the shoes of the PC, which is an empathic action. If they decide to accept the PC's wishes, desires and goals, the player becomes sympathetic towards this character. This empathic step goes for any character. However, an additional distinction is made between Non-Player Characters and the PC, in that the player aligns their goals with those of the PC within the story: thereby, a process of identification takes place. If the PC is a completely empty vessel, as can be the case in racing games for example, the player can skip the sympathetic step and instead project his own desires onto the PC.

This presupposes that the videogame presents a narrative and a PC with whom the character can identify. Through a narratological consideration of what a story is, I argue that

every videogame is in fact open for interpretation as a story, with the largest part amongst them presenting a narrative. Even those that do not use a plot to convey their objectives, make use of actors and events which can be linked causally by either the game itself or the player individually.

However, this does not account for moments of choice. Videogames dictate which options the player has when presented with a choice; sometimes, the videogame utilizes a phantom narrative that give the illusion of meaningful choice. Through empathic input, these choices are made to seem meaningful, oftentimes contrasting the empathic choice with the ethical choice. Through the process of interreactivity, the videogame offers the player a variety of actions they can perform within the game's world, to which the videogame responds.

The videogame furthermore offers a digital space within which the player can move and act. I hypothesize the existence of worldstory, which means that the videogame operationalizes this space to deepen the story it is telling on the one hand, and on the other hand showing the player what kind of game they are playing. Furthermore, if one overlays story points over a world map, it seems that certain patterns can emerge as the PC moves not only through time but also through space. Further research could be done to research the way movement complements the feelings of goal and immersion in the videogame. Additionally, I believe that the tone of a videogame story derives largely from this aesthetic space, with more realistic games as *The Last of Us, The Legend of Zelda: The Breath of the Wild* or *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* being, in this point of time, more associated with serious stories.

This movement through space is also indicative of another essence of the videogame story, in that there must always be action for the player to play. This limits the number of stories the videogame can tell. I propose that all videogame stories are in varying degrees composed of five empathic archetypes: Request, Consequence, Responsibility, Competition and Curiosity. These all provide a call to action, while equally triggering an empathic response from the player. As a result, the videogame has difficulties with portraying sad stories or stories with a negative ending or in which there is no progression, because the videogame is constructed through challenges that can be overcome.

So how does the videogame story evoke an empathic response from the player? First, empathy is a way of engaging the player's attention by having the player invest their attention in its story. Second, the story is a way to bridge the distance between the medium's challenges and the player through interreactivity and immersion, thereby giving meaning to the tasks the player is performing. Thirdly, the presentation of the videogame story in a storyworld creates

a space in which a player can fail and try again. However, videogame story does not lead to reflection on the position of others, because of the intense link of the player with the PC and the emphasis on actions and challenges that must be overcome. If a videogame elicits reflection, it will most likely trigger the player to reflect on themselves instead of on others. This does mean that the videogame provides the player with a chance to feel special.

Although the number of videogames that successfully transpose 'sad stories', or stories that directly consider difficult themes such as traumatic experiences or mental health is still limited, there are two places where one could find such stories in videogame: in the indie game industry and the horror games. It is fascinating to see that these are both at the fringes of the game industry but perhaps they could be considered as the avant-garde of what is still to come. It would be interesting to consider the stories of videogames not per game, but by genre or by its origins: the indie game can take different risks than the multibillion investments of the Triple A titles. A diachronic analysis might even point out that these themes have started to gain in main-stream videogames, as *The Last of Us Part II* has won the Game of the Year Award 2020. Furthermore, it should be noted that difficult themes are, in fact, present. I do not mean to suggest that all videogame narratives are very peaceful and happy. Instead, this research shows that, if these themes are present, they can be solved by the players. Difficult themes such as loss or trauma are presented as obstacles, not states of being. Alternatively, they can lead to ludo-narrative dissonance, if the narrative themes are not integrated into the gameplay.

This research also has left a few questions open that I would like to consider or propose for future research. First, in discussing empathic choices, I have mentioned ethics several times as an element that causes dilemmas for the player, especially when presented as a counterpart to the empathic choice. I wonder how ethical choices in videogames are influenced by interreactivity and immersion. Can a player be persuaded to perform actions that are unethical in the real-world, but ethical within the videogame? Moreover, the influence of tone and genre should not be underappreciated in this question. As I have shown, *Resident Evil* and *Professor Layton and the Last Spectre* both share a starting *fabula* but are completely different stories. For example, I do not expect the Professor to run around with a machine gun to shoot down opponents. How does the tone of the videogame impact what we find acceptable or, perhaps, how does what we are led to find acceptable influence the tone of the videogame? The radar graph can provide a quantitative approach to genre, to capture how players interreact with videogames.

The videogame as a medium for the masses is approaching its 50th birthday and is thus still relatively young. I am curious to see which developments we will see in the years to come. What I do know, however, is that it will continue to grow in popularity. It is therefore paramount that we consider the videogame as a cultural artefact that presents stories. We should not be afraid to call out problematic videogames because we are afraid that we might overextend the reaches of our critical views and theories. The videogame is as much a medium of narrative as literature or cinema. However, I hope to have contributed to that debate a way of considering the videogame as a videogame, instead of only considering a single one of its aspects like the ludologists or the narrativists. The videogame is simply a new step in storytelling, one that asks input from the player and challenges them to overcome the odds. Let us make sure, then, that we hold this exciting medium from now on to the highest standards possible.

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Gameography

A small note: I have chosen to put directors over producers. If neither could be found, I have chosen to represent the videogame as an anonymous work. The first year of publication is chosen but this can sometimes differ across platforms or countries. The developing companies take precedent over the oftentimes many times larger publishers. As these developers sometimes have numerous locations across the world, I have chosen for the locations of their headquarters. Finally, a number of games have had several names across the world. I have chosen to take the European names, but I have indicated these titles with an asterisk.

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