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SECONDARY WORLD:
THE LIMITS OF LUDONARRATIVE

by

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B.A. Florida Atlantic University, 2010

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts, Emerging Media
in the School of Visual Arts and Design
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2014

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ABSTRACT

Secondary World: The Limits of Ludonarrative is a series of short narrative animations that are a theoretical treatise on the limitations of western storytelling in video games. The series covers specific topics relating to film theory, game design and art theory: specifically those associated with Gilles Deleuze, Jean Baudrillard, Jay Bolter, Richard Grusin and Andy Clark. The use of imagery, editing and presentation is intended to physically represent an extension of myself and my thinking process and which are united through the common thread of my personal feelings, thoughts and experiences in the digital age.

Dedicated to my cousin Thomas Shedlick.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Sincerest thanks to my family for supporting me throughout my progress in this program.

Personal thanks, in no particular order, to Jo Anne Adams, Philip Peters, Theo Lotz, Keith Kovach, Wanda Ortiz, Mark Price, Carla Poindexter, Larry Cooper, Mark Gerstein, David Isenhour and Adam Lenz along with all my cohorts from the last two years previous and present.

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INTRODUCTION

Secondary World: The Limits of Ludonarrative is an episodic series of short animations on the meaning, purpose and nature of narrative storytelling within games. This series, consisting of captured footage, motion graphics, and archival footage, is to be displayed on a series of televisions in installation. The project examines the elements of narrative structure within the context of player immersion using my own voice to express observations that are intertwined with my personal thought process.

The narration will discuss the current trends in videogame narrative with the goal of raising questions regarding the contentious issues of narrative's application within a virtual environment, the impact of the perspective of the participant, the degree of permitted participant choice within a constructed experience, the limitations of computer art, the impact of game on narrative and the problem of Ludonarrative dissonance.

This paper will attempt to further contextualize theories, arguments and points presented in Secondary World: The Limits of Ludonarrative as well as an evidential recounting of the creation process and my approach in its creation. This project references the works of philosophers Gilles Deleuze, Jean Baudrillard, Jay Bolter, Richard Grusin and Andy Clark. The purpose is to give an historical, theoretical and analytical framework about (1) how the purpose of storytelling and play, (2) how new media, cinema and art serve that purpose, and (3) how the current ongoing critical dialogue accommodates its application to games. The videos in question will examine a variety of video games and film, including *King's Quest VI*, *Starcraft*, *The Matrix*, *Blade Runner*, *The Elder Scrolls* franchise, *The Stanley Parable*, *The Last of Us*, and *Papers, Please*.

This project arose from my own thoughts, feelings, and relationship with a medium, community, and industry that I have been actively involved in for over 18 years. I grew up with video games as a child culminating in the creation of games becoming my current profession. But, I have become, in large part, disillusioned and dissatisfied with a number of issues regarding current game design, industry practices, and its direction. *Secondary World: The Limits of Ludonarrative* is the embodiment of my own personal passion for this medium and it is a part of my own personal growth in understanding it. This series seeks to influence these practices at large and reconsider the existing discourse regarding the structure of how we discuss narrative in interactive media studies.

The goal of the project is to add to the discussion in the field of game studies, specifically the relationship between ludology, the study of game play, and narrative. My aim is to reach an audience of storytellers and designers within the field of video game design, to establish and provide solutions to problems and issues within the field of video game narrative; and to communicate my own personal thought process to the viewer through editing and installation.

METHODOLOGY

The overall philosophy for my editing, gallery presentation, and use of specific content is to create a physical manifestation of my thought process. To understand this approach, I point to the Andy Clark and David Chalmers' mind extension hypothesis: the boundary of the human mind does not end with the skull, but instead can be extended outward utilizing the exterior environment or objects (Cogburn and Silcox). The most famous example by cognitive scientist Andy Clark, points to a group of Alzheimer patients who were somehow able to live at home without any assistance. Researchers discovered that:

“Their homes were stuffed full of cognitive props, tools, and aids. Examples included message centers where they stored notes about what to do and when; photos of family and friends complete with indications of names and relationships; labels and pictures on doors; ‘memory books’ to record new events, meetings, and plans; and ‘open-storage’ strategies in which crucial items (pots, pans, checkbooks) are always kept in plain view, not locked away in drawers” (Clark 140).

They were utilizing a type of “scaffolding” to support their intellects. An aspect of my work stems from this idea of the structure of the mind and thinking systems. It is a mental self-portrait, an extension of me and my thinking in both the process of creation and the final object. In this process, I am the director, screenwriter, editor, animator and actor in my work. I create this work not only for an audience, but also for myself to preserve these thoughts contained within the chaos of my mind. This is demonstrated in my works by (1) my use of fast paced editing and narrative, (2) appropriated imagery selected based on my personal associations of it

with an idea, (3) skeletal storyboarding or pre-planning of visuals to maintain flexibility in the associative thought process and (4) multiscreen installation designed to reflect the multiple threads of thought being entertained. This section of the thesis paper is intended to sequentially explain my workflow, process, and any techniques I developed during the creation of videos.

Idea Creation

I begin my process by figuring out a general idea of what each project will be about, which is not as straightforward as it sounds. The process can be described as haphazard as my inspiration can stem from philosophy books, cinema, playing video games or even mundane events such as watching a squirrel waiting at a crosswalk for cars to drive by before running across the street. I come up with a rather large number of ideas at a time and only pursue one or two for a project. Selection is based on whatever feels most intriguing and my anticipated visualization of the form of final expression. This thought process continues as each project evolves with the full meaning becoming clearer as I near completion.

I approach subject matter by spinning together two disparate ideas or concepts and finding the commonalities that could unite them, which coupled with my unorthodox editing style, aims to be both queer and comical. My fascination with this technique came from a lifetime of involvement with game design wherein any process or physical action can be broken down and turned into a game. Absurd concepts such as making a competitive forklift simulator or turning the process of eating a bowl of cereal with a joystick are not abnormal for specific things I have considered.

Research

From this point, research is obtained from a large variety of sources: faculty, e-books, library resources, online digital journals, television, documentaries, galleries, film reviews, websites, committee members, friends, game developers and my own professional experience to inform my work. I have both a small booklet and my phone to track research or keep detailed notes of specific sensations, thoughts or experiences with attached dates and locations with the intention of preserving of my thoughts at those moments.

Script Creation

WIDER SHOT p.1 "I guess to show about an aspect of their games in 2005, maybe that I can be more defined what"	SCRIPT NARRATIVE p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	SCRIPT ALL HANDS p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	SCRIPT EDITING p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	SCRIPT ALL HANDS p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	PROBLEM OF CHOICE p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	MOVIE p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	WIDER SHOT p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	STYLING AND DESIGN p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"
PLAY AND NARRATIVE p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	PERSONAL STORY p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	SCRIPT ADAPTATION p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	SCRIPT EDITING p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	SCRIPT ALL HANDS p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	PROBLEM OF CHOICE p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	MOVIE p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	WIDER SHOT p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	STYLING AND DESIGN p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"
WIDER SHOT p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	PERSONAL STORY p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	SCRIPT ADAPTATION p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	SCRIPT EDITING p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	SCRIPT ALL HANDS p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	PROBLEM OF CHOICE p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	MOVIE p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	WIDER SHOT p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	STYLING AND DESIGN p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"
WIDER SHOT p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	PERSONAL STORY p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	SCRIPT ADAPTATION p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	SCRIPT EDITING p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	SCRIPT ALL HANDS p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	PROBLEM OF CHOICE p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	MOVIE p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	WIDER SHOT p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"	STYLING AND DESIGN p.1 "I remember moments of how we, you can give them to them, something shows if you can come from another time, you"

Figure 1: By Author, an example of a script in the early planning stages in Final Draft 8.

Script outlines often consist of hundreds of small lines, quips, jokes, thoughts or quotes written down along with any visuals or scenes I associate with the written dialogue. All of this is compiled as an outline in Final Draft 8 using the Index Cards View. I then color code them into groups to figure out the structure of a specific video, such as turning all cards that could be applied to a specific new media concept into red cards and turning others about a specific film into blue cards (see Figure 1).

I develop parts of the script into these blocked sections eventually tying them together. Through this process, I end up excising huge sections of all my notes or split videos into shorter standalone videos. My working philosophy is intuitive: by which I mean that I will know what I am looking for when I find it. When a script reaches the first draft, I will start highlighting sections of the script that I believe are the weakest and go back to refine them, and I will repeat this process as many times as deadlines allow. Although the wording of the dialogue may change, it is only to ensure that my thoughts become more coherent.

Audio Recording

Once a script is constructed, I will start repeating sections aloud and re-writing them to fit into my personal speaking style. Because I am, at best, an amateur voice-over artist, I use the method inspired by Ben ‘Yahtzee’ Croshaw: whose method is to record his voice as clearly and slowly as possible then speed it up in audio processing software. Although I can speak as quickly as Croshaw in his videos, my desire is to achieve clear enunciation, and audibility makes this step necessary. This method actually sounds more natural than speaking slowly and it helps constrain video length. The purpose is not only to reflect my normal speaking voice, but also to audibly emulate the chaotic nature of my thinking process.

Editing

After the audio has been finalized, I move on to editing. Final imagery is selected from the previously gathered content and notes that best suit the dialogue. This process is meant to balance my spontaneous choice of associative imagery with the drawn out technical process of editing. Any last minute imagery is substituted while I am watching the unfinished video and selecting what I associate with that particular piece of dialogue. Animations, particularly those

involving a character from the game, are created for sequences for which I am unable to associate a particular line of dialogue with anything.

INFLUENCES

Though there are too many specific artists and philosophers to list as influences and/or inspirations, there were several specific artists whose work is either similar to mine on a formal level or is similar in their approach on a conceptual level to my work, specifically, the work of Davey Wreden, Ben Croshaw and John Baldessari. I will cover theoretical influences in the analysis portion of this paper when I am talking directly about specific projects.

Davey Wreden's *The Stanley Parable*

USC film undergraduate, Davey Wreden, created *The Stanley Parable* on July 27th, 2011 as a free downloadable modification of Valve Corporation's *Half-Life 2*. Later *The Stanley Parable* was expanded upon and released by Wreden's game development company, Galactic Café, on December 19, 2013. The game has been described as a narrative exploration game, which, according to *The Stanley Parable's* antagonist narrator, is a "witty commentary into the nature of video game structure and its examination of structural narrative tropes" (Pearson).

The player is Stanley, a silent protagonist, an employee of a large nameless company. The antagonist is a faceless omniscient narrator who wants to tell a story about Stanley's journey--in discovering that the company is actually controlling his mind--and his journey to stop it. The narrator only acknowledges the player as Stanley and tells the story about him from the vantage point of the third person. *The Stanley Parable* significantly differs heavily from most current first person video games by simplifying all the elements of mechanical design within the game down to the ability to walk around and click on objects.

At each point of the story, the player can decide to follow or ignore the story the narrator is telling. This is usually presented as a binary choice: when the narrator says that Stanley goes to

through the left door, Stanley can go through the right door. The narrator will berate Stanley and eventually breaks the fourth wall by talking directly to Stanley if the player continuously defies or ruins the narrator's story. If Stanley goes right again, the narrator will force Stanley back through the left door. If Stanley goes into the closet, the narrator will lock the door if Stanley does it repeatedly. If Stanley decides to cheat in the game, the narrator will lambast Stanley for doing so. If Stanley does nothing, the narrator comments that Stanley should hurry up. The overall structure of the narrative is largely about the interplay between the game designer impotently trying to exercise control, and the uncooperative player.

The Stanley Parable is, in short, the impetus for the creation of this thesis project. Both were created with the intention of analyzing and critiquing structural issues within contemporary video game design. The use of a faceless or shifting narrator and the fourth wall breaking nature of the commentary were factors in the overall design of this project. Finally, the use of appropriated assets in the original modification from Valve Corporation's *Half-Life 2* helped direct the overall aesthetic of this project, wherein I utilized appropriated assets from games and other media to help make my points. Unlike Deleuze, who would often cite evidence for his philosophy on the films of Hitchcock, when I visualize a topic I associate it with imagery or audio from video games. In order to stay within my methodological approach, I utilize appropriated media to transform it into a component of my thought process.

Ben Croshaw's *Zero Punctuation* Series

Created by game designer, writer and journalist, Ben "Yahtzee" Croshaw, *Zero Punctuation* is a popular weekly online video game review series published by The Escapist. Formally, his videos are sequential narratives delivered with a combination of minimalistic

cartoon characters and appropriated imagery, on a yellow background. His criticism is delivered in a scathing deadpan. His work is influenced by satirist Charlie Brooker, humorist Douglas Adams, comedy writer Sean Patrick Riley; and Valve Corporation lead writers Chet Faliszek and Erik Wolpaw (Crosshaw; Schneider). Zero Punctuation relates to my work, on a formal and technical level, due its approach toward editing and audio: its use of extremely high-speed speech and its sardonic surreal humor.

On a formal level, the use of high-speed speech, whether recorded at that speed by the actor himself or done in postproduction, permits someone who is not a professional voice actor to be able to record dialogue without a tremendous number of retakes which I am guilty of. It also turns monotone speech into something that is less boring. And it forces people to pay attention in order to understand the content, which mirrors my own struggle with these ideas and how fast they spin through my thoughts.

The use of sardonic humor is an important part of my videos. My videos are put together largely in the style that I personally find amusing and are instilled with as much of my spontaneous personal observations as I can imbue in them. The fact that I infuse my videos with deadpan sardonic delivery, which dramatically alters the structure and mood, transforming them from bullet-point lectures on the philosophy of perception to a mixed form of theory, narrative, documentary and comedy.

John Baldessari's *Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line*

One of John Baldessari's earliest works, *Throwing three balls in the air to get a straight line: best of thirty-six attempts* was published by Giampaolo Prearo in 1973. The photographic essay consisting of fourteen 25 x 33 cm monoplates in a portfolio was released as an edition of 2,000 regular and 500 premium sets (SAIC digital libraries). The goal of Baldessari was to throw three basketballs into the air in an attempt to create a straight line and the photographs are documentation of his attempts to win his own arbitrary game. Specifically the work stemmed from his interest "in the interaction of imagery and language to create meaning," and that this series represents how "language and games as structures following both mandatory and arbitrary rules."

Baldessari attempted to create visible parallels between concepts as utterly foreign to each other as language and games. As previously stated, the game he created was bound by systems of both "mandatory and arbitrary rules" (Columbia College Chicago). To meet the basic definition of what is considered a game, it must have a goal, but the goal of throwing them into a straight line is itself arbitrary. The fact that it is a ball being thrown is arbitrary, but the ball must be flung using manual physical strength, which is mandatory. Likewise, the human body is only capable of creating certain sounds (Nortal Networks Corporation), but how those sounds are combined together to form words and sentences is entirely arbitrary. Both involve manual physical exertion to some degree, and both require repetition and practice to execute and achieve relatively arbitrary goals. A word being spoken by someone is never completely identical in the same way that the balls never form the same line twice due to the limitations of the human body.

The approach that John Baldessari took with this work is one of the defining characteristics of my conceptual practice. Generally, I begin with taking two completely disparate ideas, themes, concepts, and objects, which I graph and plot out to find the common threads, which unifies and presents them as a narrative piece. Examples were my graduate works, including *the eternal test* (2011), *ADSPACE* (2012), *doubt* (2012), *cycles* (2012), *playing god* (2013), *FPS Series* (2013), and *This is an important image.* (2013).

The core design of *the eternal test* is intended to emulate the experience and suffering of life and beliefs inherent to Christianity through integrating game systems taken from EA's *The Sims* and Nintendo's *Super Mario Brothers*. *ADSPACE* attempted to find the common threads between the biblical Hell and commercial advertising from 1900 to the present. *cycles* drew parallels between humans (see Figure 2), AI and god. *doubt* emulated my own process of thinking through a map created by picture frames and text (see Figure 3).



Figure 2: By Author, *cycles* (Still frame), 2012, Video/Animation.

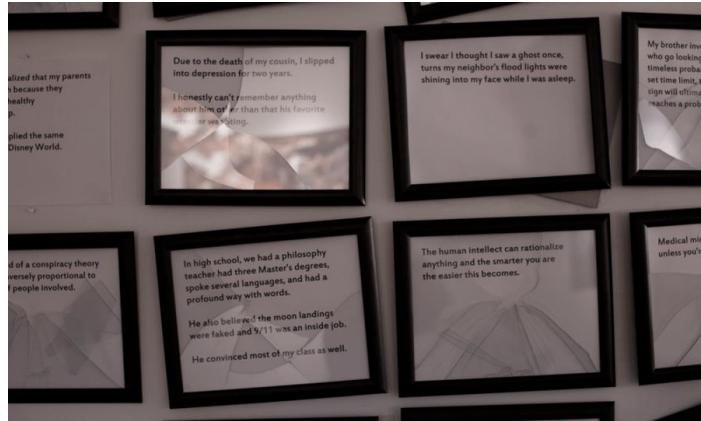


Figure 3: By Author, *doubt (Detail)*, 2012, Video/Text Installation, variable size.

These explorations led to this project, in which I merge various concepts and ideas from the fields of research within narrative studies, psychology, computer art, virtual reality, cinema studies and fine art into a coherent theoretical framework regarding video game narrative structure.

ANALYSIS

This section of the thesis will explain and justify formal and technical components of my videos and presentation.

Formal and Technical

The installation consists of four televisions horizontally aligned along a neutral white portable gallery wall. The televisions are 18” wide and spaced 22” apart with an additional 36” on either end of the row totaling almost 18’. All four televisions are E195BD-SHD 18.5” LED Sceptre Televisions with their logos, lights and buttons covered with black electrical tape. Each monitor has a single JVC HA-S160 FLATS On-Ear Headphones attached to it, hanging from under the televisions by screws drilled into the wall out of sight from the viewer. The videos are installed in one of the darkest areas of the gallery and power cables are hidden in a portable gallery wall, which was moved in front of a power outlet to obscure the cables. To the viewer, the only visible objects on the gallery walls are the televisions and headphones, a pairing meant to remove distracting elements and to intensify the effect of a neutral environment.

The videos being played, from left to right, are titled *v0.9_introduction*, *v1.0_why_am_I_not_pulled_in*, *v1.1_why_did_I_ask_the_first_question*, *v5.0_ludonarrative_dissonance*. Each video consists of my narration about a specific topic pertaining to narrative structure or theory. All the videos consist of a combination of 2-D animations, appropriated media, and gameplay footage. They are constructed in a fast paced editing style to emulate my fast thinking process. Each video incorporates a visual motif of a particular video game from my life and how it relates to a specific topic. The face of the narrator shifts, depending on the content of the game I am speaking about. For instance,

v0.9_introduction references King's Quest VI, the first game I played as a child and my introduction to video games.

As previously stated in the methodology section of this paper, the physical presentation of the four televisions is intended to mimic the multiple threads of my thoughts. The length of the headphone cords coupled with the spacing of the televisions is designed to force the viewer to focus on one television or physical representation of my thought process, one idea at a time. Standing back and viewing the televisions as a collective unit turns the installation into inaudible whispers and a cryptic collage of images, which can only be deciphered by viewing each television individually.

Conceptual

The following section of this paper will cover factors that impact narrative and the suspension of disbelief and the player's desire for choice. Concerned with theories of the structure of the mind, I am also fascinated with the process of the mind, particularly how it interprets information and understands the limits of what it can and cannot accomplish. The immersive quality of a video game has been a major factor and selling point in both academia and industry for years. I differentiate narrative from story by insisting that narrative alone is about overall structure and the approach to a story.



Figure 4: By Author, *v0.9_introduction (Still frame)*, 2013, Video/Animation.

As the name suggests, *v0.9_introduction* is intended to be the overall introductory sequence to the entire project (see Figure 4). It is intended to establish my personal relationship with videogames. Each video of mine after *v0.9_introduction* makes three arguments: (1) that the goal for immersion through immediacy is unachievable because of both physical and conscious reasons, (2) that the desire for immersion stems from our desire for fantasy/freedom and (3) that Ludonarrative dissonance is a consequence of that desire for freedom. Ludonarrative dissonance is a consequence of the pressures of business clashing with the intentions of the game designer, thereby limiting the types of coherent narrative that can be told.

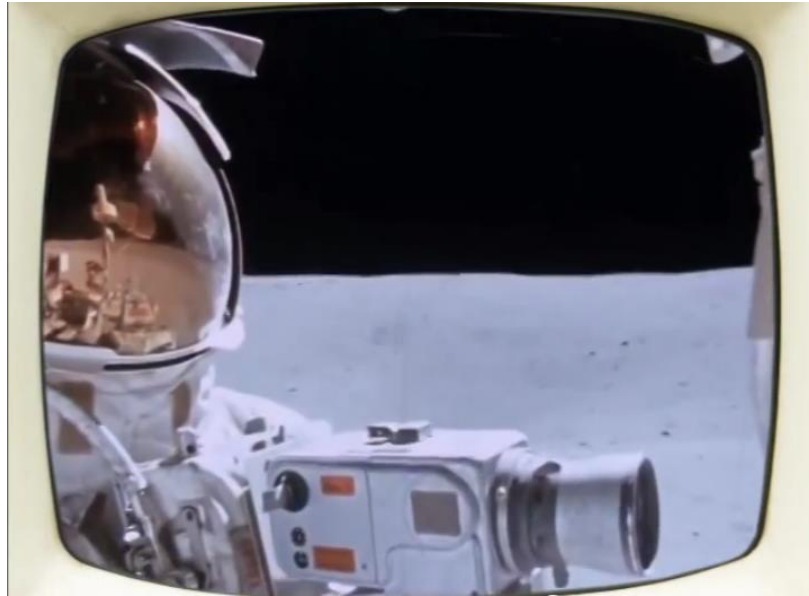


Figure 5: By Author, *v1.1_why_am_I_not_pulled_in* (Still frame), 2013, Video/Animation. Footage is property of The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). See Appendix for documentation of permission to republish this material.

The purpose of *v1.0_why_am_I_not_pulled_in* is to establish the concept of immediacy and to argue that it is an inherently unachievable goal (see Figure 5). Immediacy, as defined by Richard Grusin and Jay Bolter, is “a style of visual representation whose goal is to make the viewer forget the presence of the media (canvas, photographic film, cinema, and so on) and believe that he is in the presence of the objects of representation” (Bolter and Grusin 272-273). More succinctly, it can be defined as the erasure “of the gap between the signifier and the signified” (Blakesley). In *v1.0_why_am_I_not_pulled_in* I chose to make direct visual comparisons to the Wachowskis’ dystopian science fiction action film, *The Matrix*, because it has a central story arc of humanity being trapped in an utterly seamless simulation of reality after an unknown apocalypse. This type of scenario is known as the brain in a vat hypothesis:

“A disembodied brain is floating in a vat, inside a scientist’s laboratory. The scientist has arranged that the brain will be simulated with the same sort of inputs

that a normal embodied brain receives. To do this, the brain is connected to a giant computer simulation of a world. The simulation determines which inputs from the brain it receives. When the brain produces outputs, these are fed back into the simulation. The internal state of the brain is just like that of a normal brain, despite the fact that it lacks a body. From the brain's point of view, things seem very much as they seem to you and me" (Johnson).

My argument pertains to the filter of the human senses. We perceive the world in order of filters, beginning from the brain to the senses and then to the real world around us. To achieve immediacy with virtual reality, at least how it is understood as wearing a headset with headphones and a tactile suit is implausible. Because it is akin to sitting in front of a television, one is still distinctly aware of the media, the television itself, and the world around him or her.

Baudrillard gave three definitions to simulation: (1) "the action or practice of simulating, with intent to deceive," (2) a "false assumption or display, a surface resemblance or imitation, of something," and (3) "the technique of imitating the [behavior] of some situation or process by [...] means of a suitably analogous situation or apparatus" (Baudrillard). This means that even if simulation were to reach a total and completely perfect replica of reality, the innate knowledge of the person that it is a simulation makes one hundred percent immersion unachievable.

In other words, the major difficulty in overcoming this limitation is specifically the knowledge that the simulation is a simulation. The focus then becomes the person and his or her knowledge, therefore achieving a world like the one depicted in *The Matrix*, which is unreasonable and impossible with our current technology. At its core, *v1.0_why_am_I_not_pulled_in* is about the idea that people cannot be dragged into the game

world unless they desire it. My belief, as Baudrillard believed, is that the key is humanity's need to be seduced.



Figure 6: Eadweard Muybridge, *Animal Locomotion* (Plate 626), 1872, Photosequence. Used in *v1.1_why_did_I_ask_the_first_question (Still frame)*, 2013.

Why I wanted to be a part of this world became a more pertinent question, which deals with the desire for immersion and immediacy (see Figure 6). Due to my belief that immediacy was unachievable, I turned my line of questioning toward desire and possible alternative routes of achieving immediacy. In particular, philosopher Douglas Kellner argued that Baudrillard believed that people wanted to be seduced by media:

“The group connected to the video is also only its own terminal. It records itself, self-regulates itself and self-manages itself electronically. Self-ignition, self-seduction. The group is eroticized and seduced through the immediate command that it receives from itself, self-management will thus soon be the universal work of each one, of each group, of each terminal. Self-seduction will become the norm of every electrified particle in networks or systems” (Kellner 148).

This video then explains the relationship between the actual and the virtual. The actual is an “aspect of our lived world that is here for us right now, in the present moment as that which ‘feels most real to us’.” By contrast, the virtual is more about “memory and/or fantasy,” which is the movement away from the present moment. As a result, it is “best to equate the actual with the present, and the virtual with the past/future, or future/past” (Vitale). I argue that the actual is not a direct feed to an objective reality, but is akin to the persistence of vision effect. That effect is one in which the brain perceives movement due to the effect of the afterimage in the eye when multiple still images are seen in continuity. I bring this visual phenomenon to the forefront for discussion because I believe that the actual is the mind’s attempt to make sense of partial or incomplete information instead of being a direct window to an objective reality. The human mind is constructing, or imagining, the actual based on input from the virtual, images the mind is currently processing and ones that are fading. From this we construct an “average” of reality.

Deleuze believed that the “virtual [...] infused into the actual is what produces freedom from being enslaved to the moment” (Vitale). Fantasy might be inspired from reality, but reality is constructed through fantasy, they are intertwined. J.R.R. Tolkien, in his defense of fairy stories, argues that “fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not slavery to it.” Moreover, if “you are willing to let go of the dogmatic insistence on realism, you will find that your relationship with reality is not weakened, but enriched. You will be enabled to be Nature’s lover, and not her slave” (Tolkien).

The video *v5.0_ludonarrative_dissonance* (see Figure 7) directly compares the approaches of video games, specifically the major studio release, Naughty Dog’s *The Last of Us*, and indie game, Lucas Pope’s *Papers Please*. I then compare the approaches taken to get around

the problem of Ludonarrative dissonance. Former Ubisoft Creative Director, Clint Hocking, coined the term, which refers to the dissonance between the narrative of a video game and gameplay (Hocking). For example, I referenced *Grand Theft Auto IV* wherein the main protagonist Niko Bellic is portrayed as a good guy, while the player has the option to shoot civilians, police, and the military.

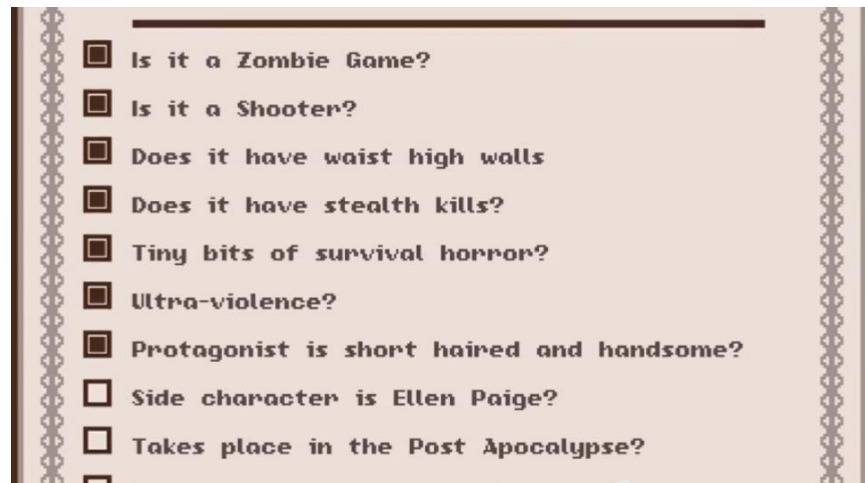


Figure 7: By Author, *v5.0_ludonarrative_dissonance (Still frame)*, 2013, Video/Animation.

Although it overcomes the problem of Ludonarrative dissonance, I argue that the approach taken by *The Last of Us* is inherently limiting. It is a standard third person shooter game requiring the player to kill hundreds of enemies for the sake of gameplay and marketability. The issue encountered is: how do you tell a story that is a tonally serious, realistic narrative driven game and kill hundreds of enemies without making the main protagonists come off as any combination of evil, sociopathic, or hypocritical? My argument is that *The Last of Us* circumvents the issue entirely by making it largely about killing mindless zombies and generating variety by making any human antagonists unrepentantly evil. In this instance a group of bandits encountered at the University of Eastern Colorado are revealed to be indiscriminately murderous cannibals. The pursuit to satisfy the agency of the player with the pressure to make

the game widely marketable inherently limits the types of coherent stories that can be told, especially realistic narratives.

Conversely, *Papers, Please*, a self-described “dystopian document thriller,” attempts to create conflict through moral and ethical dilemmas (Pope). It lacks a central narrative and the central character is defined through player choice in lieu of imposing the character on the player. Instead of utilizing weapons as its main focus, a majority of the game play amounts to stamping paperwork at a border checkpoint in a fictional dystopian eastern bloc country. Tension is created by forcing the player to strategize on how the player is going to survive, by increasing the amount of paperwork day by day and not paying the player more, forcing the player to make decisions about whether to engage in illicit activities to keep his or her family alive. The player battles starvation, terrorism, corruption, and a police state willing to imprison or kill his family. Essentially the game approaches the subject matter in a way that I personally found to be ground breaking in its creativity and inventiveness.

That game was not constrained by the same types of pressures that would affect a multimillion-dollar project like *The Last of Us*, permitting a designer to break new ground within this field. Oskar Fischinger, an early abstract painter turned animator referred to as “cinema’s Kandinsky,” made a similar argument (Canemaker). Although he argued from the standpoint of a modernist painter, his statement that no “sensible creative artist could create a sensible work of art if a staff of co-workers of all kinds had his or her say in the final creation” and that “creative artist of the highest level always works at his best alone” is applicable to my argument with both of these games (Fischinger).

CONCLUSION

Through this project I have attained a comprehensive view of my chosen passion on both a theoretical and emotional level. Although my process is more struggle than catharsis, the completion of this project clarified my associative assembly practice and made manifest my thought process in the form of narrative animation. I have found that this work has much to offer me as well as my intended audience of storytellers and designers in the field of media theory.

I have accomplished the goal of examining and addressing specific structural narrative elements through the lens of theory. Specifically, I refer to the impact of immediacy, the desire for freedom and the problems associated with Ludonarrative dissonance. In my pursuit of the limitations associated with narrative theory, I bring to the forefront these contentious issues relating to immersion into a story and of contemporary game design. The artist, designer and critic I referenced in the influences section have helped shape the direction of my project. My fascination with the structure of narrative, gameplay and the mind, coupled with my creative pursuits, will direct my future artistic practice and research.

APPENDIX
PERMISSION INFORMATION FOR FIGURE 5

The following copyright information was obtained from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration website regarding their Image Use Policy. Their organization does not endorse my work thesis, work or activities and the use of their imagery is intended for noncommercial academic purposes.

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