

Exploring Interactive Narrative and Ideology in War Games

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Abstract Given the popularity of information and communication technologies, it is a time of radical change. People are spending more of their time in virtual worlds and a large part of this time is spent playing games. Hence within this paper, the authors explore the concept of ‘identification’ and ‘representation’ within game narrative with specific reference to ‘interactivity’ and ‘character immersion’. Within the interactive realm of video games, players play an active role in determining the flow and outcome of the story. Critics have argued that games can transmit different ideologies to players. By actively identifying with the characters on screen (and determining their ultimate path) one may argue that playing a game set against a historical backdrop may have an active influence on their ideological perception of the historical events and in turn influence their own identity and how they navigate contemporary society. By using two war game case studies, *Middle-Earth: Shadow of Mordor* and *Anglo-Boer War*, the authors propose that the interactive nature of video game storytelling infers that narrative can be self-constructed, especially with the right design choices. But can games arguably be used as a tool for psychological warfare? The authors interrogate the ‘interactive meaning making process’ in the two games; and clarifies it by interviewing a developer of one of the games.

Keywords: Anglo-Boer War; Narrative; Identity; Ideology; Interactivity; Character-embodiment; Ludology.

1. Introduction

“There is no discourse so obscure, no tale so odd or remark so incoherent that it cannot be given meaning,” (Martin 1987, p. 7).“

Humans have used narratives such as myths and folklore since the earliest times to construct meaning from their lives. According to Barthes (1972), these same stories have been used throughout history to represent the social, cultural and ideological aspects of a society as normal. However, storytelling as a human trait has shifted since the onset of the internet to include more avenues for expression and constructions of truth. And yet, despite all these technological advancements, Garite (2003) argues that games “remain notoriously under-analysed within the academy”.

In film studies, researchers have often explored the role of filmic narratives, especially those set against historical backdrops, in audiences’ identity construction (Woodward, 2002). The notion that popular culture contributes to identity construction is taken a step further with gaming, because of its interactive nature. Within the interactive realm of video games, players actively determine the narrative flow. Garite (2003, p. 1) warns that this interactive feature of video games “tends to manifest itself as a relentless series of demands” which leads to “disciplining behaviour”. He draws on the work of Louis Althusser (1971) to argue that “the traditional theories of interactivity fail to acknowledge... the extent to which video games define and reconstitute players as subjects of ideology”. In reading this, one may conclude that Garite proposes that in playing a game that has a specific agenda, gamers submit themselves to a form of psychological warfare.

By unpacking the so-called ‘ludic’ or ‘playfulness’ in this discourse and converging it with the idea of narrative authorship; this paper explores mechanisms of representation in video game narrative. The trajectory follows a discussion on narrative flow in the interactive game environment; character immersion and antagonism; and finally, the role of consumer versus creator in the mechanism of video game play. In terms of methodology, the researchers set out to play the two case study games, because “playing is a form of understanding” (Mayra, 2011). Our rationale is that through participatory research the researchers would be privy to hidden social relations and the collective action that these games provoke. In addition, by examining the narrative construction process within the game, it would guide the researcher to conduct informed interviews with the game developers. We use these approaches to

interrogate the possible construction and representation of an ideology within a video game whose story is set against a mythical or historical war backdrop.

Whilst the fantasy setting of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (and Peter Jackson's film adaptation) should be familiar to many international readers, the historical account the South African Anglo-Boer War might not be. Thus, in the following section the authors will provide a brief contextual background of this historical conflict and its on screen representation.

2. The Anglo-Boer War as 'story world'

The Anglo-Boer War was an armed conflict between forces from the British Empire and the Boers from 1899 to 1902, within the borders of the country now called South Africa. The Boers republics fought for the sovereignty of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State (Pretorius, 2009). The Boer nation were descendants of white settlers (*Voortrekkers*) who rejected British colonial rule and migrated North from the Cape Colony between 1835 and 1845. British scholars usually prefer the term 'The Boer War' whilst some African scholars favour the name 'South African War' (Worden, 1998).

The Anglo-Boer War is a popular 'story world' in historical films and drama series. The Nazi propaganda machine used this historical backdrop for their anti-British imperialism film *Ohm Krüger* in 1941. In South Africa, the country's first ever 'talkie' film *Sarie Marais* (1931) ignited the popularity that would lead to a "decade of the Boer Hero" in the 1960's when seven Anglo-Boer War feature films were made (Jansen van Vuuren, 2015). With the introduction of television to South Africa in 1976, numerous Anglo-Boer War drama series would follow (Le Roux & Fourie, 1982, p. 71). In post-Apartheid South Africa, it was revisited in films such as *Verraaiers* [traitors] (2012), and *Blood and Glory* (2016). The war captured the imagination of the Australian filmmakers who made *Breaker Morant* (1980) whilst the characters in the British film *Victoria and Abdul* (2017) also references the conflict. By listing some of the most prominent examples of on-screen narrative interpretations of the war, the authors try to illustrate the popularity that the setting enjoys. The 'Anglo-Boer War' protagonist popularised by the abovementioned films, were in a sense created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle when he first wrote about the Boers in 1902:

"Take a community of Dutchmen, of the type of those who defended themselves for fifty years against all the power of Spain, at a time when Spain was the greatest power in the world. Intermix with them a strain of those inflexible French Huguenots who ... left their country for ever at the time of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. The product must be one of the most rugged, virile, unconquerable races ever seen upon earth. Take this formidable people and train them for seven generations in constant warfare ... in circumstances under which no weakling could survive, place them so that they acquire exceptional skill with weapons and in horsemanship, give them a country which is eminently suited to the tactics of the huntsman, the marksman, and the rider. Then, finally, put a finer temper upon their military qualities by a dour fatalistic Old Testament religion and an ardent and consuming patriotism. Combine all these qualities and all these impulses in one individual, and you have the modern Boer-, the most formidable antagonist who ever crossed the path of Imperial Britain" (Doyle 1902, p. 1).

With his writing Doyle (1902) creates a heroic image of the Boer, one that is reminiscent of the great heroes from mythical tales and legends. Thus, to the authors 'the Boer soldier' seemed to be the ideal figure to serve as a warrior hero in a video game. Yet when conducting an initial search, the authors could only find evidence of one video game set against this backdrop – and an incomplete one at that. However, there are ample "table top" or board games that are set within this era, such as *The Boer War* (3 W World Wide Wargames, 1991), *Bittereinder* (Microgame Design Group, 2000), *The Sword and the Flame* (That's the way it was, 1979), *The Second Boer War* (Decision Games, 2001), *Battles for Empire 1870-1902* (Hotz Artworks, 1999), *Soldier's companion* (GDW Games, 1989), *Boer War* (Commonwealth Games, 1976), *The Great Boer War Board Game* (Frontier Post 2001), *Rifle & Saber* (SPI 1973), *Boer War Card Game* (Warp Spawn Games 2004), (Carrol, 2013).

3. Theoretical framework

"One measure of our distinctiveness as a species is that the impulse to play can remain intact throughout a lifetime" (Wilshire, 1990).

There are three fields of study overlapping in this paper, namely 'Performance studies', in considering character representation as it applies to story development; secondly, theories of 'ideology' and 'narrative'; and lastly 'Game studies' or 'Applied Ludology' in which the authors compare the ludic models of analysis for creativity and engagement. The latter forms the largest component of the argument, based on Koljonen's claim that game design "models the making of societies. This makes games one of the best art forms to explore questions of freedom and control" (Koljonen, 2014, p. 21).

What does the future hold for communication and storytelling when games continue their delivery of open-worlds into our real one? Through this argument, the authors open a discussion of the ideological implications of using the Anglo-Boer War as a historical setting in a video game realm. For the purpose of this paper ideology will be defined as "an institutionalized system of ideas that shape an individual or society's values, beliefs or behaviour such as nationalism, capitalism or communism, (JansenVanVuuren, 2015, p. 57). Lambrechts & Visagie (2009, p. 76) argue that if an ideology is born in a context of suffering (such as those created by conflicts and wars) it may elevate certain ideals to such an extent that, in time, the ideology will attract followers whilst "subtly draw a false image of reality before their eyes, an illusion from which images of ideological opponents are generated" (ibid). Mark Hayse (2013) uses the works of Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser to argue that video games can transmit and teach ideology to players. Thus within this paper we will reflect on the role 'ideology' in video game creation, especially taking into consideration "those structural features that distinguish games from traditional forms of cultural production" (Garite, 2003).

4. Case studies

Our first case study is the mythical fantasy war game *Middle Earth: The Shadow of Mordor* (Monolith, 2014). *Shadow of Mordor* is set in a non-canon version of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* universe and is a unique case study because of its design mechanic that allows the player to alter progression on the story based on their individual choices. This is like performing one's own narrative in the realm on interactive immersive theatre, such as the Punchdrunk Theatre (Machon, 2013). Monolith's game takes it further by giving players an opportunity to create their own antagonists, and their own conflict, through their own iconic nemesis system.

Anglo-Boer War is the second case study that we will discuss in terms of its player-character-driven narrative development. The now disbanded South African company Twilyt Productions put in a huge amount of work in developing it as a strategy game to be released in April 2002. Yet they never completed the game nor released it to the market. *Anglo-Boer War* is now listed by the strategy game blog *Flash of Steel* under their section "Games that never were," (Goodfellow, 2005). We managed to track down the key developer behind *Anglo-Boer War*, Travis Bulford, for an open-ended interview. Bulford explained that in the same period he also designed a second game set against the backdrop of a South African War, namely *Anglo-Zulu War*. These two games were never introduced to the market, because he closed his company two years prior to their planned release date. The reasons for the closure included financial strain and burnout as he was the only video game software developer in the company. His interview forms part of the discussion within the paper (Bulford, 2018). After closing Twilyt Productions, he became co-founder of Celestial Games.

5. Discussion

5.1 Cinematic game narrative

Within the videogame environment the player has narrative agency. Every choice he or she makes has an influence on the outcome of the story, and through nonverbal discourse, in tandem with the provided game mechanics, *there* exists a "unique meaning making processes. Therefore, the authors disagree with Eskelinen's viewpoint that the narrative scenario and fictional setting within a game are not worth examining from the ludological point of view. Eskelinen (2001) writes that within the context of a video game "stories are just uninteresting ornaments or gift wrappings... and laying any emphasis on studying these kinds of marking tools is just a waste of time and energy". In contrast, Crogan (2008, p. 148) explains that games display important characteristics from other media forms,

such as “narrative, theme, character, and the representation of fictional worlds”. Crogan argues that the ‘texture’ and ‘cultural inputs’ are worthwhile objects of study.

The developer of the *Anglo-Boer War* video game, Travis Bulford (2018) states that a game’s story and its fictional (or historical) setting is one of the most important aspects of a video or computer game. In fact, he is of the opinion that as players have become lazier in their game playing, it brings more opportunity for animation and filmic ‘cut scenes’ in a game. For this reason, he explains that the way he designed the game in the early 2000’s would not be relevant for a contemporary audience anymore. This if he would resuscitate his *Anglo Boer War game*, he would have to change his approach.

5.2 Interactivity and character immersion

“Millions of players traverse the fictional landscapes of video games ... in search of the experience of being someone else. What we call ‘stories’ have turned into infinite opportunities for one to be transformed, immersed, and challenged... And they let one live larger-than-life experiences while impersonating fictional characters... One could have an antagonist or even be one” (Thabet, 2015, p. 2).

By playing the roles of certain characters in a video game the players are indeed ‘performing’ these roles, similarly to an actor in a theatre pièce or ‘play’. We use Schechner’s 2003 definition of ‘performance’ (that it is more a web than a continuum) combined with James Newman’s arguments centred on the virtual space. Newman (2002) states that identity in game narrative is not empathetic and distant, but immediate and functional. To put this in context, in virtual (game) spaces one is not watching another human perform Hamlet or enact the battle of the bastards. Rather, the observer is Hamlet, and contributes to, is a part of the battle.

Twilyt’s original website describes the game *Anglo-Boer War* as “based on the historical war between the British and the Boers over control of South Africa’s gold,” (Walker, 2006). On this website (that has now ceased to exist), they explained that players could choose to play on either the Boer or the British side, and that they could play against the computer or against other gamers on the internet (ibid). By choosing to portray either a Boer or a Brit, the player is in a sense forced to choose a side in this conflict. Hence by choosing to carry a ‘Mauser’ (the traditional rifle of the Boers), or a ‘Lee-metford’ (the British soldiers’ preferred rifle), a player could opt to support a “nationalistic” or an “imperialistic” cause. To be oblivious to this, is as Garite (2003) describes, to be “political unconscious of cultural forms”. Garite strongly argues that the interactive feature of video games “manifest itself as a relentless series of demands” or a way to “discipline player behaviour”. Hence, he makes the case that “video games define and reconstitute players as subjects of ideology” (Garite, 2003).

But Bulford (2018) disagrees with this, stating that “if players relate to the ideology in the game, the ideology is already within the player”. He argues that in the context of commercial games, one cannot argue that games are causing a certain scenario or effect, but rather that the games are fulfilling needs that the player already has. “It often happens with art that the art will be blamed on problems in society. But we should rather focus on changing our own behaviour and belief systems. We cannot paint over the mirror of society,” (Bulford, 2018).

Bulford further explains that within his current digital game designs, the immersion is more in the setting than in the individual. In planning both the *Anglo-Boer War* and the *Anglo-Zulu War* games, he did extensive research on the period to enable him to pull historically relevant characters into the game’s ‘story world’ to assist the player in making strategic decisions. “In contemporary games you play on a strategic level. This would mean that the player would have the potential to control about 200 different characters. The player would not immerse as a singular individual/character but would rather be a type of ‘overlord’ making strategic decisions within the game (Bulford, 2018).

This argument ties in with Newman’s suggestion that game identification is no longer about aesthetic representation. He argues that players identify more with characters for their capacity to do something (rather than identifying with an appealing array of pixels that fool one into seeing another human figure). Newman (2002) uses the example of Tetris to explain that a falling block does not represent the player as human, but rather “the player is every falling block, all blocks on the floor, every block that is and will be”. Still, we would like to focus less on how

the player is represented by/in the protagonist and more on the choices enacted within the game-world (by the protagonist) that define 'story'.

5.3 "Playing the narrative"

When playing video games, by manipulating a control pad, players play an active role in determining the flow of narrative". This contrasts with conventional theatre or film productions where the script has a preordained (limiting) plot with a certain sequence of events. The standard practice of being in control of the character in a video game means the player determines how and in which order the story develops. Even if the storyline is railroaded in a game to coerce the player into certain actions, the developers can never guarantee the exact chronology of events that might lead to the final climax or end event. The layout of the narrative is thus unpredictable. Uncertainty, in fact, is a primary characteristic of all sorts of play, and not of video games alone. If we can predict the outcome, we are unlikely to enjoy the game. And there is scope to suggest that higher levels of immersion with a game also connect with levels of enjoyment of the game (Costikyan, 2000). Perhaps it is the case in the digital, new media entertainment landscape that unfixed narratives deliver greater enjoyment of the entertainment product.

One might argue that *Shadow of Mordor* does not experiment with the interactive medium as much as other titles. There are games that require more creative active engagement to steer narrative such as *Until Dawn*; the *Tell-Tale* game series; *Lifeline*; and even more genre-bending Japanese Visual Novels, where the line between literature and game is heavily blurred. However, the defining factor of Monolith's AAA title is its technological innovation for unique character creation. The important factor here is the open-world sandbox that sits alongside the core narrative of the game. Sandbox games suggest to the player that they are free to roam the virtual/simulated environment of their own accord. This gives the player an incredible amount of control in terms of creating a narrative for their play experience. As such this is a prime example of the Ludic: spontaneous and undirected playfulness. Within this ludic landscape, the story devised from within *Shadow of Mordor* centres around conflict with Tolkien's Uruk, or orcs.

In terms of our second case study, a sandbox design might be an interesting choice for video game set against an Anglo-Boer War backdrop. This design might allow a player to construct their own chronology of events, thereby creating their own original narrative take on the overall story. Or rather, the players might roam freely within the game-world of that timeline and craft their own experience to better understand the historical events. In the original *Anglo-Boer War* game, battles were affected by terrain conditions taken from historical information. In addition, players would have been able to create and play custom scenarios. But to have players essentially create their own antagonists through game choices, in an Anglo-Boer War themed game as much as a *Lord of the Rings* themed one, would make for an alternative experience to the history, which might lead to players critically interrogate its legacy.

To begin to develop an understanding of self-driven narrative construction in video games, we need to understand the move from 'character representation' to 'character-action embodiment' and consider how this affects story or plot. Thabet (2015) argues that when it comes to game fiction, "the term 'interactivity' is a terribly dull one and does not say anything about how to play a story and how a story affects us". Furthermore, "the pleasure of videogame play does not simply flow through the lead of a joystick", (Newman2002, p. 1). Onlookers are non-controlling players, and their pleasure in play, is equated to that of the active player controlling the input. In such an instance perception of the identification of the protagonist is mediated one step further. This illusion of proximity is what McKenzie Wark calls 'telesthesia', mediated perception at a distance (Williams, 1999, p. xi).

5.4 My antagonist, my narrative

"Conflict is to storytelling what sound is to music" (McKee, 1999).

Conflict in *Shadow of Mordor* is represented in the orc antagonists and the defining factor in the game is that every player's antagonists will be different. This is achieved through the captains' generator - known as the nemesis system. Essentially, the artificial-intelligence engine of the game generates smart, relatable, and personalized enemies (or antagonists). If any Uruk kills the player, even if they are a random grunt, they level up and earn new abilities and some better armour. Maybe the Uruk gets promoted up the chain of command. But the player will run into them again later to settle the score, and the Uruk will have a new introduction taunt about his victory when they meet. It makes each death feel meaningful to the player. The implication is that the Uruk is the player's enemy

and nobody else's. Such a system means that there is a hierarchy of enemies, but more importantly - that the narrative of the game one is playing is never rewritten by a respawn, but rather ongoing.

The norm in video game play is that when the player makes a mistake or fails (which often happens), they get the chance to restart and try again. Hence in *Shadow of Mordor*, the player's story is shaped by his/her defeats as much as by successes. By deduction, it is their story and nobody else's. There is a sense that the player creates a subjective narrative even within a shared game-world. Any friends who remotely play the game pop up on the in-game map when they are defeated in their solo play, by one of their Uruk enemies. The player then has a vendetta mission and can avenge their friend's "virtual" death. This creates a feeling of overlapping individual perspectives on a game-world and (hi)story.

With a unique-to-the-player nemesis storyline, the narrative is ongoing. There is no restart or respawn option to try again and erase the past. The player's actions are never forgotten. Therefore, the player's actions and choices have 'real' world consequences. This makes the story more personal, and by its very nature, more complex. The authors attribute these aspects of interactive, cinematic game narrative to the nomenclature 'dynamic antagonism'. According to Isbister (2016), "game designers combine avatars and actions to generate rich possibility spaces for emotionally meaningful social interaction." (Isbister, 2016). This combination of represented-protagonist and freedom-of-choice in decision-making shapes a more personal narrative. By playing the video game, essentially the player is playing the narrative. This amendment to the convention of narrative reception, à la literature or cinema, is considered when highlighting the 'performance' of story in *Shadow of Mordor*. 'Narrative' and 'play' are not opposites. They do not constitute mutually exclusive lenses for understanding the mediation of identity, but rather must be taken as complementary". By choosing which enemies to face (and kill), the game mechanic (in the chosen case study) responds by creating unique characters for the individual player to face anew, thus progressing the narrative in an original development towards the overarching end-goal. But how would this antagonism work in a video game set against the backdrop of an actual historical event – such as the Anglo-Boer War?

In the late nineteenth century the Boer republics' struggle for freedom and independence from the British were revered by the rest of the world who had come to loathe the Empire and what it stood for – and this reverence can be seen in various European and North American newspapers at the time, depicting the Boer Nation as "David", standing up to its "Goliath" (KrugerHouseMuseum, 2015). Since then, the Boer hero has become a mythical figure. In this fashion the Boer hero is akin to the fantastical orc in *Shadow of Mordor*. A trepidation arises in the representation being understood as enemy rather than simply antagonistic to hegemonic power. A video game developer might need to be aware that the Boer Hero has also been used by the National Party in its "narrative of a nation" (Maingard, 2007) and be careful not to fall in the same trap of perpetuating a certain representation, especially considering the current so-called identity crisis Afrikaners in contemporary, post-1994 South Africa (Krog, 2007). The challenge for developers, such as Bulford, would be to create strong antagonists that are more archetypal than stereotypical – in order to portray sensitivities of the modern-day context and society.

6. Conclusion

This paper is an exploration of the interactive nature of video game storytelling, inferring that narrative can be self-constructed, especially with particular design choices. The focus is on active, personalised, narrative-building through imaginative interaction in/with video games; especially in the case of the nemesis system in *Shadow of Mordor* or a video game set within the context of a historical conflict, such as *The Anglo-Boer War*. In so doing, there is a suggestion for not only dynamic agency for the protagonist that tells/shares the story but also for a dynamic antagonism.

By analysing an element of game design that allows the player to build their own, unique, narrative manifestation of a core story, there is space to play with historical myth and the relationship with narrative construction. In addition, the next step in this research might be to invest in the myth of disembodiment; which could be furthered by collecting more qualitative data from a pool of players that engage with this dynamic narrative constructivism.

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