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ANALYSING VIDEOGAMES AS A TEXT. CASE STUDY: “DISCO ELYSIUM”

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INTRODUCTION

In semiotics field videogames are rarely going into the light of the research. Different disciplines are now created to study videogames (media philosophy¹, multimedia studies) or old and relatively new ones trying to engage videogames (anthropology, psychology, gender studies etc.). Even though the particular field for studying videogames is created (game studies) it is still more like a compilation of different approaches talking about different objects (which I will develop later). Some problems that were already pointed out by Espen Aarseth as an editor in chief of first game studies journal (Aarseth 2001) are still present and no significant turns happened. Aarseth wanted to give birth to the computer games studies but twenty years later we cannot speak of an established field (at least from the point of methodology and established object of study. The multiple works on game studies are published and conferences are organized but usually researchers are speaking about totally different things).

To narrow down the area of the research, I will only consider Role-Playing Games (RPGs) and specifically the Disco Elysium (DE) released in 2019 by Estonian studio ZA/UM, including its recent Final cut expansion², which adds full voice over and additional quests). Role-playing games are the most suitable for the purpose of this thesis, since they combine most of the aspects of the gaming experience. There is a place to discuss whether we can define RPGs at all since if we are looking at the big picture, all videogames are giving a player the opportunity to play the role of someone else (from the plumber Mario from the Mario series (Nintendo) to the witcher Geralt from the Witcher series (CD project RED)). Which is also a big discussion object for metagaming and player experience field. Nevertheless, choosing classical RPGs (games that evolved from pen and paper board games) will allow us to dismiss hyper-casual games³ which most likely have different patterns of developing (especially if we are talking about hyper-casual games as a business model) and for such games genre other analysis tools are necessary and we won't touch gam-performances like "Cow Clicker" (Bogost 2010) and videogames as not-gaming tool (theatre experience, performances, libraries on game engines). What will make RPGs as a good option to narrow down videogames is that RPG's experience usually includes several game playing options at the same time, since they developed from pen and paper role-

¹ Media philosophy center (and the videogames research laboratory) on the base of SPBSU's philosophy faculty.

² Released on 03/30/2021.

³ Candy Crash saga (King) or Flappy bird. The games with simple gameplay usually developed for mobile platforms, usually has a free-to-play model of distribution.

playing games such as Dungeon and Dragons (1974 – present). In one classical video RPG we will get all-in-one experience. Most of the classical RPG inherited the character classes (the most common ones are warrior, mage, and rogue). Their playstyle in pen and paper games and gameplay in videogames is entirely different. Classic fantasy RPGs simultaneously allow you to play stealth action (a game in which the player must remain unnoticed from the enemy and most of the actions are carried out secretly/using cunning), action (straight out fighting) or diplomatic strategy (the ability to go through game situations without battles, usually allowed for mages since they have the most developed intelligence characteristic). Rich game possibilities within one game gives a lot of scope for analysis.

DE present additional challenges for defining games in general, it is recognized as a video game, but one can say that it bears features of an unstructured adventure book experience⁴. It does not test the physical abilities of the player (for example, memory and dexterity as in Soulsborn⁵ games or tactics as in simulator games, or the building up the strategy for leveling up the main character⁶ to achieve the desired result). If you evaluate Disco Elysium according to Jesper Juul's videogames definition (Juul 2005: 54), it does not match to it, so, among other things, indeed we should assume that DE is a videogame, avoiding giving or choosing the definition for videogames. In addition to the role-playing component, the choice is justified by the general unusual history of the developing of DE⁷. Firstly, this is the first game of the Estonian company ZA/UM, where the school of game design is not yet widespread⁸. A large first project from an indie company with a small number of employees and no technical difficulties on release (lots of bugs were reported at the release of final cut but first version was stable) is a rarity. Indie companies and small companies often enter the gaming market, but rarely with such an outcome. For example, the recently released Loop Hero (2021, Four Quarters). Its gameplay embodies the idea of combining storytelling and gameplay, even though the game itself is more of a hyper-casual type of game (they are usually having addictive gameplay, so player has a motivation for restart. Loop Hero is a roguelike game also (the player is given one attempt to success, after death you return to the beginning of the game, but a player can save either upgrades or inventory (in simpler games of genre like rogue-lite) or new knowledge about the gameplay (classic ones)).

⁴ A book where one must read paragraphs in particular order dedicated but their choices.

⁵ Gamers name for game series from Software games, where the game flow is depending on player dexterity and memory.

⁶ Creating a working build for character is usually used in rogue-like series, where player has only one chance to succeed throughout the game session. A player needs to create a synergy of character powers to.

⁷ https://www.gamesradar.com/amp/the-making-of-disco-elysium-how-zaum-created-one-of-the-most-original-rpgs-of-the-decade/?_twitter_impression=true

⁸ One can say that Death and Taxes(2020) is at least known to the player, but it is a relatively small game experience <https://dtf.ru/games/153596-kak-death-and-taxes-rasskazyvaet-o-zhizni-smerti-i-byurokratii>

The story of the game is based on the disappearance of the world, where only the protagonist has survived, a player walks in a circle and gradually "remember" some game components, then entities in the storytelling and gameplay and learns the rules of the game universe. The protagonist has the power to "remember" the world once again, but his knowledge has limits, since after death he is forced to re-walk in a circle and "remember" the world. Despite the addictiveness of the gameplay, the real game time and storyline in Loop Hero takes only a couple of hours (if a player uses some gameplay flows and codes they can rush through the game without repetitions), which is just typical for games from small/indie companies. In the case of DE, it takes about 30 hours to complete a clean storyline without considering the extended version, which puts it rather in the category of AA⁹ games. At first glance, DE stands out since it is a radical change of the RPG genre, which is also attracting attention. Classic role-playing strategies, especially those inspired by role-playing systems like Dungeon and Dragons, usually allows the player to take the role of a hero/rescuer. The classic protagonist, even if he commits conventionally socially disapproved acts (theft, murder), is represented as a positive hero. Classic examples of RPG protagonists are: Captain Shepard from Mass Effect series, Hero of Ferelden from Dragon Age series, Corvo/Emily Dishonored series. The classic protagonist has positive characteristics¹⁰, the player gets a rather positive experience when associating with such a character. DE reimagines the classic role-playing protagonist, offering to live in the shoes of a socially disapproved, low, obnoxious character. Regardless of the further choice of the protagonist's "specialization" (logician, brutal, empath), the hero is an alcoholic-policeman who has sunk to the social bottom with memory loss from delirium. All that remains of the hero's classic appearance is the newfound memories of rather good police record. But due to memory loss, the player's past skills are not available. For example, the protagonist's crime rate at the start of the game is "outstanding", but a player will still spend some time to recall memories about police work. Nevertheless, the different routes of storyline there is no way a player can fail the initial murder investigation¹¹. For the protagonist, it should not be "pleasant" to play and live his gaming experience, despite this DE received high praise from critics, many game awards (including the game of the year, despite the competition with the classic "good game" developers — Supergiant Games and their Hades game¹²).

⁹ Usually used as AAA. High budget big game projects. I removed one A since DE did not have big budget and company but passes with other features to the definition.

¹⁰ Usually player is allowed to make a conventional bad decision in a game but it is more about the choice for the player than a canon for the game setting.

¹¹ Until the release of the Final Cut, now there is a special achievement for a player to fail investigation on purpose.

¹² <https://dtf.ru/games/18324-supergiant-games-malenkaya-studiya-s-bolshimi-ambiciyami>

The place of the narrative is also different from the classic RPG, presenting a vague reflection of the post-Soviet space with an element of mysticism and fantasy, which also sets the game apart from other role-playing games, therefore, it is appropriate to use the understanding of the text by J. Lotman for the analysis of the game as a text. The assumption is such, that if something has all 3 functions of the text, it would be one, and it could be decoded as one. In the interviews with the developers, this is not mentioned, but it can be assumed that the atmosphere or cultural importance of the Tartu-Moscow school could influence the development of the game. Also, I wanted to oppose rhetoric wordplay approach by C. Paul, since it is one of the very little special analytic tools in game studies developed especially for videogames. As it was said before there is still a struggle in video games studies with the lack of methodology and correct description of the object (or an agreement of the object). The most thorough works are either about one videogame or a philosophy study. In the interviews with the creators, this is not mentioned, but it can be assumed that the atmosphere or cultural importance of the Tartu-Moscow school could influence the development of the game.

Collecting the game as a text and analyzing in this thesis, it will be necessary to form a criterion for the analysis of role-playing games and their extrapolation for the analysis of other games. Also, the possibility of using such an analysis for practical game development.

Before the analysis it is important to frame and describe the features of the RPGs since my argument is that the inner connection between the parts of the game is the key to the positive game development. Why not form such a game as a text since it on the one hand function inside itself, had a connection with a player and with other games (texts).

As a result, we will get a theoretical reference point for the basis of game design (in which the narrative part is also included, and not separated from it), which can be transferred to the creation of game software as part or developing some small game projects.

The research question is the development the criteria for the analysis of role-playing games and their possibility of extrapolation for the analysis of subsequent games and their creation. We will try to use the J. Lotman approach of text functions to reach that.

The first chapter will be focused on the deconstructing the videogames as such. To see how each of this aspect has a possibility to convey the messages between different receivers (excluding the hardware part since the programming is also about coding and decoding messages between developers and game engine). We will see the current videogames studies problems, the research that is existed already and more important we will see the different aspects of the role-playing game that can convey meanings between each other and the player. One of the issues that will be

addressed in this paper, that some of the aspects are overlooked by the developers or some of them are overlapping each other creating a rough gaming experience. We will not analyze the “outside” features of the videogame, trying to concentrate more on the videogames itself and their functions.

The second chapter is mostly about the DE itself and its functions as a text. We will see how different aspects of the game which were explored in the first chapter are working as small messages that are working together and convey meanings.

Combining two approaches we will reach to the conclusion where will be discussed if the construction of the videogames as a text is not only good for the post-game analysis but could be helpful for the developers for creating future games.

The primary aim of this paper is to try to find some practical tool that can be used in developing games beforehand and not after.

I CONTEMPORARY GAME STUDIES: OVERVIEW

As was briefly mentioned before, contemporary game studies are making small progress due to lack of consensus of both the object of game studies and the methodology to describe and analyze it. The core discussion out the game studies subject is much quieter now than 10 years ago. We can say that there is a key discussion that is now only slowly smoldering — what is a videogame and if videogame is a gameplay or narrative. The issue is that anytime the core question for the field is rather there is no productive outcome out of it. We can see that there is still no clear game definition even for the legal practices which can be a problem in the court. The recent (08.2020 — present) case between Apple company and Epic company is one example of that. But on the first glance it seems that there is already a lot of things was done so now we can explore the brief overview of the current state of game studies.

We can say that game studies were organized or at least established as a new field in 2001 by Espen Aarseth (Aarseth 2001). But it was not the beginning of game studies as such. In 1997 Aarseth developed a theory of cybertext and introduced the concept of ergodic literature:

During the cybertextual process, the user will have effectuated a semiotic sequence, and this selective movement is a work of physical construction that the various concepts of "reading" do not account for. This phenomenon I call ergodic<...> (Aarseth 1997: 1)

Aarseth developed the notion when hypertexts have already gained huge popularity by which I mean text adventure books, that had their golden age in 60's. Before that in 1995 the notion "hypertext" was introduced by Nelson, which started the new studies that concerned new media appearing (Nelson 1995). The multimedia studies established around that time also and one can say that they developed a separate approach for studying video games (Toh 2019, Hawreliak 2019, Paul 2012).

But the idea of seeing a computer games as the ergodic literature is the concept that also helps our cause. The only issue is that I will not say that videogame can be called literature as such since this definition will bring them into the far end of the playing experience and gameplay. I am using playing experience as this moving mechanism that is needed in order to progress in the game. The Aarseth approach is contributing to the dispute between narratology and ludology. They can be considered as the two branches in the game studies theory, or the basics that are looked upon while studying games (either from the side of the gameplay or the story). According to Schmid, literature theoretician:

Narratology is "storytelling theory." Unlike typologies that relate more or less to the genres of the novel or the story and are limited to the field of fiction, narratology, which developed in the West in line with the structure of tourism in the 1960s, seeks to discover the general structures of all kinds of "narratives," that is, narrative works of any genre and functionality. (Schmid 2003: 9)

What is considered to be an issue with a narratology approach to videogames was pointed out by Jesper Juul "But we need a separate theory of games. We need a theory that isn't just interactive bits and pieces tacked on to narratology or dramaturgy." (Juul 2000: 1). There is not a problem with narratology itself but usually by that approach is also considered classic narrative studies like dramaturgy or cinema studies. So, the gameplay will appear as a substitute to the narrative in videogames and the primary research object will be the story in a game that presented by classic audio/video aspects without a gameplay perspective. Such a narrative approach was approached was criticized by some scholars who are mainly looking at videogames as stories (Denikin 2013)

Some of the game studies scholars say that there is not a problem between ludologists and narratologies approaches (Frasca 2003). He argues that even though there are two groups that are research gameplay and stories that the first group (which he is considered to be part of) is also looking out for the stories in their analysis and it was not an issue from the start. I would assume that in 2021 the narrative branch of game studies is on the side. Some scholars say that the portion is quite on the contrary and that the game mechanics and game play is less interesting for the researchers (Timus 2020: 23) I tend to disagree. Game mechanics and game design are the key components not only by theoreticians (Juul, Salen, Zimmerman, White, Domsh, Cella, Schell and more) it is also the most interesting and profitable point for the future game designers where you can find lots of books about programming and game designing (or how to make a fortune out of a videogame). Narrative part of video games is the domain of narrative studies itself (for example "Narrative, Culture, Cognition" research group from University of Tartu) or the game design approach for video game writing (guides for videogame writing (Heusnner 2015)).

Going back to 2001, Aarseth while establishing the first video game studies journal evolved the notion of the cybertext from videogames:

So far, however, the World Wide Web, the mu(*o*)st successful hypertext system by far, has only produced a better distribution mechanism, and very few texts actually use the nonlinear possibilities of the technology. Games, however, are often simulations; they are not static labyrinths like hypertexts or literary fictions. The simulation aspect is crucial: <...> Games are both object and process; they can't be read as texts or listened to as music, they must be played. (Aarseth 2001: 1)

Here we can see that first crucial turn that should turn game studies away from the narrativist approach to something else. The aspect of play and repeated confusion and process also brings some problems in videogame research. The attempt of narrowing down the research object is opened the gate to infinite possibilities in game studies and the dispute about it.

Ian Bogost is going into video games studies from the philosophy and literature field, exploring and expanding the abilities of videogames. His works are building the bridge between casual understanding of videogames and practical framework where he deconstructs different features of videogames to show designers the new possible approaches to game design and what the game can be (Bogost 2011). The new perspective of describing videogames (Bogost 2015), and work on the playful experience (Bogost 2016). Bogost is also bringing up issues with videogames studies object (Bogost 2009). The last one is addressing the issue that was talked briefly about that videogames are a lot of things at the same time, and it is not possible to clear the object from it, he is using the example of the “the worst game ever” — Atari’s E.T. to show what can be a video game:

<...>8 kilobytes of 6502 opcodes and operands, <...>flow of RF modulations<...>molded plastic cartridge<...>consumer good<...>system of rules or mechanics<...>an experience players can partake of individually or together<...>. All of these units of being exist simultaneously with, yet independently from one another. There is no one “real” E.T., be it the structure, characterization, and events of a narrative, nor the code that produces it, nor anything in between. (Bogost 2009: 1)

Most famous works are mostly descriptive, since Bogost has a big library of gaming experience and can present analysis for interesting cases from videogames industry. The examples are well delivered but the problem is there is no key to rebuild something upon them. Jesper Juul is coming from game design side, his works are focused on the definition of videogames and trying to explore the binary nature of videogames as a narrative experience and a gameplay rule structure (Juul 2005). Moving from defying videogames he is also trying to see how to draw a border between a play and a player experience, which is also addressed by Bogost (though in terms of Bogost the gaming experience will be the more correct object for game studies since the key feature of the play is different for everyone. There is no possibility to look at a videogame out of the context of a player). The issue with bringing a whole definition to videogames by Juul that on the one hand he chooses to broad it as much as possible and make it universal, but at the same time he is eliminating the majority of playing experiences that could easily be including as a game otherwise (Ibid: 54). The binary nature of a videogame that Juul is bringing up is erasing when he is speaking about the definition of a game, erasing the more narrative driven experiences. For example, such experiences were explored as games in works of other authors

(2013). The other issue that Juul is exploring is the game design nature of failing in video games and its connection to player experience (Juul 2013). The playing experience and videogames is usually explored through bringing up the concept of “magic circle” from Huizinga (Huizinga 1944, 10) The important thing is that around 2010’s the video game studies are coming to an end of trying to explore the videogames as a whole (trying to establish some universal theory or define videogames) stops at rejecting of further attempts of defining a videogame and instead exploring them as an art pieces (Bateman 2012) or just including everything in the definition (Bogost 2009).

In the last 5 years game studies were broadened once again. After Bateman (Bateman 2012) and Bogost (Bogost 2009) articles that to some extent relieved scholars of defining videogames once again there are lots of opportunities to explore video games at different angles. The rise of gender studies also included videogames, since after the Golden Age of video games (Dillon 2011) women started to participate more both in game development and as players/consumers (Chess 2020). Gender studies are narrowed down into very interesting fields of game studies like the depiction women in the videogame narrative of particular setting (Draycott 2022). Pedagogy is also interested in game studies since we are considering the play as the primary learning activity and imagination as a learning component (Vygotskii 2005). Video games contain both the multimedia aspect and playful activity which can be as successful in learning experience as board games (Ryazaeva 2013). Video games can be explored as a learning process itself (because video games as a special activity should be taught to master (Novak 2008)) or the options how to organize educational processes with them (Dezuanni 2020). Economy also is a branch for game studies since the growing profit of video game companies each year (in the 2020 pandemic video games brought 20% more profit then cinema and sport¹³). Since games could be a stable profit segment in economy, the branch of game studies combined with economy also appeared (Paul 2020).

Game studies came a long way to develop and expand, now we are having lots of opportunities to look from different sides on video games but there are several problems of game studies that will be addressed below. There is still a place where methodological tools can grow and develop.

¹³ <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/videogames-are-a-bigger-industry-than-sports-and-movies-combined-thanks-to-the-pandemic-11608654990>

1.1 Main problems in the contemporary game studies

Since the invention of the Pong game in 1958¹⁴, the virtual entertainment industry has undergone significant changes. Game studies, instead of theories about the new media (Manovich 2002) and the future of stories in hypertext and cybertext societies, was able to move from theory to practice (Janeth Murray, the author of "Hamlet on holodeck" has already commented the new edition of her original book in 2017, considering the changes in culture and the development of industry). The changes affected not only video games themselves (the hardware changed, new genres appeared), but also the study of them. Video games (considering that the media began its development with arcade machines and consoles (McNeil 2019), it would be inappropriate to call video games only computer games) have gone from discussion and popularity on the hacker forums (Kushner 2003) in the FidoNet and the increased attention of psychologists and journalists (Ibid) on the negative impact of games to the establishing the study of video games (game studies). Even though officially game studies have already taken shape as a discipline, for half a century there have been no clear definitions and ways of interacting with an object of the discipline (moreover, the object of study of game studies itself is also have not yet been defined). This is not surprising, since the same object may be of interest to different areas of research, but one of the problems of studying video games is a versatile approach on the same field. For example, the recent conference based on the Moscow Center for Game Research "Aesthetics of Good and Evil in Video Games"¹⁵ covered a wide range of researchers — culturologists, designers, philosophers. This led to the situation when each speaker not only spoke in his own scientific meta-language, but also presented a different object of research. In this connection, a consensus between the presenters could not be reached, and a lively discussion could not form due to the remoteness of the researchers from each other. The situation was escalated by a large amount of data, which in game studies is not often processed and reduced (theorist Jesper Juul often uses a huge amount of all video games to be able to fine-tune the theory (Juul 2005)). For example, at the same conference of the Moscow Center during the report "Ethical dimension of research and investigation in modern computer RPGs" the question was raised about the universal nature of all role-playing games as a story about the search for the truth of the protagonists and the hiding of the truth by the antagonist¹⁶. Within the framework of the theory, there comes a counterexample of the protagonist of Pathologic 2 — Haruspex (Ice-Pick-Lodge, 2019), who during the game story has the opportunity to both find the truth and hide it (the game

¹⁴ Conventionally considered the first videogame developed.

¹⁵ <https://design.hse.ru/news/1521>

¹⁶ With the support of examples of action movies like Indiana Jones, where the protagonist is trying to find some treasure and the antagonist is hiding it.

has two different endings), which makes him an antagonist at the same time (by the provided theory). The short answer from the scholar came down to the fact that "Dybowski (*lead designer of Pathologic*) was just lazy with the Haruspex company". But regardless the problems of the Pathologic 2 development and release (poor performance, loose plot), nevertheless, the game was completed to some extent and it was possible to play it from the beginning to an end, the game entered the market, and we can treat it like a complete game, not a draft. Nevertheless, there appears an example of ignoring an undesirable example for theory. On the one hand, this is not a new example for game studies, but on the other hand, it does not seem to be an intention from the scholar's side, but rather a lack of a tool and an excessive broadness of the object of study in game studies.

During the study of video games, there was no division into a certain classification or subgroups, so that researchers could operate in one small field, and not in a very broad one (the exception is the researchers of one series, for example DOOM series (Pinchbeck 2013), Silent Hill horror series (Perron 2012), Legend of Zelda series (Lemaire 2017)). The one-game analysis seems to me the most sustainable one. The issue is that one-game studies will be always retrospective so there is not an option to transfer this analysis to a future games' development.

Due to the lack of hierarchy in game studies, now there is a disastrous opportunity to use only the material suitable for theory for research. An additional challenge for researching video games is the difficulty of verification of the provided examples. Now, there is no handy tool for linking to a video game experience (since the key component of a video game — play is almost impossible to recreate), unlike book quotes and timecodes for movies. For video games, screenshots are usually used (which are rather difficult to double-check due to the need for the verifier to have gaming experience to reach the exact gameplay place), which often reflect only the cinematic or literary experience, and not the gameplay experience. This also creates a problem of double checking for the researcher since there is no tool for an easy double check. One can create multiple save files but there is no guarantee that the data in these files will be needed. These are problems of research, but not of the researcher as such, but the future possibility of representation of double-checking gaming experience could be useful for research.

On the other side of video game research is its researcher. Now, there are two approaches to the study of video games — practical and theoretical. Gundolf Freyermuth, the media studies scholar views conventional creators and critics as if you look at the theory of cinema from the point of view of the creator Tarkovsky, or a film critic who does not make films (Freyermuth 2016: 226). This division can be seen in the study of video games, for example in Russia. There is a branch based on culturology and philosophy (Russian State University for the Humanities and St.

Petersburg State University), which deals with the theoretical direction of research of video game narratives and the influence of video games, and the practical department of game design (HSE). Only in HSE there is actual game designer as a lecturer (Ice Pick Lodge lead writer Nickolay Dybowski). Despite the fact that not only the science of video games has a practical and theoretical separation, but it also seems important to me to note that the current level of development of this media does not allow these areas to be combined just yet. For example, the book critique could not only engage in journalism, but also write a novel (regardless of his artistic qualities from the point of view of classical music studies), a graduate of the conservatory can compose music (regardless of its artistic qualities, with the help of the existing basis he can be able to write a new piece). Video games stand out among the media for the inability to create even a basic product when studying it. Theorists remain in the field of mostly narrative and gameplay research or media studies. My argument that the impossibility of creating a product is the root of incomplete research in video games. The aim of this study is to try to find common ground in video game narrative that can explore gameplay and narrative in such a way that complex video games can be built on this basis. Be able to evaluate and analyze video games not only from the point of view of their separate components (as in the multimedia approach (Hawreliak 2019)), but as a whole (with a possibility for further integration with hardware). It seems appropriate to combine the game part entirely into the concept of text (not only the player experience that was done previously) in order to be able to consider each part of it as a continuation of the other, not in isolation from each other. The huge game text will consist of smaller text-messages (like player experience) which exchange meaning to each other and the player. The current multimedia approach does not fit in full in terms of the mix of components and the heterogeneity of the gaming experience. This approach should decipher of the answers from game designers about the successful video games development experience (Klemetti, Grönberg 2018.) (the usual answer of the successful company is “making a good game”). The urgency of such a task lies in the looseness of half a century of game development. Now, there are practically no companies in the industry that make consistently good games¹⁷. In this case, by "good" I mean those that have received positive reviews from critics and players (it should be also a key for a game development to survive the hardware for a long time¹⁸) The creators of "successful" games describe their experiences as "doing a good job at a good game," which makes the experience more random than natural.

¹⁷ SuperGiantGames as an exception. All their games win game awards and have a positive critique and player's acclaim.

¹⁸ For example, first Super Mario game (1985) is still a comfortable experience to engage, or Doom (1993).

Of course, one should not discount the economic factor in video game production. Often, the game "fails" not because the publisher did not understand exactly how to create a "good" game, but because of a lack of time, money, pressure from publishers and fans. It seems to me that the general approach to practical theory of video games can partially solve the economic problem, since understanding how the game works as a whole will allow you to reduce game components without the consequences in a video game. An example of a hasty release of a video game is BioWare's *Dragon Age 2*¹⁹, with the quest "All That Remains" showing how the lack of a concept affects the gaming experience. During the mission, the protagonist goes for a search of his/her missing mother, who was most likely kidnapped and will probably later be murdered. Music, voice acting, and in-game text explain to the player that time is short and there is may be a chance to save the protagonist's mother. In the killer's lair, the player is faced with the fact that during the dramatic moment and the voice acting repetitive phrase: "maybe we are not too late" the player can loot treasure chests. This destroys the video game experience and cannot be considered a gaming convention, because with the correct exposure of the plot level, the game designer could simply remove the chests from the location or make them inactive. Usually, such examples are found in cutscenes²⁰, and are called the "Cutscene Incompetence"²¹ trope, when a character without the player's control suddenly stops doing everything that he could do with the players' aid. A prime example of such a trope appears in *Mass Effect 3* from BioWare (2012). You play as the probably strongest soldier in the galaxy and must once again save some object from enemy attacks²². It is known that protagonist is an exceptional tactician and has exceptional combat skills. In one of the cutscenes, your team of equally capable companions with weapons at ready stands and watches as their companion is killed by a lone fighter which will be easily killed later in the game. There is no in-game explanation why no one helps this companion (for example, some smokescreens drop from the antagonist) other than advancing the plot with the death of your partner. Separately, the cutscene works as a dramatic one, since you cannot see that your protagonist is doing nothing, but when combined, it creates a loose gaming experience. Such a trope can be considered in the gameplay and storytelling as examples of "good" and "bad" development. It brings out the issue of good development in separate aspects of the game but there was not a match from their combination in the gameplay. Two messages were contradicting each other.

¹⁹ The game came out in 2010, the year after the successful first game in the series to fill in the release gap in the EA publishing schedule.

²⁰ Small cinematic scripted part, sometimes running on a game engine which evolving a plot with cinematographic tools.

²¹ <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/CutsceneIncompetence>

²² Priority: Citadel II quest.

There is no point in simply framing this analysis in RPG's without going into the features of the RPG so we can see how they are interconnected and create meanings on different levels (gameplay, sound design, cutscenes). We will also look into different approaches of the game role play in game design to see how the game can involve the player experience in different ways, especially because player experience with semiotics was explored recently (Timus 2020).

1.2. The boundaries of the role-playing game

"I implore everyone involved in games — academics, game designers, players - to give up wild Grand Theory of Everything approaches and turn these issues on their head" (Bateman 2012). Since I am on the side of narrowing the field of study, I agree that now, unfortunately, there is no possibility and/or need to define the game as such. Each definition is either too broad for further development of the discipline, or too narrow and leaves out the games, which in any other definition would be included in it. It should also be borne in mind that the linguistic aspect of the concept of a game makes it difficult to define it in a different linguistic environment. Where in English the game activity is clearly separated by the word play and its agent, the player, which interact directly with the game, in other languages such a boundary may not exist. Let us say it is possible to separate video games from everything else, assuming that playing activity is open to everyone, but the object of game studies will be directly video games. For example, in this definition of Jesper Juul:

A game is a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable. (Juul 2005: 55)

In this way, firstly, we lose the layer of board role-playing games that gave birth to the creation of computer role-playing games and first-person shooters (the creators of Doom, who invented the first-person shooter genre, were big fans of board role-playing games and drew inspiration and ideas from them (Kushner 2003)). Secondly, we do not draw a line between platforms. At the moment, the gaming experience on a personal computer and a game console differs in the degree of user influence on the gaming process. On consoles (PS4, XBOX, Nintendo Switch), there is no possibility of a simplified modification of the gameplay, starting from the developer's

console²³, in which you can change game variables (resources, health of a player or opponents) to the ability to install game mods²⁴ for changing content. For example, the enduring popularity of the Doom game (in March 2021, a local Doom championship was held²⁵, forums with custom levels are still active²⁶), including the unlimited possibility of modifying both the game and building your own projects on the game engine (founder of the Chinese Room Ltd studio and big Doom fan Dan Pinchback started out with custom mods for Doom²⁷). One of the most famous mods for Mass Effect 3 (after the release of the game in 2012, a wave of criticism fell upon the developers about the end of the plot²⁸) MEHEM The Mass Effect 3 Happy Ending Mod from MrFob²⁹ adds a happy ending to the story for the protagonist, which allows players to experience a completely opposite gaming experience, unlike owners of the game on other platforms³⁰. In addition to cosmetic or gameplay changes, players on personal computers have the opportunity to independently fix technical imperfections without waiting for the developers. At the moment one of the largest websites for modders <https://www.nexusmods.com/> contains 303,623 for 1,253 games. Gaming experience on a personal computer can thus put the player in the position of a co-author, which would require other tools for analysis if gaming experience were the research problem. If we talk about physical aspects, then personal computers will differ from consoles in the control language (keyboard + mouse or gamepad). Muscle memory, reaction speed, micromanagement capability and aim precision are different, which also affects gameplay and experience. Whether it is possible to say that the same game on consoles and personal computers could be analyzed differently remains open to question. For example, we can say that we only consider the game that the developers intended to release initially, so modifications and changes to the in-game balance make a different game and it is inappropriate to compare them regardless of the platform. And, yes and no, here you can draw analogies with the restored author's drafts (for example, which version of "À la recherche du temps perdu" is considered the most correct and available for analysis). It is not uncommon when players are restoring the cut content of the game which developers cut due to the lack of time or money (The Sith Lords Restored Content

²³ Special in game mode where you can change the parameter of gaming experience (add objects, change character characteristics and more)

²⁴ User's modification based on the game engine.

²⁵ <https://bombora.ru/bomborachampions/>

²⁶ <https://www.doomworld.com/10years/bestwads/>

²⁷ And then developed his most known game Dear Esther on valve engine.

²⁸ <https://johnswritersblock.com/2012/03/22/all-that-matters-is-the-ending-part-2-mass-effect-3/>

²⁹ <https://www.nexusmods.com/masseffect3/mods/66>

³⁰ Since console are unavailable for users modifications (at least easily and with the risk of banning the console).

Mod for KOTOR2³¹ restores the cut-down content for the game due to the tight development time, and also improves the performance part³²).

For this thesis, it is necessary to limit the research part of video games as role-playing games. This will draw a straight line to the RPGs and separate the hyper-casual segment. If we take the most general definition of role-playing video games, then this is a genre of video games, where players make interactions in a certain elaborated world, while the game master (he is not a player but mastermind, who determines the outline of the game plot, knows the extended rules of the game, and keeps the rules of the game world, plays the role of the game world and reacts to the action of party members) leads the game. The genre of role-playing video games is a direct heir to the tabletop (pen and paper) role-playing games that provide the player with the ability, firstly, to play alone, and secondly, to play without a dungeon master (since the game world is constructed by the developers and all the reactions were scripted beforehand). Some of the notable early examples of RPGs are the Ultima and Wizardry series. Beginning with the direct adaptation of the tabletop version (for example, the player manually entered commands in the game to progress through the story), the language of role-playing video games has gradually evolved to live in another medium. There are distinctive features for each role-playing video game (development of player characteristics, inventory, game universe, experience increase), as well as branching into subgenres (roguelike, action RPG, MMORPG, tactical, sandbox, first-person) or hybrid genres (MOBA). In particular, such a branching occurred due to the great potential of the role-playing game as such. As mentioned earlier, in fact, any game, if not a simulator, is a role-playing game (even in hyper-casual games, there is often a small introduction that justifies the player's actions in the game). You can play any role you want, and depending on this, the gameplay will change. Classic RPGs have inherited the pen and paper class system (sometimes expanded) as a mage/warrior/rogue. Each class has its own set of characteristics and style of play (a magician has high intelligence and uses magic spells, a thief is based on stealth and cunning, a warrior usually uses brute force). In the course of the development of video games, the new subgenres evolved from the playstyle of this character classes, since it was getting difficult to access the full-fledged gameplay for each class (stealth, diplomacy, fighting) in the boundaries of the hard and software at that time, and some classes were not having as much content as the others. For example, in the well-known game Planescape Torment³³, the most common class choice is the mage, since the game is mostly built on communication and

³¹ Knights of the old Republic II The Sith Lords (Obsidian entertainment) 2005 (for the purpose of the mod I am choosing the year release of the pc version).

³² <https://www.moddb.com/mods/the-sith-lords-restored-content-mod-tslrcm>

³³ Black Isle 1998.

testing social skills in which the mage was the most powerful, also the developers created different images for the mage spells, so it was more variability in fighting sequences. The rest of the characters that the protagonist takes to the party cope with the tasks of the other classes. The rogue branch has changed, for example, in the game Thief³⁴, where you already fully played only as a thief and the mechanics of the game were based on stealthy passage. Usually, the immersive sim in the game development philosophy has moved into the same subgenre of stealth action. Immersive sim developed from the approach of Looking Glass Studios that developed a video game System Shock in 1994 and also inherited by Ios Interactive in the creation of Deus Ex in 2000. Immersive sim still does not have a clear definition in game studies, but we can say that it is a game design philosophy approach which makes an emphasis on interaction in the game world (it is similar to the notion of the interactivity proposed by scholars (Jensen 1998)), The games mentioned allowed player to explore the game levels in any way that a player could possibly imagine to allow different paths to complete them. This can, for example, weather conditions like in Zelda Breath of the Wild³⁵ (if it is raining, then your footsteps are less audible, but lightning can hit you, and it becomes harder to climb the rocks)³⁶ or, like in the Deus Ex³⁷ or System Shock³⁸ series, the ability to pass mission in various ways using your inventory and the world around you (bomb the door, use a lockpick, kill the guard and get the key). The other approach in game design will be emergence:

The first category encompasses games that, starting from a relatively small set of elements and rules, can have a multiplicity of possible outcomes. These are the open games, or games of emergence according to this terminology. This is often associated mostly with traditional games, although videogames are not excluded. (Soler-Adillion 2019)

The emergent gameplay creates game situations where there is no exact walkthrough sequence since the game situation occurs randomly on the crossing borders of the game systems.

The development of the combat system has led to the genre of roguelike, in which the player is required to develop real physical skills to complete the game, such games are usually called "difficult" because of the increased cost of a mistake by the protagonist and complete or partial loss of experience during the death of the protagonist. This is the Soulsborn series. At the beginning of the game, your protagonist can be killed with one hit and your success depends only on how quickly you memorize the patterns of opponents. In such games, it does not imply

³⁴ Thief: The Dark Project 1998 (Looking Glass studios, Thief: The Dark Project).

³⁵ The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild 2017 Nintendo.

³⁶ <https://knife.media/video-game-randomizer/>

³⁷ Eidos Interactive 2000.

³⁸ Looking Glass Studios, Origin systems.

passing the first time, since in order to study and memorize the enemy's behavior pattern, you need to see (and, accordingly, die) at least 1 time during a meeting with the enemy.

More story-driven stories have formed an action RPG genre in which character development slightly adjusts the playstyle and/or the story atmosphere³⁹ but does not change the plot line. This often changes as you progress through the difficulty level. So, for example, *The Witcher 3* does not require a thorough thinking at a level up to "normal" difficulty level, but it will require additional efforts on the part of the player and a well-thought-out strategy when meeting enemies on a difficulty level "to death". Regardless of the changes in the gaming experience, the plot component remains unchanged (there are exceptions, for example, in *Mass Effect 3*, you can change the number of plot selection choices for the player and focus on the cinematic component or the combat component of the game).

The exploration of the game universe and the modeling of one's own history has become widespread in sandbox strategies (for example, *The Elder Scrolls* series⁴⁰). In such games, the exploration of the game world is encouraged in a non-linear way, there is no punishment for going on a different path from the established order of passage and there is no clear end to the game (for example, after completing the main story in *Skyrim*⁴¹, you can continue exploring the game world or, on the contrary, explore additional tasks instead of completing the main story).⁴²

The variety of subgenres and hybrids of role-playing video games with one structural component allows us to consider it as a rich object of research, which will be convenient for the purposes of this thesis. Next, we outline the foundations of game storytelling with which to analyze role-playing video games.

1.3. Game conventions

The aspect of game convention is at the heart of game activity in general, and also includes subsequent conflicts between gameplay and storytelling. A game convention is a consensus between the player and the game world, the rules of the game that are accepted and expected to

³⁹ *Dragon Age 2* is on the border between classic RPG and Action game since there is a choice of only class for the protagonist (as it is highly implied that there is one canon option as a mage class) and there is no actual choice, but player can choose the reaction to the world actions (smirky, renegade, paragon).

⁴⁰ Bethesda Game Studios 1994-...

⁴¹ *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* 2010.

⁴² The opposite example is *Mass Effect 2* where there is a clear end of the game – Suicide mission. If a player is rushing to the end (ignoring side missions and companion missions) he will probably fail the end game with him or his companions dying. (still the ending is valid but a player cannot move a game with such game state to *Mass Effect 3* since the canon is surviving the Suicide mission).

be executed by both the game and the player. The rules of the game convention cannot be violated within the gameplay since they are its main component and hold the "magic circle" — the special playground as the equivalent of the ritual space, where convention rules are being held by the participants (Huizinga 1944: 10). Later the term was expanded by Salen and Zimmerman to see how games create the closed time and space dimension with a special set of rules without a ritual component of it (Salen 2009: 9.3). The uniformity of the game narration is combined when the rules of the game world correspond to game situations, so that the player "believes" what is happening on the screen, and also uses conventions to navigate in game reality (metagaming can be considered one of the varieties of such conventions). Game conventions can be both generally accepted for games in general (approximately the same metalanguage of key configuration for interaction in the world, color indicators for interactive objects, a similar interface in games of the same series or genre)⁴³, or within a particular game. An example of in-game convention is the absence of a meal-eating mechanic in Dragon Age series, in-game dialogues about making stew in the camp make up for the game convention of satisfying the physical needs of the character and do not interfere with the perception of the game. A violation is the example of eating food in Pathologic 2. The protagonist is a doctor, he is an average healthy man according to the game, who is trying to stop the plague in his hometown. The developers of the game emphasize the "realism" of what is happening in the game (the weapon can jam, since it is an old one, the player cannot constantly "run" since his protagonist is not a marathon runner), but at the same time the mechanics of eating to replenish the "hunger" parameter are unfairly harsh to the player. On average, every day in a crisis, a character must eat a couple of kilograms of meat, a few handfuls of nuts, and a couple of cans of canned food. In this case, the punishment for skipping food is death. In this case, the hunger parameter is accumulated over several game hours. In the conditions promised by the developers of the "realism" of what is happening in the gameplay does not fit the convention with the constant intake of food. This creates unreasonable complexity since food in the game is quite time consuming to get. Rationale and adherence to the rules of the game world make it easier to immerse yourself in the gameplay and constitute a homogeneous story.

1.4 Immersiveness or straightforward action

⁴³ <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/interactive-storytelling-narrative-techniques-and-methods-in-video-games/environmental-storytelling#:~:text=%E2%80%9CEnvironmental%20storytelling%20creates%20the%20preconditions,their%20mise%2Den%2Dscene%2C>

Together with the terms immersivity, it would be appropriate to use the term emergent systems. Component of immersive simulator games:

- The possibility of alternative ways of resolving game situations (run away/attack/bribe) and tools for their resolution (master keys, gun silencer).
- Emergence. A set of game features that, when interacting, create a new game situation that was not initially scripted. For example, the hobgoblin camp Zelda Breath of the Wild does not have to be attacked by boars regardless of the player's actions, but if their areas of interaction intersect, this will happen.
- The possibility of alternative ways to advance through the plot (no corridor⁴⁴ locations).
- Environmental storytelling. not a distinctive feature but is often present along with the immersive sim. The game encourages exploration of the game world, revealing the environment not through video cuts, but through in-game diaries, notes, tapes.

This direction in RPGs allows players to independently build stories around their protagonist, even if the general outline of the plot. Depending on how open the world is (for comparison, the area of the world in Skyrim and Deus Ex⁴⁵) and the possibility of the protagonist's variability (the same games for example), stories can be generated both in the world and only around the protagonist. The development of emergent systems reduces productivity costs and reduces the number of scripts for characters, and only allows them to set a set of rules for interaction, but also implies limited plot development around the protagonist. This means interaction with the inner world of the protagonist, and not his avatar. A good example for comparing such an approach can be the life of Zelda Breath of the Wild and The Witcher 3⁴⁶. The main character Zelda — Link has no vocal accompaniment and reacts to changes in the plot or the game world only with conditioned exclamations of indignation, surprise, or sadness. The player himself must figure out how his character reacts to the changed weather or the ambush of the hobgoblins. For the most part, this creates similar holes, like the magical space between the panels of comics that Scott McCloud talks about in *Understanding the Comics*. The empty spaces between the comic panels are boosting the reader's imagination, so they are constantly cocreating the story, filling them (McCloud 1994: 72). The Witcher Geralt in *The Witcher 3* acts not in an emergent, but in a scripted system, the influence of rain will be reflected in the scripted escape of the characters under the roof of the house, and Geralt will utter a displeased remark about the bad weather.

⁴⁴ Opposition to an open world experience. Player can only go straightforward from one end to another.

⁴⁵ <https://www.themarysue.com/largest-video-game-worlds/>

⁴⁶ CD Project RED 2013.

Gerald's remark will outline how he relates to bad weather and the player will no longer have the opportunity and need to work out this aspect of the plot in his head.

The problem with this division is that often the authors of games combine both approaches, disrupting the player's internal process of creating a story with a further scripted event, which destroys the integrity of the narrative. In a way, this is reminiscent of the endless possibilities of tabletop role-playing games. In tabletop role-playing games, the less information the player provides, the more opportunities the player has. For example, a player-thief can pick up an item from a chest and say that it is "valuable" leaving a large area of possibilities, from which he can later determine the specific item that he has picked up. For example, it may turn out to be a jewel that can be pawned in a tavern to help out money or a lockpick with which he will open the necessary door. Until the plot forces the player to choose, he has a set of possibilities, which he can later accept in accordance with the consent in the party (Podvalnyi 2020). When such mechanics are transferred to role-playing video games, the very consensus with the game world (the dungeon master) is called into question. The average player does not have the opportunity to negotiate with the game world (without using modifications), so any holes left by the developers for opportunities or the possibilities themselves should be left considering the further development of the plot and not contradict them. On the gameplay side, this can happen as during "cutscene incompetence", where the cinematic storytelling destroys the general rules of the game world or other violations of in-game rules, where immersiveness and scripting collide. For example, your character has completely mastered lockpicking, and he is considered a great city burglar, but he cannot crack the scripted door, since it will open itself further in the story, although the door itself is no different from those that your protagonist can crack (visually for example).

In terms of storytelling, the problem takes place during the developer story and the player story. Often, developers will provide their own story that they want to tell (for which the action rpg genre is usually suitable) but within the framework of a game with increased plot branching or immersiveness⁴⁷. An example of such development can be both the Dragon Age series and Mass Effect from BioWare. Throughout all parts of video games, developers are faced with the conflict of their own storytelling. and the ability for the player to create their own. For example, in the Mass Effect series, where the player can control the captain of a spaceship and fight against multiple dangers, there is the option of romantic relationships with some of his crew members, and there is also the possibility of losing some of the crew members throughout the

⁴⁷ <https://levelskip.com/rpgs/Mass-Effect-3-Why-the-Tuchanka-and-Rannoch-Arcs-Are-Biased>

trilogy. Such a partner is the alien Liara T'Soni⁴⁸ (initially positioned as a clumsy, shy scientist who clumsily flirts with the captain in the very first dialogue), who was conceived by the developers as a default novel for the protagonist (for this, in the first part of the trilogy, the romance option is provided as for both woman and man protagonist). The character of Liara should develop over the course of the trilogy instead of with the captain of the protagonist in a friendly-romantic relationship. But due to the fact that the developers in the first part give the choice of developing relations with other team members and there is an opportunity not to interact with her character until the end of the game (except for scripted scenes), the protagonist's captain may not get close to the alien at all. In the second part of the trilogy, she appears during a small part of the game plot not as a companion, but in the third part she will again join your team already as a strong-willed character who most strongly influences the plot and with which the captain has the most scripted scenes. After the release of the third part, the gaming community was outraged by such, firstly, the awkward development of the character, and secondly, the fact that, regardless of their choice, her character continues to be imposed on the player. Because the players had the choice not to follow the developer's canvas, they did not get any other plot development, but they missed important aspects of the progress and development of the characters, which would make their experience more cohesive. This kind of conflict between choice and story makes the game loose. It seems to me that a good prospect for game development will be the initial choice between having the player tell his own story or letting him participate in someone else's. But is it possible to somehow connect these game components without conflict?

There are several narrative design options where you can connect both directions.

1.5 Narrative design options for combining branches.

- Absence of direct punishment for breaking the story chosen by the developers.

Dishonored⁴⁹ is a stealth action game in which the main emphasis is on passing silently across locations and without killing. The protagonist is the lord protector of the empress, who is suspected of killing her. Real killers also kidnap the heiress to the throne, so the task of the protagonist is to return her and take revenge on the assassins of the empress. The game is positioned as a stealth action game with an emphasis on silent and bloodless passage, however, unlike other games with silent passage, if you act differently (kill opponents), then this does not

⁴⁸ <https://levelskip.com/rpgs/Mass-Effect-2009-Liara-T'Soni-a-Character-Analysis>

⁴⁹ Arkane studios, Bethesda Softworks 2012.

lead to failure for the player (for example, in the Metal Gear Solid⁵⁰ series if the character If the player is noticed, the mission ends in an instant failure (in general, this rule applies to most games with an emphasis on noiselessness). In Dishonored, the chaos level mechanic is implemented (it increases if the protagonist leaves traces of neutralizing the enemy or kills them). The world around you will also react to you differently depending on the current level of chaos. At the end of the game, however, you face the consequences of your passage. With a bloodless (true) passage, the current lord regent gives the heiress to the throne from the hostages to the protagonist. At a high level of chaos, the lord regent either dies with the heiress, or the player can use the protagonist's abilities and manage to save the heiress to the throne. If the heiress was saved while the chaos was low, then the epilogue would be "happy" indicating that the new empress ruled in a golden age for the country. If she rules with a high level of chaos, then a severe crisis for the country followed during her rule. At the death of the heiress, the country will disintegrate, and the protagonist will flee the country. This path of indirect punishment allows players to play through the game in different ways and the consequences of his actions correspond to the rules of the game world (the narration hints to the player that there is a more "correct" way to go through the plot), but at the same time the player has a lot of freedom of action in terms of immersiveness (you can neutralize or kill enemies in different ways, get to the targets).

- A set of game rules and an outline of the narrative.

This technique is primarily used in the Elder Scrolls series of games. Despite the presence of a coherent narrative in which the protagonist participates, the creators do not leave hints in the game about the truth of one or another plot choice. The game world has no moral coloring on the part of the creators of the game, but it can have a contradictory assessment from the side of the game world (for example, some characters may respect the character of a thief, while others, on the contrary, despise). In Skyrim part of the series, players have several forks where they can support different sides of the conflict (choosing a side in a civil war, choosing between vampires and their hunters), but the game will not positively or negatively characterize their choice. The opposite example is the Mass Effect trilogy. From the first part, the player is shown several conflicts (intelligent robots against their oppressive creators, a race of aliens who were sterilized before the events of the game), and immediately hinted by the narration on the "right" side (the robots are not to blame, the aliens must be cured). The conflict reaches a crisis in the third part of the game, where the protagonist can finally choose which side to take. taking the "wrong" side, the protagonist gets noticeably fewer advantages than with the "right" choice of the side.

⁵⁰ Konami 1998—2018.

Inconsistencies in the narrative would not have occurred if the "correctness" of the choice was not influenced by the narrative, or the "wrong" choice would be absent in principle. There is research though that having the “wrong” choice adds value to the “right” one.⁵¹

- Distinguishing between the main story and the gameplay.

The latter option is suitable for immersive games with emergent systems such as *Zelda Breath of the Wild*. The player is given the opportunity to generate his own adventure during the game, indicating only the main points of the plot, where sooner or later the player must come to advance the plot. The main plot lacks choice and any branching of dialogue, so there is no room for conflict between the player's narrative and the developers' narrative.

This is a quick overview of the possibilities of narrative development directions and possible conflicts when they are combined.

1.6. Metagaming and/or role-playing experience

The second important aspect of RPG storytelling is the definition of roleplaying, or the impact of metagaming on the playthrough. “The metagame emerges as the material trace of the discontinuity between the phenomenal experience of play and the mechanics of digital games” (Boluk 2017: 9). In Boluk’s and Lemieux description, by metagame one can define any experience that we have outside the game itself (the comfort of the couch, the platform, mood, knowledge of the game when we play and many more). It expands the classic definition of the metagame that is common among competitive gamers in cyber tournaments or collectible card game (CCG) players. By the narrow definition we can call metagame as an outside database of all strengths and weaknesses of the game, compilation of the strategies and such. For example, for CCG *Magic: The Gathering* player can see a database for the price of single cards (which may differ based on performance in tournaments) or the decks (builds) that are currently strong in different game mods⁵². Metagaming refers to the player's interaction with the game's narrative, not their avatar. Conventionally, this aspect can be perceived as the awareness of the magic circle according to Huizinga (Huizinga 1955: 10). Metagaming is any new information that a player learns or knows, but his game avatar may not know. A conflict arises if, with the possibility of role-playing, the player becomes obliged to use the metagame. Here is the game designing and analysis point where we should decide where metagame ends and role play begins.

⁵¹ <https://levelskip.com/rpgs/Mass-Effect-2009-Liara-TSoni-a-Character-Analysis>

⁵² <https://www.mtggoldfish.com/>

Below I will provide some examples of how they can overlay each other in a game with the result of ruining the player experience. I am considering that metagaming and role playing are creating two dichotomies, where either a player should “break the fourth wall” or should not. But the role-playing experience as such can be considered metagaming already. In order to understand how to play and think like a rogue character, a player should have some previous experience from culture to create his rogue role-playing walkthrough. It is tempting to agree with that “every game must have a metagame and every metagame must have a game” (Boluk 2017: 16) which will lead to the point where every RPG cannot be a true RPG since the metagaming is involved. And that there is no point on defying and setting some game designing rules for the dichotomy. But if the issues which are described below are still present in the contemporary games, we can say that there is some key difference which can be used in game design.

Metagaming is the backbone of all roguelike games. The ability to complete any game in which the defeat of the character means a rollback to the initial or conditional save point implies that the player uses the knowledge gained in the past to advance further in the story next time. Defeat, then, is the road to progress. As already mentioned, the death of a character when meeting an enemy in Soulsborn games is necessary in order to get acquainted and begin to memorize the enemy's behavior patterns. Depending on the elaboration of the story, such metagaming can be tied to the gameplay or not. In Soulsborn games, the protagonist is immortal or practically immortal, and the story of the game justifies his revival at special bonfires. In game genres like *Metroidvania*⁵³ (a combination of *Castlevania*⁵⁴ and *Metroid*⁵⁵ titles) there is no justification for resurrecting a hero, so your character completely rolls back his progress to the beginning of the level, and not a special save section. As in most role-playing video games, conflict occurs when the gameplay does not match the narrative component. Even though my argument is the ultimate amalgamation of storytelling and gameplay, virtually all examples of games at this point share these concepts and it is impossible to use any other term to describe them. In the article by the user @disastrousgrape, it makes no sense for a character to choose almost all possible companions for his party⁵⁶. According to the plot of the game, you are one of the last representatives of the order to fight the Blight (a distortion that turns people into spawn of darkness and tries to destroy all living things, you must gather the support of several peoples and go to fight the archdemon (the quintessence of Blight). meet your potential companions who will help you in the fight against Blight (party gathering is a classic feature of role-playing

⁵³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metroidvania>

⁵⁴ Konami 1986.

⁵⁵ Team ninja, Nintendo 1986.

⁵⁶ <https://levelskip.com/rpgs/The-Followers-of-Dragon-Age-Origins-2009-It-Makes-No-Sense-to-Recruit-Any-of-These-People>

games, so the player has the opportunity to adjust the balanced play style to his character. For example, if the player chose to play as a mage, in the future he can take warrior and thief to balance the gameplay), but from a roleplaying point of view writes Ash it makes no sense to accept them in the party. The most prominent example is Stan, a representative of a hostile race⁵⁷ whom you find chained in a cage for killing a family of farmers whom he killed in a state of passionate fury. Despite the fact that he looks like a capable warrior, he is presented as a fighter and despite any of the protagonist's prehistories (the player can choose a different start of the game depending on race and class) it will not be logical to recruit him. However, if you use metagaming and you know that this character will not betray you (only in a certain case⁵⁸), the player can safely take him as a companion. Moreover, in most role-playing video games, the plot itself is not branched enough to make sense for role-playing, since some content becomes unavailable. A possible solution is a large variety of branches and forced selection of content, in which the player wants to replay the game with a different role-playing role.

Another option of the conflict between metagaming and role-playing can occur during scripted cinematic scenes. In addition to cutscene incompetence, a cinematic production can create metagame for a playable character. In *Dragon Age 2*, for example, as in almost all BioWare games, there is the possibility of romantic relationships with companions. One of the options is the sarcastic freedom-loving pirate Isabella with whom the protagonist of any gender can romance. The relationship with Isabella is positioned as a relationship without commitment and for one night in terms of role-playing, the protagonist can accept this option and after the first night there will be a dialogue about love. Isabella tells the protagonist that she does not want a love relationship and she likes to be alone on what he/she can accept, and according to the terms of role-playing, for example, to have an affair with another companion (given that after this scene several play years pass before the next meeting with Isabella makes this an appropriate outcome from a roleplaying point of view.) However, the exposure during this dialogue shows Isabella facing the viewer, while the protagonist sees her back. The player is shown the Isabella's sad face, which hints at a different emotional background of the conversation and a possible "love" line on her part of the romance later⁵⁹. The player receives outside narrative knowledge and can apply it to the plot and get a happy ending of such a novel in the finale. Another question is how organic it is from the point of view of game waging. We can say that such conflicts are resolved by first-person games, but it seems to me that paying attention to such a game nuance and the correct exposure of cutscenes will solve such a conflict.

⁵⁷ Kunari as a very vague representation of Islam versus Christianity in DA series.

⁵⁸ https://dragonage.fandom.com/wiki/The_Urn_of_Sacred_Ashes

⁵⁹ <https://levelskip.com/rpgs/Dragon-Age-2-2011-Isabela-A-Character-Analysis>

An additional option for solving any of these conflicts is to explain them internally by the rules of the game world or ridicule them inside the game. For example, in the case of a scripted door, it is possible during the plot to explain that this particular door cannot be broken with a master key, since it has a new lock technology⁶⁰. An example of derision is a joke inscribed in the plot about poor gameplay mechanics. In Mass Effect, the protagonist could open locked locks by completing the mini-game or using a local technological resource⁶¹. In Mass Effect 2, the ability to open doors using a technological resource was removed, and in the Shadow Broker expansion⁶², when the protagonist and his companions are waiting for the door to be opened, the following dialogue will occur:

“— Remember the good old days when you could just slap Omni-Gel on everything?

— That security upgrade made a lot of people unhappy.”

Thus, the gameplay inconsistency fits into the canvas of the narrative. We can approach differently to such inconsistencies if we agree that the camera is also the participant of the game action. A player can have different reference point in the game to boost his experience. His avatar, the world around and the camera. When a game is first person experience a player can only have two points for reference (the camera can appear in the cutscene for example allowing the player to see some metagame, that is unavailable to the character). In the third person game a player is always using camera as his reference point allowing to change his point of view from character to himself. Some scholars imply that an ability of such switches is boosting the player experience (Genvo, Pignier 2011) but I assume that more hidden features that smooth such an experience (since there are examples of incoherent experiences as mentioned above present).

1.7. Audio, video and gameplay aspects of the game

Despite the fact that most video games have similar components (text, audio, visual, interface), in a role-playing game we can most fully trace their meaning and interaction within ourselves. Since the goal of this thesis is to find the possibility of creating a full-fledged game narration, combining gameplay with the rest of the game, it is important to track exactly what tools the developers use and what are the ways to improve the gaming experience.

⁶⁰ Mass Effect 3 quest "Priority: Cerberus Headquarters" despite the visual coincidence of doors with doors throughout the game, at the beginning of the quest you will be required to take an AI companion to open the doors throughout the quest. The AI companion is a product of the Cerberus organization and has studied their security system).

⁶¹ Omni-gel.

⁶² Lair of the Shadow Broker 2010.

The question immediately arises as to how the elements should work with each other in the game. For example, the multimedia approach (Hawreliak 2019). Implies that each aspect should reinforce each other, resulting in game expressionism. Among other things, this approach can be explained by the fact that one or more game aspects may be unavailable to the player at will or not. You can play without any of the components other than the gameplay (although in most modifications it is possible to simplify the gameplay elements or remove them altogether). If every aspect of the gameplay duplicates the same meaning, then games will become more accessible for players with different needs, for this it is important to understand the properties of each aspect. We will look at a different approach separately for each aspect below. The second approach that can be used when creating a game is not to strengthen each element, but, on the contrary, to contrast or complement them (additional knowledge using metagaming and cinematic exposure, or inconsistency of the musical accompaniment with the text). Another approach to videogame components that should embrace most of the game is the rhetoric approach and wordplay introduced by Christopher Paul (Paul 2012). He divides a game into 3 components: words, design, and play. By words Paul introduces the narrative core of the game as well as the building community around it. For example, not only the dialogues within the game but also the special wiki about the game, reddit forum meeting with game developers and else. Words that work as a communication tool between developers and players and players with each other in the broad sense. (Paul 2012: 161) Design is the game itself and the meaning that developers convey by picking one option over the other. This issue is also addressed by Marie-Luise Meier in the future work “the influence of default choices on gender representation in videogames”⁶³. For example, if a game has an opportunity to play as a character having different gender, and also have a romance option in a game, one can see how the initial message from the developer was constructed, depending on how much content female or male romance had (i.e., in Dragon Age series some romantic paths are opening a new perspective for a plot for a player, like Solas for a female elf in Dragon Age 3). And the play part of the game is the gaming experience itself something similar to metagaming notion from Boluk (Paul 2012: 169). Paul is proposing the rhetoric approach as a tool that can help both designers and players to talk about, analyze and create videogames (Paul 2012: 18), but what I think that such an approach would make game design too broad. Paul proposes the idea that the videogame is both influenced by culture and creating meanings in culture and vice versa.

⁶³ Accessed from PhD workshop from University of Tartu on 11.12.2020

1.7.1 Audio

To begin with, the audio part in video games, where there is a voiced text, is divided into at least two scales - effects and dialogues. Due to the different approach, it is possible to divide the properties of audio in video games into technical and dramatic. The first, in this case, will be used to enhance and replace other aspects of the video game, and the dramatic to contrast and complement. The technical implementation in this case may be the possibility of sounding the environment for navigation without the aid of vision, or binaural audio, which allows you to better navigate in the playing space. An incomplete audio track will disorient the player, regardless of whether he is using the video sequence or not. For example, in *Pathologic 2*, one aspect of the gameplay is finding medicinal herbs in game locations. The herbs themselves are almost invisible, but each of them has an individual sound, so the player has to look for them by ear. But often the sound comes from the opposite side of the grass, and it becomes difficult or impossible to find it. The replacement of technical sound in the game is its transformation into text. Additional subtitles not only for dialogues, but also for effects (for example, in *Borderlands 3*⁶⁴ you can see the inscription "a poisonous barrel explodes", which makes the player pay attention to a possible spilling puddle of poison, even if he did not hear a specific sound from the barrel explosion).

The dramatic aspect of audio in a video game will be the use of an audio track to advance the narrative. For example, minor music in tragic moments and major music in joyful ones. Most of the compositions have no words, so at the moment it is not clear how the dramatic effect of the audio component can be translated if the player does not use audio in the game. For this, the rest of the game's aspects will work in multimedia theory, as they reinforce each other, so the absence of one will not ruin the story much. Sometimes audio is used to add alternative meaning to footage. So, in *Planescape: Torment*, each companion of the protagonist has its own audio theme, which is played either if the characters are next to each other when they first meet, or when talking with them. In some cases, the audio track only enhances the known information about the characters (for example, in the playful, lustful skull *Morte*, the musical theme sounds in major with the addition of male moans⁶⁵, which does not greatly change the impression of interacting with the characters at the level of the written text), but in the case of the tiefling companion *Anna* from *Shadows* and the noble succubus *Grace*, the situation is different. Despite

⁶⁴ Gearbox Software, 2K 2019

⁶⁵ <https://youtu.be/Z1cPQH3QoyU> music theme

her initial insults and the appearance of the character, which is rather cruel than gentle, Anna's musical theme is touching and minor⁶⁶, which serves as a preface and a hint for further interaction with her. In the case of Grace⁶⁷, despite the fact that in the initial dialogue she defines herself as renounced from physical passions, her musical theme sounds exciting and disturbing (similarly with Anna, new character traits will be revealed as it progresses, but the musical theme becomes a hint of further developments). In the case of such use of the audio aspect in role-playing video games, it is not yet clear whether it is worth using such a tool if there is a possibility that the player will not use the audio channel.

1.7.2. Video

Video component is the one that most common to look at while reading the game analysis. As was mentioned previously the video part is the most accessible for visibility and one of the most common aspect that is analyzed by adjacent disciplines sine it is one of simplest way to analyse the game from cinematic point of view. Video component of a game can be divided into the small entities with different meanings for a player. Cutscenes are usually carrying the dramaturgy part of a game (and can overlap in the “Cutscene incompetence” with gameplay footage). Interface, that is visible only to a player and not the avatar that conveying the results of interaction with the game world. Visual aids (usually the objects that can be interacted with are lightened or painted in a contrast color, so it is easier to find for the player) are working as metagaming information that speaks from the developer to the player in order to explain game rules. It can also be reached through the gameplay as will be described below. This aspect of video games is called visual design on which there are several researches existed (Alexander 2016), so it is just a brief outline that videogame game visual consists of different parts and conveys meaning between different agents.

1.7.3 Gameplay

As was said before the key component that makes a game — its interactive mechanism, the gameplay. This concept was already thoroughly explored by Aki Järvinen:

⁶⁶ <https://youtu.be/CKhzMxQE40I?list=PL8804009A91F98915> music theme

⁶⁷ <https://youtu.be/7MiPD-05lg4?list=PL8804009A91F98915> music theme

“<...>the relation between game mechanics, the configuration of game elements in a game state, and the dynamic behaviour of the game system from one game state to another during the gaming encounter. Gameplay emerges from the sum of the 1) temporal sequences of players deploying the mechanics made available to them and 2) the responses of the game system in relation to the change in game state.” (Järvinen 2008: 258).

Gameplay is the only component of videogames that can be inseparable from a video game. A player cannot proceed forward until he interacts with the game (unlike the other types of media that can be proceeded by themselves). The most interesting examples of the influence of the gameplay on player interaction is horror games. Perron in analyzing Silent Hill series empathized that the terror is growing for a player since there is no other opportunity for complete the game in the scary part unless to proceed (a player can turn off the audio and close eyes, but he still needs to interact with game mechanics to see the end state) (Perron 2012: 109).

The gameplay that combined with little visual can also be as set of rules itself substituting the textual rules reference. The brilliant example of gameplay usage for conveying the game world rules is the 1—1 level of Super Mario Bros. game (Nintendo 1985). There are several analyses⁶⁸ of this game level, so I will briefly outline it. The level design in the game was constructed so the player within first ten seconds of the game can realize unintentionally several things: where to go the ability to jump and attack, was introduces to monsters, treasure, and growth mechanic. None of this was written but the process of moving the gamepad as a player decoded the message about game rules and fictional world state.

1.8. Summary

- Nevertheless, the more than a half century of game studies we can see that there is not still an established discipline. The object of videogames is yet to be defined and analytic tools are yet to be discovered. The most successful video game analysis concern one-game analysis or genre retrospective, which does not allow to improve games beforehand.
- Key feature of video games — play prevents the provability of the research. Tools that can recreate gaming experience are yet to be created.
- The next step for the discipline is to create a bridge between theoretician and practitioners which will evolve the use of simple game engines and the ability of scholars

⁶⁸ <https://medium.com/swlh/the-perfect-game-tutorial-analyzing-super-marios-level-design-92f08c28bdf7>

to develop simple game situations. That will shift the view from the narrative side of game studies theoreticians to a practical one which will strengthen the game development.

- Different aspects of the game are usually creating dichotomies that are overlapping each other. Several options are introduced to reduce overlapping to minimum (outlining of the narrative and absence of the player's gameplay punishment).
- We engaged the different aspects of videogame that can bare the message ad exchange it with each it other. Examples if innovative use of them in DE will be presented.

II DISCO ELYSIUM AS A TEXT

During the first chapter we looked at different aspects of the RPG and game design approaches that developers use. Now we can briefly see how these features appear in the DE. All of the actions in the DE are not done directly by a player (for example usually in games you use a spacebar to jump) but throughout the text command that appear in a dialogue window. It was said before that the gaming experience of DE looks like an adventure book rather than a game. There is no combat or stealth action, most of the game time the player is reading. But why DE can be defined as a video game and not a cybertext? If it is a cybertext and not a video game, then no wonder that it going to be well constructed and analyzed as a text. What make a video game a game is gameplay that is a set of mechanics. As was set before, “the game mechanics are a set of rules guiding the player to achieve the end-game state” (Timus 2019: 43) but in that broader sense an adventure book with the mechanic of the choice should also be considered as a game. We take see if DE has the game mechanic categories which were presented by Schell (2008) — categories regard: space, objects, attributes, states, action, rules, skills and chance.

- Space is presented in DE differently that it would be in a classic hypertext. There is several game spaces which are moving the narrative forward. There in no option for a player in De to explore the content in one location. The game space is changing throughout the game, where one paths are closing and the others — open.
- Objects, attributes and states as the pieces of the game world that can be interacted with differently can also be found in some some adventure books but only as one-time interaction (for example you can have an option to use a knife to cut the rope in the paragraph but, the knife would remain in the readers inventory forever) and in DE you can like in any game you can find or miss some objects to make new game interactions. For example, the protagonist can find the prybar for opening the garbage can in the beginning and keep it in the inventory to break windows and glasses later in the game.
- Rules appear both in adventure books and games so it cannot be a unique category of a game mechanic (cybertext also have these rules in order to be interacted with)
- Skills category was overview before. Skill check in DE is the most innovative feature that presented in RPG. They are driving the narrative forward to the end-game condition.

- Chance was overviewed in DE before as also an interesting feature that driving the game experience, but chances are also found in the adventure books.

Key game mechanic category that can make DE as a gaming experience and not a cybertext is objects and attributes.

2.1. Boundaries of a game in Disco Elysium

At this stage, you can determine DE as a kind of continuation and revolution of the RPG genre at the same time. A distinctive feature of DE, which catches the eye at the beginning of the walkthrough — ridicule or altering the standards of RPGs. Reimagining RPGs is not new to the industry; in the golden age of video games, Planescape Torment, for example, could already be an example of this (diplomacy was put in the first place instead of fighting). The classic RPGs at that time were built on the principle of good character destroys ultimatum evil (in general, it destroys almost everything that comes in its path, since the mechanics of diplomacy have not yet been skillfully implemented) and the death of the protagonist means defeat. Chris Avalon, the creator of Planescape, gracefully made the protagonist an immortal character who lost his memory, and asked the player and protagonist the question "what can change the nature of a man"? During the game, the player, together with the protagonist, seeks the answer to this question in order to regain his mortality. The mechanic of immortality is implemented not by infinite health bar, but by returning after death to the location of the morgue, where the hero begins his adventure. Planescape torment was also the first game where the protagonist was also the antagonist (the final boss of the game is the past incarnations of the protagonist). Disco Elysium also begins by disrupting the genre, forcing the player to take on the role of an ultimately unpleasant and socially disapproved character. He is a cop alcoholic with memory loss. A character that is not usually associated with the protagonist of an RPG. There is also a shift from usual heroic death for your character since he may not die classically — in battle (although this option is possible closer to the end of the passage), and for example, if the hero sat on an uncomfortable chair.

2.2. Narrativity

Narrative is the key component in DE. As was mentioned before, DE would not fit in the classical game definition. The structure of the DE as an RPG is shown not in the gameplay

walkthrough variability but the narrative experience. Developers were highly invested in the narrative part of the game, so they changed the interface accordingly. For example, their key change to the RPG genre was to move the dialogue window from below the screen as in classical games to the right bottom part. It was previously down in Shadowrun series, but the text was concentrated on upper right part. Lead writer Robert Kurvitz explained that they made this change since people most of their screen time on computers spend on the right bottom side (where clock and notifications are)⁶⁹.

2.3. Metagame

The interesting game design notion about DE is that it tries to remove the metagame experience as they can. As it was discussed before usually RPG provide players multiple choices and paths they can take throughout the game. That is because all the skill and objects checks are usually presented for the player, so they can see what can be done in the second playthrough or later in the game. DE uses the game design feature of hidden skill check, so a player is provided with limited meta gaming experience. The usual gaming experience in DE throughout the feedback from the players was that the game provides only one path as you proceed. On the one hand that creates a flawless narrative but not all players will get enough motivation to replay the game differently since they didn't get enough metagaming information for that.

2.4. Gameplay

The unique game component of Disco Elysium is the lack of the possibility of non-role-playing the character and hidden ability checks. Classic RPGs, especially those based on their tabletop predecessors, have a classic interface with a list of lines that the protagonist can say to non-playable characters (NPCs). Checks are the conditions that are necessary for the protagonist to be able to choose one or another line. The character passes the check according to his characteristics of skills (for example, checking whether the character has jumped through a hole will be checked by the value of dexterity) and/or a dice roll (randomization)). The value of the characteristic with the addition of a dice roll becomes a modifier, in which the die influences more or less the outcome of the event. Disco Elysium uses dice checks (visible to the player, the image of two dice appears on the screen). An additional option, which is often found in role-playing video games, is the indication of the value of the skill that is required to select an action or dialogue

⁶⁹ <https://youtu.be/9X0-W5erEXw?t=108> 1:40—1:50

line. For example, a character talks to a merchant and in the list of replicas there is an opportunity to ask for a discount, but only if the character's charisma characteristic is higher than a certain value. In this case, you gain metagaming knowledge that if in the future the character improves his charisma skills, he will be able to ask for a discount from the merchant. Disco Elysium brings skill testing to a level that has not been seen before in any RPGs. Most of the checks that your character passes are invisible to the player, thanks to which the player gets a great opportunity for role-playing, since metagaming in this case is reduced to minimal. Let us see this usage of invisible checks in the example of interaction with a stuffed bird on the bar desk in the hotel where the main character is staying. The player has the opportunity to choose one of three personality types of the protagonist, depending on the distribution of his skill points (or create one of his own). Points are categorized into five categories (intelligence, psyche, motor skills and physiology). The personality types of the protagonist (thinker, empath, brutal) are distributed mainly in three of these branches (intellect, psyche, physiology). The gameplay is structured in such a way that during a particular check, the corresponding skill, (which are presented as the character's inner voices), gives out some kind of clue and/or opinion about the situation and you can have a short dialogue with them. At the beginning of the game, the protagonist goes to the bar to talk to the administrator, the hero can look around before asking questions. If the protagonist is a thinker, then he will notice a stuffed bird on the counter and start a dialogue between the "encyclopedia" skill (responsible for the trivia knowledge) and "visual observation" (the protagonist's ability to notice details of the environment). The interaction between the communication skills not only sometimes adds a comedic effect to the storytelling, but also, according to the game's lead writer Robert Kurwitz, "a person rarely remembers information the first time; so that he understands, it is better to repeat it in different ways"⁷⁰. While interacting with a stuffed bird, we can see the use of this approach. The "Encyclopedia" begins the dialogue with an assessment of the bird's appearance according to ornithological parameters and then develops a conclusion on the presumptive appearance of this birds' species (the "encyclopedia" is going through long lines till it reaches the conclusion). Then "Visual observation" briefly enters the dialogue, with the line "there is a plate under a stuffed bird with the name of the species". In this moment, not only the information is repeated for better memorization by the player (it will not be needed in any way during the plot of the game), but it helps to characterize the inner world of the protagonist and adds a comic effect and make a protagonist more alive. If you go through the same observation with an empath character, then the hero will not determine the type of bird, and the player will not even be shown the check of the "encyclopedia", the only thing that the empath character will pay attention to is the

⁷⁰ <https://youtu.be/9X0-W5erEXw?t=352> (time code 5:50-6:00)

depressed look of a stuffed bird. An option will appear to pity the stuffed bird or offer the hotel administrator assistance with restoring it. Completely hidden checks are revealed with a brutal protagonist. Apparently, outside the interface of the visible player, the brutal character did not complete any checks available for interacting with the stuffed bird, so when playing with such a protagonist, does not even have the opportunity to interact with it. If you think about role-playing a character, then an alcoholic with a terrible hangover, whose leading need in life is satisfaction of basic physical needs and drugs (the leading skill for brutal character are electrochemistry, which persuade the character to use psychoactive substances and physical instrument. Which talks about physical supremacy), then he really would not have interacted with this stuffed bird. The player lost the metagaming experience when he would be replaying the game, but at the same time got more opportunities for role-playing the character. At first glance, an obvious approach to testing skills in role-playing video games (it could be directly inherited from the desktop RPGs, since the dungeon master secretly makes a certain number of checks for players behind a screen and not in every time announces the result to the players) but before DE is not found in role-playing video games (except for early examples with manual input of possible actions, but there the player himself controlled his role-playing). I would also assume that there are not only hidden checks, but the dice roll is sometimes a scripted check and not a random one. For the proof I would be needed to go through the game files which I does not have the skills yet. But we can see that indirectly. On the game map there is a bunker door which had a very low chance of opening (only the die roll of 6—6 will succeed), the check is red (which is a one in a walkthrough check that cannot be reopened later) and when a character fails to open the door, he can process⁷¹ the thought about opening it. This process is one of the longest in the game and in the end, there is no boost, only the line “Some doors cannot be open”. Which indirectly implies that the failing result of the dice roll is scripted. Which not only mocks the “randomness” of the game (since there is another door in the game that opens easily with the same check and grants money) but makes a player think whether all of the checks are scripted.

The second unusual way to check skills in Disco Elysium is that a positive check does not always mean a positive plot outcome. One of the skills "Authority" is responsible for the protagonist's self-confidence and, when passing a check, usually forces the character to put himself in an uncomfortable position (for example, it can convince the character that the hotel employee intimidated by him actually admires the protagonist and should invite her out on a date), such an outcome is rare (never) found in role-playing video games. Very remotely similar

⁷¹ Thought cabinet — is the analogue of a skill tree in DE, where a character can constantly “think” about some features which can boost characteristics and open some alternative dialogue options. For example the thought “Hobo cop” allows a character to sleep in the dumpster which otherwise is not possible.

can be noted a scene from Mass Effect 3, where the protagonist can use the available action for the character, which usually means a positive outcome for the dialogue and hit the general of the fleet from whom the protagonist should ask for help. Despite the fact that such an action does not carry serious consequences, this is one of the few situations that companions will condemn (which usually does not happen).

Another trick that DE use with checks is the unreliable storytelling trick. The technique is found, for example, in Dragon Age 2, where all the events of the game are retold by a gnome-writer, so not until the end, one cannot be sure that at least some event took place exactly like this in the game's universe. In DE, an unreliable narrator was used through yet another skill check. Towards the end of the game, when the player has become comfortable with passing checks and is used to trusting them in opinions about the game world (despite a negative result with a positive check, the player can predict the effects of events in advance), he is faced with the interrogation of the character from the beginning of the game about the committed murder (curiously, at the end of the first with her dialogue she drops the line "it will be lousy for you to interrogate me" which is the predecessor for the events). By the time of interrogation, the protagonist may have sympathy for her and use "Drama" check to find out if the suspect is lying. Other skills, perhaps, will begin to question the objectivity of the "Drama" and the protagonist may try to pass one of the most difficult checks in the game in order to recognize if the "Drama" check failed on the person you are interrogating is lying. If the protagonist passes the test, it turns out that the suspect is lying, and "Drama" becomes an unreliable narrator and calls the rest of the skills into question of their credibility. An unusual technique, which, among other things, encourages the player to re-play with other skill set.

With these gameplay elements, DE successfully combines narrative and gameplay elements and bypasses the conflicts between storytelling and gameplay outlined above.

DE uses the same approach as in Super Mario Bros, trying to limit the textual explanation part of the game mechanics as little as possible, engaging a player to interact with the game, to explore its limits. For example, it is common that videogames have some kind of a starting location where a player can engage with the rules or have a direct tutorial. DE starts in a hotel small hotel room, where a player can explore dialogue options, skill checks, world history and injury and the death of the character.

2.6. Functions of the text in DE

The issues that were brought out throughout the first chapter are mainly considered the overlapping game messages from different aspects.

As it was analyzed recently (Timus 2019), game mechanics (and it can be extrapolated onto the gameplay) can be seen as language.

- The accurate transmission of the message

Text is considered to be a carrier of a codified message from one individual to another. Lotman considers the theme of impossibility of a complete translation of a text from one system to another. That would be possible only in the case of complete equivalence between the codes of the addresser and addressee. That is an almost impossible condition, as even the messages in a natural language may be perceived differently. The system of codification here is understood not only as a linguistic entity, but the whole system of culture, experiences, memory, that forms the code of an individual. In this case, there would be more adequate to talk about not an exact transmission, but of an approximative, relative one, an analogue. The other thing that considers the transmission of the message that even if there is a possibility of a complete understanding on both sides, there would be any transmission of the message at all because there is no new information that can be transmitted. On the other hand, the complete differences between to individual's will also lead to inability to communicate. That what can happen not only between the living species but also between different medias in the video game.

In a videogame we can say that several messages can be transmitted throughout the game (from the developers to players) — intentional and unintentional. First group will be the gameplay flow of the game and the artistic meanings that would be transferred through the game plot. Unintentional meaning will be created when the initial message will be deciphered not fully, and additional context will be added to the game message. For example, as the protagonist of DE is a policeman some players interpreted as the “policemen are heroes” since the history of RPG assumed that we usually play as the “good guys”. The other misinterpretation could occur because of forced role-playing that was described before. DE offers a protagonist to choose a political orientation for your character (capitalist, communist, centric or anarchists), while there are a lot of hidden characteristic checks it could be seen that the game is turning to the one particular political side (usually communist). Since a player cannot see all the possible options in the one playthrough the initial message will be incomplete. We can assume that a hidden choices game feature even though benefits as a game design mechanism can fail as a text function

“accurate transmission of the message”. But if we say that several walkthroughs will be a complete message than this function is fulfilled correctly. Sometimes videogames use this approach to gradually release content from different viewpoints (i.e., Nier Automata 2017). As for the game rules transmission the example from the Mario can be indeed the example of how you can a developer use game mechanics to code the game rules. DE as was said before works similarly while presenting an interactive playground in the first room, avoiding the direct textual explanation.

- Generation of new texts

The possibility of some text to create new text is relied on its heterogeneity:

“semiotically describing a complicated synthesis of at least two significant ones. systems that together form one structural, semantic and functional whole, and providing a comprehensive impact on the addressee ”(Ischuk 2009: 12)

By Lotman it will be the creative function of the text that will be working only if the text has the heterogeneity. Video games are by the definition double coded since being the multimedia experience, on the development stage already several codes will be engaging with each other (video, audio, gameplay).

- Preservation of cultural memory

Texts are not only the carriers of the meaning that was coded intentionally but it also carries all the texts from the culture. The cultural memory is absorbed throughout the new texts. As was said by Lorman, text is creating a semiotics space that will become a part of a cultural context. Perhaps this is the strongest function that in the DE that makes it the phenomenal cultural and gaming experience. Developers throughout the game are constantly having a dialogue between cultural messages they are bearing within a game. From the outside DE started as an heir to the golden standard of RPG — Planescape: Torment and most of the players that engaged the game were already familiar with its cultural impact. The RPG itself as it was said came from the pen and paper experience and what is interesting that DE is constantly trying to embrace what exactly they are preserving and try to have a dialogue with it (I think that it is an impact of post-modernist literature and hypertexts). In one of the quests the protagonist will be exploring the cursed mall, where all business is doomed to be closed, to find a strange attic, where a group of people was playing pen and paper game. The dialogue sequences in these quests are mocking those, who are trying to create the greatest game ever and initially collapse due to the bad budget planning (which almost happened to the ZA/UM at the development stage). The game continues in its self-awareness when a player find an NPC “Novelty Dicemaker” that could bare the curse

of the building, she is once again serves as a medium between the developers and the player, explaining that you are, indeed in a game:

“— That’s why people love role-playing games. You can be whoever you want to be. You can try again (implying the possibility of save scamming⁷² throughout the game). You can try again. Still, there’s something inherently violent even about dice rolls” (Novelty Dicemaker)

The DE is constantly mocking its own choices and heritage (the scripted dice rolls for example would be a bea game design choice in any other RPG it continues to have a dialogue with itself out of the realm of the game. It is similar to the definition of the wordplay in the rhetoric approach by Paul (Paul 2012). In one of the quest the protagonist and his partner will find two punks trying to brake up the police care. Both punks have matching jackets which reads “F*ck the world” and “pissf****t” on the back. The protagonist can take their jackets and tries to give one to his partner, but he refuses to wear it. The “Encyclopedia” skill will comment on the matching jackets:

“— Pity. The jackets are meant to complete each other. If a man were standing alone on a street corner with ‘pissf****t’ written on his back, it’d just be an individual that has take a liking to urine. And ‘fuck the world’ all on its own is, frankly generic” (Encyclopedia)

After the release of the game ZA/UM opened a merchandise shop with only one of the jackets which is once again creating a dialogue between the texts. I think this feature is closely related to one of the game design solution for the probable game flows of the game. Even though there are flows.

⁷² Used in games that allow players to save whenever they want, thus making the game substantially easier because there is no real penalty for mistakes, and it lets the player know what to expect ahead. Allows to game metagaming knowledge other than classic trial and error in rogue-like series.

CONCLUSION

Through the paper we explored the current state of game studies and the contribution from adjacent disciplines to it. Since 2001 the establishing of the discipline we can say that there are still problems inside the discipline. The gap between the theoreticians and practitioners is waiting for the bridge to be built. There is a need for game studies and game researches yet to create some tool for easier interaction with the games itself. Now there is a problem of transmitting the key component of the game — game play into the research field to be easy accessed and proofread. The issue that was brought recently (Timus 2019) about the lack of game mechanics research can also be explained by the difficulty of interacting with the material. The future of the game studies will be the invention of simple game engines where theoreticians can also approach the game mechanics for analysis.

One of the possible solutions that is currently explored by game studying — the concentration on one-game studies, since it is the only option to narrow down the research field, avoiding the definition of the object and its properties. There is a point of developing an easier development tool which will bring theoreticians closer to the actual game development.

RPGs on the one hand can be seen as an optimal object of video game studies since in any game a player is engaging into some role. The concept of a play is similar to magic circle introduces by Huizinga and then developed into game studies by Salen and Zimmerman (2004). For *Disco Elysium* we used the definition of categories by Schell (2008) to see if DE can be researched as a video game. DE posses a feature of interactive objects which separates it from cybertext experience.

Video games by their nature of a multimedia interactive object already double coded in several aspect which makes them approachable for the textual analysis not only on the level of actual words but also on video, audio, and game play. Games bear all functions of the text introduced by J. Lotman and have a big capability of heterogeneity.

Disco Elysium is mostly using the game design approach similar to post modern literature and one of the game design solutions that were introduces in the paper. Developers are constantly having a dialogue with their text which allows to avoid possible game flows. There is an option that this approach is one of the options for future game development.

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KOKKUVÕTE

VIDEOMÄNG KUI TEKST: “DISCO ELYSIUMI” ANALÜÜS

Videomängude uurimise ajalugu hõlmab nüüdseks juba üle poole sajandi. Alustati osana multimeedia uuringutest, kus keskseks mõisteks oli hüpertekst ja sealt leidsid juba videomängud oma tee ja loodus uus iseseisev uurimisala. Iga aastaga kaasab videomängu tööstus üha rohkem mängijaid ja kasvatab oma kasumit võrdluses klassikalise meedia vormidega. Nüüd ei pane ka imestama, et videomängud on uurimisobjektideks ka paljudes muudes distsipliinides, sealhulgas soouuringud, haridusteadused, majandus, sest mängimine ise kui üks aktiivse õppimise vorme pakub laialdast huvi. Taoline videomängude populaarsuse kiire kasv on endaga kaasa toonud ka mitmeid veel lahendamata probleeme mängu-uuringute (*game studies*) vallas. Ikka ja jälle defineeritakse mängu kui uurimisobjekti, selle piire ja funktsioone. Seega ei ole olnud võimalik luua universaalset tööriistakasti videomängude uurimiseks, sest iga teadlane mõistab seda erinevalt. See toob omakorda kaasa võimetuse tegutsemiseks ühtsel uurimisväljal. Antud töös kirjeldatakse nii neid erinevaid lähenemisviise kui ka nende käigus üleskerkivaid probleeme.

Need mängu-uuringutes esilekerkinud probleemid mõjutavad mitte ainult distsipliini seisundit täna, vaid minu arvates mõjutavad ka mängutööstust tervikuna. Iga aasta tuleb peale hulk uusi mängu, aga mängude keel jääb laias laastus samaks, erinevate stuudiote nii tugevused kui nõrkused säiluvad. Käesoleva töö üheks eesmärgiks on just arendada lähenemisviisi, mis aitaks kaasa mängude arengule. Üks probleem, mis kahtlemata ei ole omane ainult videomängudele, on lõhe teooria ja praktika vahel – mängude uurijate ja nende reaalsete loojate vahel. Siin eristuvad kaks põhilist lähenemist: nn narratiivne (loopõhine) ja ludoloogiline. Esimesed keskenduvad loojutustamisele, teised rohkem mängu mehhaanikale. Ludoloogid on loomuldasa rohkem seotud mängutööstusega, mängude arendamisega ja mängukogemuse paremustamisega. tavaliselt rohkem seotud tööstus, areng ja mängukogemus ise. Nad on tihti ka mängu arendajad, samas kui narrativistide arendatud uued analüütilised vahendid ei pruugi jõuda mängu arendajateni.

Antud töö põhieesmärk ei ole mitte ühe videomängu järjekordne defineerimine, vaid selle asemel valisin lähtepunktiks RPG kui žanri, et selgemini näha selle olulisi iseloomustavaid aspekte ja selle ilminguid konkreetses mängus. Analüüsiobjektiks valisin värske 2019. aasta

videomängumaailmas laineid löönud ja mitmeid auhindu võitnud eesti loomekollektiivi RPG Disco Elysium(ZU/UM). Põhieesmärgiks oli vaadelda seda mängu kui teksti Juri Lotmani definitsioonis, keskendudes teksti kolmele põhifunktsioonile: info edastamine, uue info (uute tekstide), mälu kujundamine. Üheks töö tulemuseks oli ka tõdemus, et mänguloomes on loo jutustamise sujuvus, tekst kui niisugune oma tavatähenduses olulisel kohal suurepärase mängukogemuse saavutamisel ja lähendab mängu tervikuna kunstiteosele Juri Lotmani määratluses.

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