

# Videogames and problems of media translation in the context of comparison of narratology and ludology

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**Abstract.** The article studies the possibility of translating a video game into other types of media, as well as the possibility of a reverse process. Research results received within the framework of the narratological theory of video games and the ludological theory of video games are used as methodological ground. The authors rely on the concept of translation presented in the works of B. Latour. The main provisions and conclusions are formulated by comparing ludological and narratological approaches to the problem of transferring a video game to other media types (cinema), as well as the reverse process. Basic concepts are identified, key points of methodological interest are set out. The article provides illustrative examples of video game translation into cinema, as well as examples of reverse translation, that are commented and explained in the context of the given methodologies. The conclusion is made about the prospects for investigating the issue in the context of media research and media practice.

## 1 Introduction

The epistemological model may be split in the process of establishment of video game research as a specific object. In the initial position, theorists of media and video game research study video games from the standpoint of all-humanities text research methodology. Proceeding from this, an important starting point in the study of video game as text is defining its media features that may hide the true textual, narrative structure behind some visibility. At the same time, these features are supposed to be secondary, not constituting the fundamental essence of video game and can be subject to reduction to a certain extent, it is for the act of reduction that it is necessary to know what exactly is being reduced.

Jesper Juul's approach, who is in the positions of ludology, but at the same time trying to find common ground and the trajectory of constructive complementation of both approaches, looks somewhat compromising. J. Juul suggests giving up on the practice of

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narratological framing, motivating it in the following way: "The framing operation, that is, considering something as something else, works as follows: certain concepts of the original field (narrative) are taken and applied to the new field (games). This is not a neutral operation: it accentuates some characteristics of the subject and suppresses others "[9, P. 61]. As a softer version of the junction of two approaches, J. Juul chooses "comparison," where similarities and differences of the two categories (narrative and game) can be indicated and hidden prerequisites of these revealed.

Considering a video game through the lens of narratology or ludology leads to different consequences in the context of possibility of "translating" a video game as media into other media forms and vice versa.

## **2 Materials and methods**

The study is based on comparative analysis of the approaches presented in the works of the main theorists of video games research of the twentieth century: J. Juul and E. Aarseth. The study is based on two key approaches formulated by the noted authors - ludology and narratology respectively. It should be noted that these theoretical approaches to video games research gave rise to the tradition for the researchers to join either of the opposite groups regarding what should be considered primary for the essence of video games: narrative or special rules and principles of game interaction. Narratology in its foundation dates back to a long tradition of text research, the perception of culture as a summary of texts and various media as variants of text presentation. In a certain way it is possible to say that the narratological approach follows J. Derrida's maxim "everything is a text", it is embedded in the post-structuralist discourse of literary criticism as a tool for analyzing all cultural phenomena, one way or another correlated with the denotation procedure. The very ability of a particular medium to produce this procedure is brought to the fore, and how this is done is the subject of deep analysis. With such an analysis, those media features, which in one way or another can be integrated into the phenomenological representation of meanings, the translation of signifying connections of the latter with signified specific unique way, remain secondary. Since the process of interpreting meanings remains fundamental, but not the procedure of perception itself.

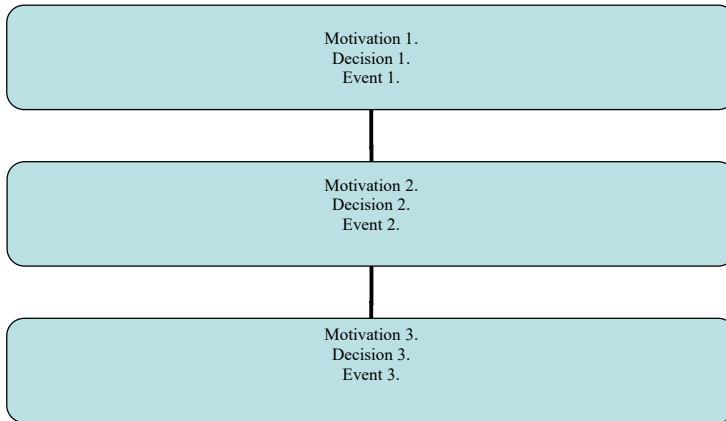
Ludology, in its turn, defines as the central concept the identification of special features of video game as media and insists on the separation of video games as a specific and special object of study. The key concepts are the rules and mechanics that define the interactive component of video game as media. Interactivity, in turn, is a distinctive feature of video games as media from the standpoint of ludology.

Thus, in order to determine the possibility of "translating" the content of third-party media into video game type and vice versa, it is necessary to clarify the emerging possibilities and explanations offered within these approaches. Significant and important for the problem of translation is the appeal to the concept of the actor-network theory of B. Latour and his understanding of the translation procedure and also to the works of fundamental media theorists such as L. Manovich, O. Grau, M. McLuhan and others.

## **3 Results and discussion**

The main reflections in the field of working with the polymedia environment are centered around the concept of "translation," very similar to the "translation" of B. Latour (proposed by him as one of the metadiscursive tools in the work "Re-assembly of the social: an introduction to the actor-network theory" [3]), but understood primarily in the concept of media theory. According to J. Juul, the problem of translation is that any narrative does not

exist on its own, but is always present through mediation, that is, representation within a particular medium. Such a medium can be an oral story, a book, a film, a theater performance. From the fact that the same narrative can be represented through different mediums (or media), it should follow that the narrative itself exists seamlessly and "drifts" from one way of representation to another.



**Fig. 1.** Plot tree in narrative-oriented media.

"This transportability of history is the strongest argument in favor of the fact that narratives are still structures independent of any medium" [14, S. 20], writes S. Chatman, who advocates the position of independence and, in general, the transcendence of the narrative. He is echoed by P. Brooks, stating the following: "Narrative may be a special ability or competence that... when mastered, allows us to summarize and retransmit narratives in other words in other languages, to transfer them into other media, while remaining recognizably faithful to the original narrative structure and message" [11, P. 3] Both S. Chatman and P. Brooks argue in their statements that the narrative component of any media is present outside of it, regardless of it, and can be translated from one medium to another without unnecessary labor (as it is especially clearly manifested by P. Brooks). Narrative thereby becomes a predominant metamedia substance which is able to adjust the media to itself. Indeed, one may find a sufficient number of examples where game makes it possible to look at itself from the standpoint of narratological analysis. So the game "Detroit: Become Human", 2018 by Quantic Dream studio has a built-in ability to analyze the "plot tree."

J. Juul also problematizes the statements of P. Brooks and S. Chatman, suggesting that even trying to complete a full-fledged procedure for translating narrative within one media-ecological environment from one medium to another, we will always come across the fundamental incompleteness of such a translation. In this sense, absolute translation is impossible, even within one mediaecological niche.

To explain the possibility of relative translation, J. Juul resorts to examining narrative on several levels: "With a somewhat rough examination, narratives can be broken down into a level of discourse (how a story is told) and a plot (the story that is told). The "plot" part can, in turn, be divided into two: existents (actors and environment) and events (actions and circumstances). Then the story may be identified by common existents (having similar names) and common events; this is what we usually mean when we talk about "the same story" [9, p. 66]. This approach to considering the specifics of the translation of narrative between different methods of mediation allows, according to J. Juul, to identify the specifics of the media themselves. If this procedure is possible and existents are preserved in translation, then the media can be defined as a narrative one.

The following cultural products combined under one franchise and designed to reveal the same stories (narratives) can be considered as examples. J. Juul himself addresses two opposite translation directions: a movie to a game (J. Lucas' "Star Wars", released in 1977, transformed into "Star Wars" arcade game developed by Atari in 1983) and a film to a game (fighting game "Mortal Kombat", released by Mindway Games in 1993, filmed as part of the movie "Deadly Battle" directed by Paul Andersen, released in 1995).

The situation of transferring a movie to an arcade-type game reveals little connection between the content of two cultural products at the existent level. The action in the game is limited to a time segment that is insignificant for the film. Divided into three phases, the game only partially refers to the events of the film, the second phase has no connection with the original story, nevertheless remaining organic and consistent within the framework of in-game representation. The obvious connection arises only due to the common name of the game and the movie, which are shown to the player on the body of the gaming machine and on the screen. In the game itself: "There is no background, the rest of the film, all personal relationships. We may even not understand that we are fighting with Death Star (whatever it could be). And finally, the most obvious: if we do not complete the mission, then any resemblance to the film disappears; if the mission is completed, another Death Star arises, which also does not correspond to the film "[9, p. 68].

In other words, despite the fact that game can exist as an independent cultural product, and, even, relies on the prescribed narrative, nevertheless, when translating, almost complete discrepancy is found in the specifics of perception and content of the original source and the game. Not only a significant part of the narrative volume falls out (only a single episode is reproduced, and even that is very much modified), but also the absolute majority of existents.

The second case of reverse translation from a game to a movie also causes difficulties. A fighting game, according to J. Juul, is a "dynamic" system, that is, a system in which many different interactions and outcomes of these interactions are possible. A single narrative cannot be formed and reproduced every time, cannot be stable and fixed, since the interactions themselves will await changes that lead to the uncertainty of the result. Moreover, the game itself, being a program reproduced according to certain algorithms, does not let existents collide in a situation of an indefinite outcome (or a conditionally indefinite outcome, if we are talking about a self-contained game that does not presume a human player, but only actors based on algorithms), it also aims to produce a potentially infinite number of existents - actors and events that, moreover, can be repeatedly reproduced within the same ecosystem, but with an unpredictable result. "The problem is that programs are essentially machines for the production of existents: computer games make it easy to produce an infinite number of existents, many action games actually imply an infinite number of opponents existents" [9, p. 69]. Specific events, reconstruction of personal background of relationships in the narrative structure of the film are contrasted to the simulative uncertainty and convention of the game, where the development of events cannot be predetermined in advance (and in many, more importantly, reproduced again), and the characters are conditional, practically impersonal. An attempt to translate a game into a narrative lead to the fact that events and actors in these events are strictly determined, but the dynamic system is lost - the game component disappears. Games, due to their formalization, severity of the rules related to the dynamics of the system, are focused on simulation, but not on the disclosure of existential problems, since it is hardly formalized (or formalized with difficulty).

Narrative, according to J. Juul, is present in video games as a visual-cinematic addition or cut scene: "...in most modern games there are cut scenes, fragments in which the player is forced to watch in inaction how events unfold. Cut scenes usually appear in the form of introductions and those episodes where the player completed some part of the game "[9, p.

69].

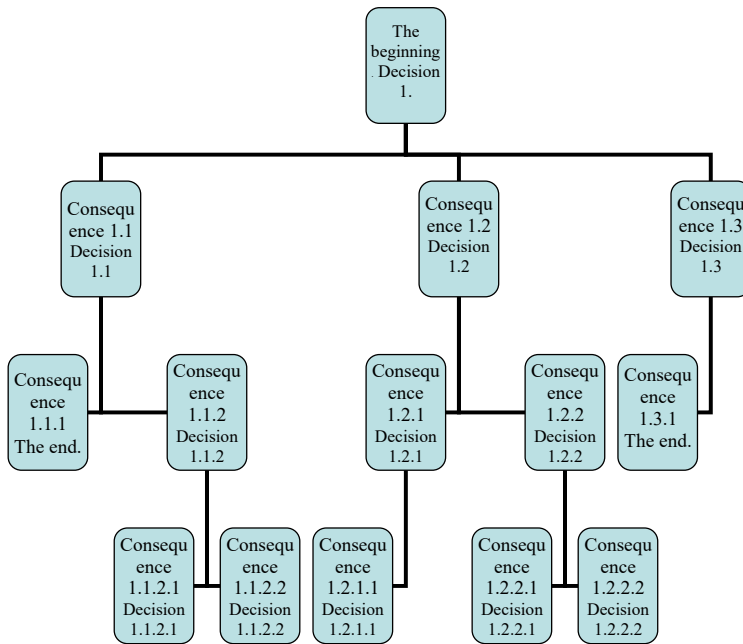
In this case, it is appropriate to consider an example, paradoxical at first glance, related to the genre of interactive cinema or similar in its deep narrative component to the genre of “plot adventures”. This genre is actively present in the space of the modern gaming industry and is illustrated by the following successful examples: "Detroit: Become Human" (2018), "Heavy Rain" (2010), "Beyond: Two Souls" (2015), "Life is Strange" released in episodes from 1 to 5 during 2015, etc. It is not a coincidence that games in this genre are either fully characterized as “interactive cinema”, or contain an indication in the definition of the genre that they contain elements of “interactive cinema”. Their gameplay essentially consists of cut-scenes, which are necessary to immerse the player in the space of the narrative in which the game's plot unfolds. But, the fundamental difference between an ordinary movie and an interactive feature movie is that the narrative contains a certain (the exact number varies from example to example) variety of plot development options. Potentially, the plot can move along several paths, usually called “plot rails”, but in the process of making active decisions by the player based on his personal beliefs and reactions to what is happening in the game field, “arrows” or conditionally called “crossroads” of the plot are built into the narrative, where one line of development can go interconnect another. The transition from one plot line to another is not just a shift in the optics of the story, the addition or change of existents, but a fundamental change in the plot, the development of alternative variability.

Thus, even in a deeply narrated game process, there is always an element of uncertainty in the game, which comes from the active participation of the player, which constitutes the specific ludological basis of the game process and, as a result, the game as a media. It is the active, immersive involvement of the player in the active development of the game space that does not allow us to say, even in the case of games like interactive cinema, that the player acts as a spectator/reader, but is fundamentally in a different position, an active participant in the process.

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participant of the process.



**Fig. 2.** Plot tree in in interactive cinema genre games.

J. Juul proposes to present the specifics of translating narrative into game and vice versa in the form of a table (see Table 1):

**Table 3.** Translatability between narrative and game [9, p. 70].

Narrative	Game
Existent	Existent or Continuous production of existents (i.e., hordes of opponents)
Event	Event (cut scene) or Simulation with multiple outcomes
Sequence of events	Selected events as events or simulations or Ideal sequence of events that the player has to actualise by mastering the simulations
Character	Character (cut-scene) or Player position (game)

## 4 Conclusion

As a result, it becomes obvious that making an unambiguous and accurate translation becomes a very problematic task (if ever possible). The translation procedure contains many optional and unforeseen moments that are determined by the specifics of the medium (or wider - a media ecological niche). Games reduce the narrative component of the movie, leaving only the most saturated action, characters (to a greater extent) become mere acting figures, or their disclosure is carried out within the framework of special cut scenes, which are themselves external to the gameplay. When translated back, all the simulation power of the game, its uncertainty and multivariability are reduced to one possible scenario, characters and events expand, incorporating existential qualities as if "crystallizing" and at the same time are fixed on the "rails" of the plot.

To summarize, narratology, as a method of study of video game's ability to be translated into other media, notes the important principles of plot construction and reproduction, which may initially be absent in a video game or have many options, while ludology emphasizes the need to take into account the specifics of the video game as media and to compensate for the potential shortage of elements, that may be lost in the new media so that the translation result becomes unviable.

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