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DECREASING NARRATIVE DISTANCE IN VIDEO GAMES

VĒSTĪJUMA ATSTATUMA MAZINĀŠANA VIDEO SPĒLĒS

BACHELOR THESIS

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ANOTĀCIJA

Pētījums *Vēstījuma atstatuma mazināšana video spēlēs* tapis ar nolūku apskatīt rīkus, ar kuru palīdzību iespējams palielināt spēlētāju emocionālo ieguldījumu datorspēles pasaulē. Tas panākts aplūkojot dažādas ar vēstījumu spēlēs saistītas teorijas un analizējot izvēlētu video spēļu vēstījumus. Kā pētījuma mērķis tika izvēlētas pirmās divas *Mass Effect* triloģijas spēles, ir atsauces arī uz citām spēlēm salīdzināšanas nolūkos. Teorētiskā pētījuma daļa atklāja, ka spēles līdz šim nav tikušas analizētas no vēstījuma atstatuma puses. Spēļu analīze rādīja, ka spēlētāju izvēļu izraisītas sekas, gan mazas, gan lielas, ir labs veids vēstījuma atstatuma mazināšanai.

Atslēgas vārdi: vēstījuma atstatums, vēstījuma struktūra, video spēle, emocionālā sasaiste, izvēle, sekas, interaktivitāte

ABSTRACT

The main goal of *Decreasing Narrative Distance in Video Games* is to uncover the means for increasing the emotional investment of players in a video game world through investigation of the available theory on game narratives and analysis of the narrative found in select games. The first two games of the *Mass Effect* trilogy were selected as the focus of this research, while other computer games are occasionally referenced for comparison. The theoretical research revealed that games have not yet been researched from the perspective of narrative distance. The analysis of the games showed that implementing storyline consequences, both small and grand, to the player's choices is a good way to decrease narrative distance.

Key words: narrative distance, narrative structure, video game, emotional involvement, choice, consequence, interactivity

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ODO – Oxford Dictionaries Online

CDO – Cambridge Dictionaries Online

RPG – role-playing game

PC – player character

NPC – non-playable character

QTE – quick-time event

INTRODUCTION

Video games may have started out as an unusual technological experiment in the mid-20th century, but they have since grown into one of the biggest entertainment industries in the world with millions of passionate supporters. Budgets for premium games have grown exponentially in the last two decades, as has the size of development teams. At times, the spectacular technological achievements of modern gaming platforms seem to overshadow the unique characteristics of the medium. The present research is an attempt to focus on one of the more complicated facets of video games: narrative.

Game narratives have been the focus of a heated debate since the 1990s, yet the subject of *how* game narratives can affect and emotionally involve players does not seem to have been broached. Therefore, the **goal** of this research is to uncover the specific means with which the motional investment of players in the narratives of games could be increased. The **research question** is: What unique methods are available to game developers in order to reduce narrative distance between the game world and the player?

The enabling objectives are:

1. to read and analyse the theory available on interactive and game narratives;
2. to apply the theory to the narratives of select video games;
3. to draw conclusions regarding narrative distance in games.

The **research methods** used are theoretical (the investigation of theories relevant to the subject of the research) as well as qualitative empirical (analysis of various techniques that can be used to manipulate narrative distance in games).

The current research was not grounded in any single school of game theory. Instead, the author used an amalgamation of a large number of different concepts from both game and literary studies to analyse game narratives. One of the authors referred to are Greg Costikyan for his definition of *game*. Gonzalo Frasca's work contributed greatly to dealing with narratology and ludology. Grant Tavinor's discussion of emotion in gaming was a very useful resource, as were the delineated perspectives on narrative presented by Henry Jenkins and Julian Küklich.

Because analysing games is a prohibitively time-consuming affair, the choice was made to focus on only two games as the subject of the current research: *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2*. Where possible, comparisons with additional games and the narrative techniques employed therein were drawn, including *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, *The Witcher*, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* and *Mass Effect 3*.

In order to collect the data for research and reference, the first two games of the *Mass Effect* series were played and the gameplay footage was recorded. This was done using the video capturing software Fraps; the resulting raw video files were then compressed and edited using VirtualDub. In this paper video footage is referred to by its filename (e.g. 01.avi), followed by the minutes and seconds at which the fragment of interest begins and ends (01.avi 0’0”-0’24”) if necessary. The video files are provided on a DVD-R disk along with the paper, sorted in folders according to the chapter they pertain to. Image files are provided on the same disk in a separate folder, referred to by their filename as well (e.g. image01.png).

The first chapter of the research pertains to the investigation and establishment of the most important terms used in this paper. The following chapter is research of the various theories pertaining to games and game narratives. The third chapter is an explanation of the reasons behind choosing the *Mass Effect* series as the subject of this research. The research methods are also described. The final chapter of the research is a discussion of the findings, the numerous aspects of the *Mass Effect* games that could be utilized in order to manipulate the narrative distance between the game and the player.

CHAPTER 1: ESTABLISHING THE TERMINOLOGY

Previous research (Husko, 2011) has shown that there can be wildly differing opinions and definitions for seemingly simple and self-explanatory terms. Therefore, it is vital to clearly name and explain the key terms of the paper; doing so helps ensure consistency on the part of the author and understanding on the part of the reader.

For this paper online dictionary resources, such as Oxford Dictionaries Online (ODO), Cambridge Dictionaries Online (CDO) and the website Dictionary.com were used as sources for preliminary definitions. This was primarily because they are more likely to offer the latest definitions; printed versions might be out-dated and, as a result, inappropriate for a modern topic such as video games. However, as they seldom provided explanations that were satisfactory for this paper, various articles and specialized literature were referred to as well.

1.1. Game

People encounter games throughout their daily lives in various forms. It is a word used frequently, without giving the exact meaning much thought. Yet, as is often the case with such seemingly obvious words, providing an accurate, air-tight explanation can be rather difficult. It is important to remember that this paper deals with games exclusively in the form of electronic entertainment, and so the definitions should be viewed with the context in mind.

Research done in previous years (Husko, 2011) has revealed that the explanations offered by conventional dictionaries do not offer in-depth detail on the structure of games and the process of playing them. For this purpose, specialized sources must be consulted, two of which stand out as the most fitting for the requirements of this paper.

The first is provided by game designer and author Greg Costikyan. In his paper *I Have No Words & I Must Design*, he describes in detail the thought put into creating what he calls a 'functional definition' for the term. According to Costikyan, a game is 'an interactive structure of endogenous meaning that requires players to struggle toward a goal' (Costikyan, 2002: 22). The thought process leading to the formulation of such a definition is rather expansive, therefore it shall not be repeated within this paper, but an abridged explanation of the constituent parts can be found in the paper *Building Narrative through Dialogue Choice in the* Mass Effect *Video Game Series* (Husko, 2011: 4-6).

Costikyan's definition is, perhaps, one of the best-conceived of all those investigated for this research, largely because it is free of the external factors often mentioned in other suggestions – games are not defined by the player's attitude. However, this does not mean it

cannot be modified to better serve the goals of this paper. This is possible by expanding upon some ideas not explored within it. *The Game, the Player, the World: Looking for a Heart of Gameness* by notable game researcher Jesper Juul contains an explanation for the term that appears to focus on some other aspects, which makes it an excellent supplement for Costikyan's definition.

Juul explains the term *game* as 'a rule-based formal 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 attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable' (Juul, 2003) . It is immediately apparent that this definition also at least partially depends on the factor of player attitude – there is no guarantee that a player will be attached to the outcome. Nevertheless, there are ideas expressed within that are of interest to this research. Namely, the concepts that games have a variable and quantifiable outcome and that different outcomes are assigned different values (whether by the game or by the players themselves). Some might argue that the interactive nature of a game itself implies as much, but it would be prudent to state it explicitly regardless.

Therefore, the definition of the term *game* used in this paper shall be: a game is an interactive structure of endogenous meaning that challenges the player to reach a goal with variable outcomes of different values. This explanation is ideal for the needs of this paper, though it is important to remember that the definition of what makes a game does not necessarily denote all of the possibilities enclosed in that form. One such unnamed element that is particularly noteworthy in regard to this research is *narrative*.

1.2. Narrative

Narrative is another important term, as its interactive form found within the *Mass Effect* series lies at the very core of this paper. Although it has been defined in previous research papers as 'the telling of events to the reader' (Husko, 2010), the context has since changed, warranting a new investigation of the term and the nature of the concept it denotes.

ODO provide several definitions of the term, three of which are at least somewhat relevant to the topic at hand. The base meaning of *narrative* is 'a spoken or written account of connected events; a story' (Online 1). The first definition is of interest because it again displays a certain archaism present in many popular dictionaries. Even if many still argue that games have little or no artistic merit, films have surely long since become accepted into the

fold alongside prose, and yet they require neither speech nor writ to convey their story. Should it be understood that *narrative* is not applicable to cinematography?

The second definition, 'the narrated part of a literary work, as distinct from dialogue' (ibid.), needs to be mentioned so as to clear up any confusion outright – the term *narrative* in this paper is completely unrelated to narrators and the information they provide, not in the literal sense, at least. In fact, with few exceptions, it is almost impossible to talk of any identifiable narrator in films or video games. Johann Schmidt writes on the matter in the book *Narratologia: Contributions to Narrative Theory*. Schmidt's article deals with films, but video games share many similar storytelling methods, therefore a number of his statements can be directly applied to the medium researched in this paper. He explains that

> the general proposition is that there is no narrative without a → narrator poses particular problems when applied to narration in feature films [and video games]. Though almost all of these films [and video games] abound in storytelling capacities and thus belong to a predominantly narrative medium, their specific mode of plurimedial presentation and their peculiar blending of temporal and spatial elements set them apart from forms of → narrativity that are principally language-based (2009: 212).

Although films lack the interactive nature of video games, there are numerous similarities in storytelling techniques between the two mediums. This becomes particularly evident in more recent games that take advantage of modern technological developments in order to provide a more cinematographic player experience (such as the games of the *Mass Effect* series). In these cases 'the characteristics of [narrative] strategies differ significantly [between literature, film and video games]' (ibid.). In his book *Theory of Narrative* Rick Altman speaks on the topic of the various forms narrative can take in more general terms. As Altman explains, narrative is 'omnipresent and culturally privileged [and] gains much of its power from its ability to change form easily and repeatedly' (Altman, 2008: 1).

Narrative is not and cannot be constricted to any set forms or mediums, as stories and their telling are integral to human nature and culture. Altman argues that 'however different the media that serve as a given story's vehicles [..] we readily recognize a story's ability to be translated into different forms and yet somehow remain the "same" story. Clearly narrative exists **independently of the media** that give it concrete form' (ibid.). Therefore it is safe to assume that video games rely on a form of narrative to tell their story as well, even if it differs from the classical perception of the term.

This leaves the third definition of *narrative* found in ODO, which is of direct interest for the purposes of this paper. Narrative is 'the practice or art of telling stories' (Online 1). To expand upon that, the term *narrative* refers to the skills, techniques and tools employed in

order to tell a story and convey some meaning. *Narrative* is not simply what is shown or told, it is *how* the story is told as well. Perhaps this definition is somewhat broad and some might disagree as to its use in the context of computer games, but it should be remembered that the focus of this research is not to announce the supremacy of Aristotelian narrative principles over video games or vice-versa, instead it is the scope of possibilities available to the developer within the medium to tell an involving story. It can be argued that games are not fundamentally a medium *for* telling stories, but it seems foolish to deny that storytelling and all of the numerous possible techniques involved therein cannot be a part of a player's computer game experience.

These various approaches to telling a story or narrative techniques can be the order in which events are told, the withholding of information from the reader/viewer/player, the shifting of narrative perspective or the utilization of a subjective narrator or particular vocabulary. As will become more apparent in the practical part of this research, the medium of video games offers several unique and innovative possibilities for storytelling, though there is some contention as to the manner in which narrative research in games should be approached (this topic is touched upon in the sub-chapter *Research of Narrative in Games*). Despite these disagreements, it is important to retain an open mind when it comes to the ways in which narrative can manifest itself, particularly regarding the means for manipulating narrative distance between the game world and the player.

1.3. Narrative Distance

Perhaps the most important term for this paper is *narrative distance* (also occasionally referred to as *aesthetic distance* or *aesthetic illusion*), as the concept is at the very heart of the research. According to Dave King, writer and freelance editor, narrative distance '[is] a continuum that measures how close your narrative voice is to your viewpoint character's voice' (Online 2). This can be interpreted in several ways, in order to fit any particular narrative-based relationship that requires analysis. One form of narrative distance is that between the narrator and the characters, made evident by how similar the narrated part of the text is to a character's perspective and speech patterns.

Another type of narrative distance is that between the author or the reader and the narrator or characters. In both of these instances, the word *distance* can signify any number of factors – only seldom is it spatial. The distance can be time, mental state, morality, experience or any number of other factors. A prominent example of such narrative distance can be observed in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. Philip Pirrip is both narrator and

protagonist, yet there is a gap of time and maturity between the two Pips. The older and wiser narrator is occasionally critical of the younger, more selfish Pip's deeds, which is notable in the narrator's speech. 'Next day, I had the meanness to feign that I was under a binding promise to go down to Joe; but I was capable of almost any meanness towards Joe or his name.' (Dickens, 1861)

The closest approximation of the meaning of *narrative distance* as used in this research can be found in Matthew Schanuel's article *Additional Pylons: Introducing "Distance"*. *Distance* 'may be an effective term for describing the degree to which a player occupies a character's place in a narrative' (Schanuel, 2011). It is almost synonymous to *immersion* in that it describes how deeply the player is involved in the process of the game. However, *immersion* in the context of video games typically denotes the concept of as-if forgetting oneself in the game, disregarding reality as less important for the duration of the game experience (Atkins, 2003: 66; Ryan, 2001).

Within this paper *narrative distance* refers to the player's general mental and emotional engagement in the game world and the events transpiring therein. The meaning goes beyond minute-to-minute involvement and deals more with the overall emotional investment of the player in the events transpiring within the game world. However, the concepts of *distance* and *immersion* are not entirely separable. It would be more accurate to say that they are two facets of the same phenomenon, as a strong sense of immersion allows for a greater degree of suspension of disbelief, which, in turn, is an important aspect in presenting an emotionally engaging world. Though not exclusive to video games, due to the way humans naturally communicate, one of the most important aspects of narrative presentation is dialogue.

1.4. Dialogue

The *Mass Effect* dialogue system is both one of the series' signature features and an important means of manipulating narrative distance within the games. Oxford Dictionaries Online suggests that a dialogue is 'a conversation between two or more people as a feature of a book, play, or film' (Online 3). The definition found at Cambridge Dictionaries Online is very similar; the only real difference is that it points out that dialogue is written (Online 4).

These definitions are satisfactory, except that they must be slightly altered to better fit the subject matter of this research. Within the context of this paper, the number of speakers is irrelevant, as the meaning of *dialogue* sought is somewhat more general – any speech by any character, whether internal, external, reciprocal or isolated. It should also be remembered that voiced dialogue in video games is only a relatively recent development, and even in

contemporary games not all characters are fully voiced, meaning speech can appear in solely written form as well. Consequently, within this paper the term *dialogue* is used to denote any speech produced by a character in a book, play, film, video game, etc.

1.5. Quick-Time Event

The last of the terms investigated for this paper is also the most game-specific; the expression *quick-time event* (QTE) denotes a particular game mechanic present to some extent in games as old as 25 years. This highly divisive feature has become increasingly widespread in the last decade, present in many different games of many different genres, though predominantly in various action-oriented games.

QTEs are a combination of a cinematic cut-scene with a gameplay sequence. Instead of passively observing the scene, the player is typically asked to perform timed button presses or other control inputs (moving/tilting the controller if it has motion sensing capabilities, moving the control sticks in a particular way, etc.) as the scene progresses. Most often this is used in order to show a particularly grand or exciting action set piece that would not function with the standard gameplay controls due to the actions performed or potentially disorienting camera movements. The concept at least appears to be intended as a means to leave the player with some sense of control and involvement in the on-screen proceedings, as interactivity is, after all, at the very heart of what games are.

Although all variations of the mechanic have the same fundamental principle, there are numerous nuances in the implementation, particularly in the attitude towards failure. Most games punish the player, causing them to replay either the QTE cut-scene itself or a longer section of gameplay (Online 5). This occurs either because the character fails at what she attempts to do and has to try again or because the character dies and the player has to retry from a previous checkpoint. Occasionally there will be games in which missing the inputs will alter the scene that plays without actually undoing player progress. Developer *Quantic Dreams* took such an approach with their unique project titled *Heavy Rain* (Online 6).

Quick-time events also feature in the *Mass Effect* games, most notably the second game of the series. The innovative implementation of this highly divisive gameplay feature within the context and nature of the science-fiction role-playing series is an interesting example of the unique storytelling opportunities offered by the video game medium and will be closely investigated in the practical part of this research.

Through the investigation of terms in this chapter it was determined that a **game** is an interactive structure of endogenous meaning that challenges the player to reach a goal with variable outcomes of different values. The definition is a modified combination of Greg Costikyan's and Jesper Juul's suggestions in order to create the most appropriate and accurate definition for the context of this research. **Narrative** is simply the art or practice of telling a story, regardless of the form in which it is presented. **Narrative distance**, then, is how close and involved the audience becomes in the events and the world of the story being told. The term **dialogue** signifies any speech performed by any character. The last of the terms investigated, **quick-time event** usually denotes cinematic cut-scenes that require timed input from the player for any number of different results. A relatively minor issue revealed over the course of this research that requires addressing nevertheless, is that standard dictionaries seldom provide definitions of terms that have meaning in the context of video games.

CHAPTER 2: INVESTIGATION OF THEORY

Game theory and the narrative analysis of video games are certainly less developed fields than their counterparts in literature or film. Nevertheless, a significant amount of work has been done in the field by academics and enthusiasts both; this chapter is an attempt to capitalize on the effort and observations that others have made in order to build a better, more balanced and objective research.

One of the most controversial and notable issues in game research is the so-called *narratology v. ludology* debate; the opinions and disagreements as to how game narrative analysis should be approached are to be investigated before any such analysis is conducted. Another important topic closely associated with the aforementioned theoretical debate is the relationship between the typically static nature of narrative and the changing essence of interactivity, their interplay in the video game medium. The third theme that requires investigation is the body of methods for decreasing narrative distance that have already been researched; hopefully, any information acquired can help in the comprehension and analysis of the narrative techniques utilized by *BioWare* in the *Mass Effect* series.

2.1. Research of Narrative in Games

It is nearly impossible to investigate narrative research without encountering the *narratology v. ludology* debate. On the surface it appears to be an argument spanning over a decade between the two major schools of thought with very different opinions regarding several topics, most importantly the way in which narrative analysis in games should be approached.

The person that originally coined the term *ludology* is difficult to identify, but the first to use the term in its most common modern meaning is notable game scholar Gonzalo Frasca. His 1999 paper *Ludology Meets Narratology* was an attempt to establish or at the very least give name to a unified, comprehensive field of game analysis. As Frasca explains, at the time computer games and play

> [had] been broadly studied from different disciplines (for example, psychology, anthropology, economy and sociology). However, these studies are generally independent, focusing on small characteristics without looking for bigger patterns of understanding. (1999)

In a later article Frasca provides a concise definition for the term, ‘Ludology is the discipline that studies games,’ (Frasca, 2001). He makes a point that ludology is not exclusively focused on video games, yet currently the term is most commonly associated with

video game research. As electronic entertainment is the focus of this paper, *ludology* will primarily be used herein with video games in mind.

Narratology, on the other hand, deals with the study of narratives in general. According to Oxford Dictionaries Online, *narratology* is 'the branch of knowledge or criticism that deals with the structure and function of narrative and its themes, conventions and symbols' (Online 7). However, in the context of video game research it usually takes on a slightly different meaning. Narratologists suggest that games are, in many ways, an amalgam of numerous storytelling principles found in other mediums, and should be researched as such. Ludologists argue that games do not so simply adhere to the template of narrative analysis applicable to the classical mediums. They believe games are different enough to warrant a unique analytical discipline, constructed from the ground up with the specific features and needs of the medium in mind. These certainly are two principally different viewpoints, but the greatest problem at the heart of this conflict lies not with ideological disagreements.

Research of this debate and its history has shown that the issue most harmful to computer game studies is the utter confusion and the prevalent misunderstandings regarding the "opposing" side (sometimes even one's own), and even the subject of the discussion itself. Frasca tries to make a point that no disagreement ever occurred in his article *Ludologists love stories, too: notes from a debate that never took place*. The dictionary provided by *Game-research.com* illustrates one of his points: the site offers two different definitions for the term *ludology*. One is 'the study of games, particularly computer games' (Online 8), which is essentially the same as Frasca's. The other, however, paints a very different image of ludology. 'Ludology is most often defined as the study of game structure (or gameplay) as opposed to the study of games as narratives or games as a visual medium' (ibid.). This is a common misconception as to how ludologists view games, argues Frasca. It is a simplification of what ludologists are trying to accomplish, and that is movement away from the perception of games as narratives.

In fact, the very same article in which Frasca introduced the term *ludology*, he explicitly states that his main goal was 'to show how basic concepts of ludology could be used **along with** narratology to better understand video games' (Frasca, 1999). At no point is it implied that the nature of computer games rejects narrative outright, which is what many self-professed narratologists claim is what ludologists believe. Jesper Juul, another important ludologist, writes,

> I would like to repeat that I believe that: 1) The player can tell stories of a game session. 2) Many computer games contain narrative elements, and in many cases the player may play to see a cut-scene or realise a narrative sequence. 3) Games and narratives share some structural traits. (2001)

A most curious observation made over the course of the investigation is that there are no game scholars who identify themselves as strictly narratologists. It is surprising how such a significant chasm between two opposing camps of thought was even created, considering one of these so-called camps does not appear to exist. Every academic that opposes the ludological mindset has expressed the view that neither narratologists nor ludologists are entirely wrong, it is simply that they must admit and agree to their different approaches and work together in order to form a more comprehensive view of games and play.

For example, Henry Jenkins writes, 'I hope to offer a middle ground position between the ludologists and the narratologists, one that respects the particularity of this emerging medium – examining games less as stories than as spaces ripe with narrative possibility,' (Jenkins, 2002). He then proceeds to make numerous valid points, such as, 'Narrative analysis need not be prescriptive' (ibid.) and, 'If some games tell stories, they are unlikely to tell them in the same ways that other media tell stories,' (ibid.). Jenkins' ideas are compelling, yet it frequently seems like he is struggling against the imaginary foe of ludology. Jenkins is far from the only one to suffer under this strange illusion.

At the *Digital Games Research Association* conference in 2005, Janet Murray, Professor and Director of Graduate Studies at the Georgia Institute of Technology, delivered a preface titled *The Last Word on Ludology v Narratology in Game Studies*. She states that 'claims have been made for considering computer games studies as a field not merely differentiated by its objects of study, but as explicitly disconnected from the kinds of inquiry that have traditionally been applied to other cultural genres' (Murray, 2005), yet this investigation into the ludological-narratological argument has uncovered no such statements. How is it, then, that this prominent figure in modern game studies so strongly claims that 'attempts by other scholars to discuss games as part of a larger spectrum of cultural expression are denounced as "colonialist" intrusions on a domain that belongs only to those who are studying games as abstract rule systems' (ibid.)? It would seem a simple misconception of the meaning behind certain ludologist statements.

To exemplify, in Jesper Juul's 1998 paper *A Clash between Game and Narrative* it is clearly stated that 'computer games and narratives are very different phenomena and, as a consequence, any combination of the two [..] faces enormous problems' (Juul, 1998) and that 'computer games are not narratives' (ibid.). However, a clarification follows almost immediately. 'Obviously many computer games do include narration or narrative elements in some form. But first of all, the narrative part is not what makes them computer games, rather

the narrative tends to be isolated from or even work against the computer-game-ness of the game' (ibid.). The point Juul is trying to make is not unreasonable, extremist or separatist.

Markku Eskelinen is another prominent game researcher whose papers are occasionally subject to controversy due to his somewhat sharp-tongued style. In an article Eskelinen (2001) took issue with what he refers to as the colonization of computer games from the fields of literary, theatre, drama and film studies and was criticized for his claims. As a response, Eskelinen explains that he is in fact referring to the attempt to '[explain, theorize and analyse video games] by theories uncritically imported from other fields' (Online 9). This is a real problem, because the straightforward application of ready-made theories ignores the primary characteristics of games, i.e. 'rules, goals, and the necessity of more than interpretative player effort' (ibid.). Once more, this is not at all an unreasonable opinion.

Fortunately, it would appear that this great, convoluted argument has settled down as of late; it is difficult to find any particularly combative articles on the topic from the past few years. Nevertheless, it has left most of the immediately available information something of a muddled mess – to investigate the topic of game research one is forced to browse through dozens of articles and blog entries dealing with what is essentially a non-issue. It is a rather sad state of affairs for anyone trying to get into the field without the benefit of a video game-oriented education, and needs to be addressed by, if nothing else, populating available resources with more up-to-date articles. In essence, the great confusion was caused by the numerous uses of the term *narrative*. What ludologists were trying to explain all along was that computer games **may have** narratives, but they themselves **are not**. It is rather likely the reason for this is the fundamental difference between the predetermined nature of traditional narrative and the core of the video game experience – interactivity.

2.2. Narrative and Interactivity

When researching narrative in games, an issue that is likely to surface is the matter of narrative and interactivity. There is the opinion that these two features by nature conflict with one another, with arguments that can be summarized into two basic lines of thought.

One is provided by Jesper Juul in his article *Games Telling Stories?* Essentially, his argumentation is that narratives and stories are, at heart, **retellings** of events that have occurred. Even when the narrative is of fictional events, it is implicitly understood that the events being told are not occurring as they are being told. Indeed, such a feat is principally impossible. And yet in computer games, particularly in action-based games, the temporal distance between the story being "told" (the events occurring in the game, whether it is an

assassin stalking his target, a hero fending off waves of enemies or an adventurer making his way up a snowy mountain) and the audience receiving it is eliminated whenever the story (game) immediately responds to the player's actions. This reaction to player input goes against the concept of classical narratives, which exist in a singular form. The only thing that can change about a story is how it is perceived (due to the intellect or maturity of the audience, or political context, for example) and, perhaps, how it is told. The moment that the plot changes, it becomes a different story (Juul, 2001).

Marie-Laure Ryan offers a different point of view. In her book *Avatars of Story* she treats the issue from the perspective of how narratives are built. As Ryan explains, traditional narratives, or old media narratives, as she calls them, build narrative meaning through top-down design. It 'presupposes the linearity and unidirectionality of time, logic, and causality' – the author cannot convey an idea, convey meaning if the central character of her story suddenly begins to run around in circles and then jumps off a cliff (Ryan, 2006: 99). This, however, is the power that is often available to players, the power of choice. This power changes how the structure of the story is represented. Instead of a single line, it becomes 'a nonlinear or multilinear branching structure, such as a tree, a rhizome, or a network' (ibid.), and the way that narrative is built changes as well. The top-down construction is no longer applicable, as the authors of the story cannot singlehandedly determine the plot. The player becomes co-author to their very own story (a major selling point of the *Mass Effect* series), interactivity creates a bottom-up structure based on user input (ibid.).

Even though the emphasis on telling stories in games has grown the most after the turn of the century, game designers and enthusiasts were aware of the issues presented by trying to construct a narrative in an interactive structure long before then. In his seminal 1997 book *Cybertext*, Espen Aarseth discusses at length the various considerations regarding nonlinearity as well as interactivity in fiction, particularly hypertexts and new media. He tackles the complicated issue of terminology in particular, which still requires work. Although the matter discussed is interactivity in storytelling, the observations and conclusions made are not directly applicable to the theme currently explored and best serve as a summary of ideas expressed prior to the turn of the century (Aarseth, 1997: 41-51).

Of more relevance is the article *The Designer's Notebook: Three Problems for Interactive Storytellers* by Ernest Adams, which directly addresses the problem of interactive stories. Despite the fact that this article was written in 1999, his points remain valid even more than a decade later. According to Adams, there are three primary stumbling stones presented by the challenge of telling an interactive tale: amnesia, internal consistency and narrative flow (Adams, 1999).

The first problem, that of amnesia, is how gamers are most often asked to take control of a character that has supposedly been living in the game world all of his or her life, and yet treats the world and the objects within as unfamiliar. This is because the player controlling the character is not actually familiar with this world and its inhabitants (ibid.) and the developers must explain to compensate. However, this problem is hardly exclusive to the medium of video games. Perhaps player freedom exacerbates the issue, but even in traditional narratives introducing the audience to one's fictional world can be difficult; it is all too easy to rely on explicit, out-of-place exposition. This would appear to be more of an issue with the quality of writing than the inherent issues of interactive storytelling.

The second problem, dubbed the problem of internal consistency, occurs when the player decides to overstep the boundaries that the player character (PC) or game world supports, according to the internal logic created by the authors of the game. In order to enact any sort of fantasy, the player has to be imbued with some form of power by the game mechanics (ibid.). What happens when the player abuses that power, goes off the intended tracks? This is especially problematic when the central character is portrayed as having a strong moral core. Often gamers will eventually try to play against the rules, because the possibility is there, because they feel they have reached the limits of enjoyment that playing the game "the right way" can provide. The noble sheriff suddenly decides that he shall gun down the hostages in order to kill the robbers. The professional hit man chooses to eschew his standard procedure of meticulously researching the location and target of his assassination, instead bursting onto the scene with guns blazing. The PC decides not to take the linear path of the level, opting to explore the area instead. Developers are well aware of this issue, and attempt to deal with it in a number of ways.

One of the oldest approaches is to forcibly restrict the options of the player via direct punishment for ignoring the logic of the game through a 'game over' screen, as seen in (01.avi). It is certainly effective in keeping the player within the boundaries set by the developers, but is also generally frowned upon by the gaming community as an excessively rigid form of control. Also, from the perspective of narrative, it is definitely the most damaging to player immersion in the proceedings of the game, as there is seldom a satisfactory logical explanation for what occurs. However, this is only possible in games where the player's capabilities are already somewhat limited.

The increasingly popular open-world games provide different challenges. These games emphasise player freedom, and yet this freedom cannot be absolute, if any story is to be told. For example, *The Elder Scrolls* series is known for the freedom its vast world offers to the player. And yet the developers try to maintain a strong narrative element through interaction

with NPCs and quests that give the player concrete goals. This attempt can and does come into conflict with the openness of the game world, such as when the player attempts to kill a story-centric character. The developers decided that cutting a player's access to certain content by allowing them to kill a character required for progress would be a bad idea, which can result in some rather ridiculous situation involving immortal NPCs (Online 10). From the perspective of internal consistency, this is a problem, as there is no lore-based reason for these characters to be immortal, yet the developers have to somehow deal with the power they themselves have imbued the player with.

This matter of the authors relinquishing control over the central character to their storyline is also closely related to the third issue in Adams' list, the problem of narrative flow. It is a commonly-known fact that most stories follow a certain structure, containing an introduction, an escalation in the action, a climax, falling action and a conclusion. This dramatic pacing is a strong factor in keeping the audience interested to the end, as they anticipate the climactic scene and the resolution that follows. The challenge that game designers face is maintaining this narrative flow while also granting the player a certain amount of freedom, which is integral to the mandatory interactivity of games (Adams, 1999).

Due to its structure, the *Mass Effect* series itself (and the majority of *BioWare* games) is a good example of this problem. In each of the games Commander Shepard, the player character and protagonist of the series, is charged with a seemingly impossible task. In the first game, this task is tracking down the rogue Spectre Saren and dealing with whatever threat he poses towards galactic peace. It is clear that lives are at stake and, consequently, time is of the essence. Logically, Commander Shepard would take the most direct and immediate path to resolution, since the entire galaxy is potentially endangered.

However, this is where narrative and game logic begin to diverge. The story's sense of urgency is undermined by a bevy of side-missions and additional activities that serve no real narrative purpose. Certainly, many of them flesh out the game world, introduce numerous interesting characters and quite simply give the player more things to do, but still they detract from the immediacy of the central mission, and this is an issue with fundamental game design.

Because the game is an interactive structure that is meant to **challenge** the player, as discussed previously, the player is, understandably, given options to help improve his chances of overcoming said challenge in the form of the aforementioned side-missions. Because completing these objectives offers a gameplay advantage, whether that is a reward of in-game currency or equipment, most players feel compelled to tackle these tasks. Some do it to improve their chances in completing the main story missions, many do it simply to experience

the complete spectrum of what the game offers. Whatever the reason, it is disruptive to the narrative flow if Commander Shepard decides to travel from star system to star system, mining planets for valuable minerals and historical artefacts, rather than respond to an urgent distress call that is likely related to Saren. It is a serious problem from the perspective of narrative, and one that Adams points out three traditional solutions to.

One is limiting the aspect of interactivity, preventing the player from straying off the critical path. Adams is critical of this approach, though his primary focus is adventure games, which traditionally offer an open game world to explore. Another option is allowing the game world and the plot to progress at its own pace, regardless of the player's actions. This can lead to interesting and creative narrative developments, but likely reducing enjoyment from the game. The incredibly broad range of players and their skill makes it impossible to determine a pace for the game that everyone could keep up with. Many would end up falling behind and probably losing the game in one way or another. Others would rush ahead and become bored waiting for the plot to catch up.

The third option is, perhaps, the most commonly used; the plot is prevented from moving ahead until the player has met all of the necessary prerequisites. While it seems a relatively good solution, it certainly has its flaws. The flow of the narrative seems to stop while the player deals with all of the barriers in his or her path (ibid.), then continue when the obstacles are surmounted.

A similar solution that Adams does not mention in his paper is diminishing the temporal sensitivity of the main story events, a technique attempted in *Mass Effect 3*. However, decreasing the immediacy of the proceedings becomes a problem in and of itself, as the struggle to reach the goal becomes less compelling without the pressure of a time limit.

Unfortunately, any real solution to this problem proves too challenging to provide. In fact, it is hard to disagree with Adams' suggestion that there may not be any such solutions (ibid.), as that is what experience seems to indicate. However, that does not mean one cannot learn from the situation in order to better understand what games are and how game stories function. Adams writes, 'I won't go so far as to say that interactivity and storytelling are mutually exclusive, but I do believe that they exist in an inverse relationship to one another. The more you have of one, the less you're going to have of the other,' (ibid.). Investigation of the topic and many years of gaming experience certainly seem to suggest the truth in Adams' words, but it may not be as simple as that, according to Julian Küklich.

Many, like Adams, choose to believe that interactivity and narrative are opposites on a single scale, and all games can take a place somewhere on the scale, with traditional, static narratives located at the absolute end of the narrative side, while a game, such as a football

match, are the exact opposite. This view is sufficient when comparing games to other forms of storytelling, but the concept might be improved by expanding upon it when investigating the interplay of narrative and interactivity in video games.

The Road Less Traveled is an article written by Küklich in 2002 with the purpose of helping establish and develop a new form of game research, or at least give a number of already applied theories a common name. In that it is similar to Frasca's work (1999), yet where Frasca tried to develop the principles of game research altogether, Küklich's goal is the advancement of what he dubs computer game philology. In short, it is the expansion and modernization of literary studies so that it can be appropriately applied to computer games as well (Küklich, 2002). There are a number of interesting points made and ideas expressed, but of greatest relevance to the current research is Küklich's concept of game structure.

In the article he disputes this polar perception of the relationship between narrative and interactivity, suggesting instead an area with three points of reference that represent three aspects of game structure.

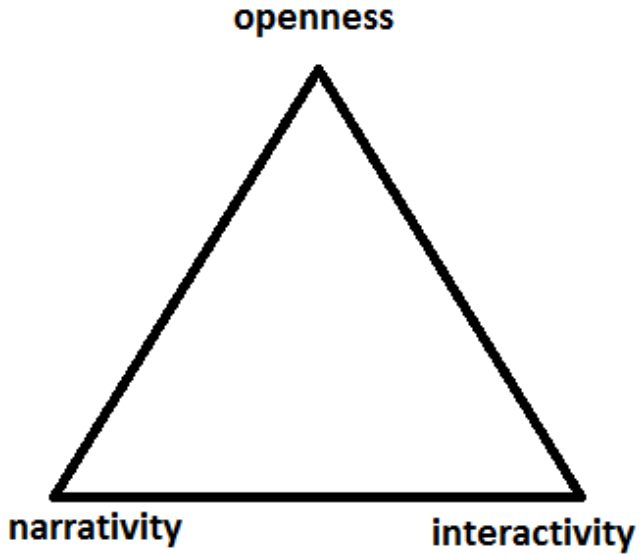

Figure 1.1. Küklich's triangular matrix of game narrative structure

One corner is **narrativity**, which is the degree of control the authors exert in order to tell their story the way they intended. A book or film would place upon the very tip of the narrativity corner, as they are entirely subject to the author's whims, the audience has no real influence on the reality after it is completed. The second corner is **interactivity**. It represents the frequency with which the player is in control compared to the entirety of time spent playing. A purely skill-based game such as *Tetris* or *Bejewelled* would be close to if not on the tip of this corner. The last corner is **openness**. If interactivity measures the frequency of player interaction, openness indicates the variety of possibilities presented to the player (ibid.). For example, games such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* would place relatively high, as the player is not only allowed to engage in the traditional fantasy RPG activities of exploration, combat, thievery and conversation, but also the crafting of various items and

equipment, cooking, mining, chopping wood, even marriage. The theory is that any game can be placed somewhere on this triangular matrix, and that would represent the type of narrative experience in that particular game.

Küklich himself is of the opinion that this scheme can be further built upon and improved (ibid.), and there are certainly some questions that arise after serious consideration. Perhaps the most pressing matter is the unintuitive distinction between openness and interactivity. The triangular matrix makes sense because the three corners are, at least to a certain extent, mutually exclusive. However, the *variety* of activities offered to a player does not in any way affect the *frequency* of player control, unless there is a misunderstanding regarding what Küklich means when using the term *openness*. Unfortunately, the paper in which Küklich first presents and explains this theory is no longer available, making it difficult to properly explore his suggestion. Despite of the potentially confusing details, his theory is successful in that it helps delineate one's perception of the narrative/interactivity struggle and hints at the possibility of more than a single dimension in which the structure of games exists.

Perhaps slightly altering Küklich's matrix might make it more suitable for the context of this research (manipulating narrative distance in games), if not the study of game narrative structure altogether. **Narrativity** remains as described in Küklich's paper, while the concept denoted by *openness* is folded into **interactivity**, making the term now a measure of both the different possibilities and degree to which the player can act on his or her own. Instead of discussing the variety of actions the player can take, of greater weight might be the degree and ways in which the player can *influence the game world*, denoted with the term **flexibility**. This might be a better option for the third pillar because it is also more closely related to both narrativity and interactivity in a direct way: having a game world react to the player in a number of possible ways moves the game further away from the rigid singularity of traditional narratives, nor does player control always result in significant effect on the game world itself.

To explain that idea one need only look at the slew of first- and third-person shooters released in recent years, such as the *Call of Duty* series, or any other video game that presents a driven, highly linear experience. The rate of player activity to overall game time is typically very high, as these games focus on constantly engaging the player in the action, placing obstacles in the form of foes in the way and mixing in the odd set-piece sequence to intensify the spectacle. What these games typically lack, however, is player ability to make choices beyond, 'Which enemy shall I kill first?' and 'Which side of the room shall I proceed through?' As far as the story and character progression is concerned, there is a single path from the beginning to the conclusion.

There are, however, games that not only allow the player to act, but alter the state of the game world in more ways than the elimination of one's foes. The 2011 RPG *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* allows the player to make a choice at the end of the first chapter that results in an entirely different second part, changing the location and characters depending on the decision. The player's choices are also reflected in the state of the world and NPCs' attitudes. True, it is all written by the developers beforehand; these reactions of the game world are still not dynamic or procedurally generated, but they are steps away from the linearity of classical storytelling nonetheless.

Another curious, if very different example of reactiveness is the game *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories*. Throughout the game there are a number of therapy sessions with a number of different tests that evaluate the player's psyche. The results of these tests are combined with careful monitoring and categorizing of the player's actions in order to alter numerous aspects of the game, from specific plot points to the possible endings, to character and item appearance. A more detailed look at the psychological aspect of this game and the ways that the game reacts can be found in a pair of *YouTube* videos made by vlogger Animetalchick (Online 11, 12).

These different approaches to game design illustrate the benefit of considering flexibility a major factor in game structure for the purposes of classification and analysis, as illustrated below. What this alteration to Küklich's theory means in terms of analysing narrative distance is fairly simple. Games that feature highly linear, developer-driven plot and character progression (such as most action games and traditional Japanese RPGs) decrease narrative distance through classical means and present a large degree of **narrativity**.

Games that offer a high degree of **interactivity**, e.g. *Jetpack Joyride* or *Bejewelled,* generally do not focus on decreasing narrative distance, but usually provide a greater degree of immersion in return. It is the **flexibility** of a game's narrative, the degree to which the game world reacts to the player's actions, that allows for the greatest control over narrative distance in ways that are unique to video gaming, which is why the analysis of the *Mass Effect* series will particularly emphasise facets of the games that exemplify flexibility. Therefore, the narrative structure of games as perceived within the context of this research shall be perceived as depicted below.

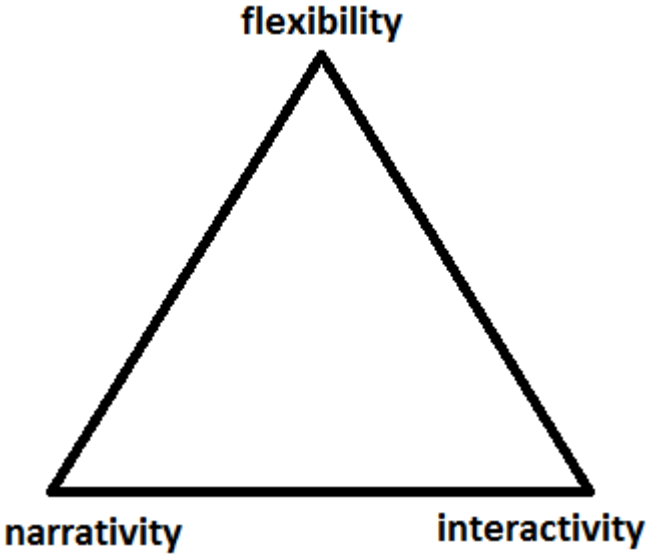

Figure 1.2. Husko's triangular matrix of narrative structure

It could be argued that flexibility and interactivity are not mutually exclusive, and that any player action could be considered a change in the game world. Serious application of this theory would require a specific distinction between valid changes in the game world and trivial alterations. Nor is the elimination of *openness* as a separate category entirely satisfactory. Perhaps, if the term is more specifically defined than what was found during this research, it could be added to the scheme to create a 3-dimensional scale, though the practical implications (and applications) of such a chart are difficult to evaluate at this point in time.

By no means have all the available opinions and ideas regarding this topic been exhausted. However, the main purpose of this rather lengthy chapter was to illustrate the truly complicated issues that arise when one attempts to marry narrative and interactivity, as is the case in many computer games. It is an issue with no hard answers or absolute truths, yet it must be considered and discussed nevertheless, otherwise nothing can be learned and the techniques of telling stories through video games cannot be developed further. Techniques of building a compelling experience, techniques made to exploit the unique possibilities provided by the characteristics of games, and, of greatest significance to the current paper, original techniques to help decrease the narrative distance between the game world and the player.

2.3. Decreasing Narrative Distance

Narrative distance in the context of video games is difficult to discuss because so little appears to have been written about it. The vast majority of the articles on the subject pertain to literature, which limits their applicability, especially because the purpose of this paper is to uncover techniques for manipulating narrative distance that are *specific to video games*.

Despite the fact, investigating these ideas might be worthwhile in order to learn more of the narrative techniques possible in games, whether because of similarity to or difference from literature.

In prose, manipulating narrative distance can be taken almost literally. Dave King (Online 2) lists several indicators and manipulators of narrative distance, and most are connected to how the narrated part of the text is presented. If the world is described through the character's eyes – if the things the character sees are noted, if the descriptions borrow the lexicon and associations of the character, if there is a tint of emotional shading even to words not coming from the character's mouth, it accustoms the readers to that character's point of view. He suggests that using the first person can also help, as in natural conversation people are much more likely to talk in the first person than the third. This acclimatization allows for a greater sense of intimacy and empathy than could not be achieved otherwise.

The problem is that these forms of manipulating narrative distance are practically impossible to apply to the computer game medium. Narrators are almost never used in video games (with the lauded 2011 indie adventure game *Bastion* a notable exception), therefore filtering the narrated text through the focal character's psyche is technically impossible. The first-person perspective, for example, is rather popular in video games, particularly shooters, yet its effect on the player's perception of the narrative is unclear. Little research has been done on the topic, and what has been conducted (Online 13) does not provide conclusive evidence as to the significance of physical point of view in presenting game narrative.

Accommodating insight into a character's inner world – their thoughts and feelings on various matters, is also seldom done in video games due to the nature of the medium. If in traditional storytelling this is often done so as to better convey certain meaning, the very principles of games are different: games are about action. In his book *Games Cultures* Jon Dovey explains that 'in the computer game, interior life is insignificant since external action is what drives the game; the player's avatar has to be doing things not thinking about them' (Dovey, 2006, 97). This is an important aspect to bear in mind when exploring storytelling in video games.

Unlike Dave King's suggestion, online query answering resource *wiseGEEK* (Online 14) focuses on somewhat more abstract concepts when describing techniques to manipulate the emotional involvement of the audience, called aesthetic distance in the article. Great significance is given to the character – the audience is more likely to empathise with a character they have something in common with, such as a similar background, or if the circumstances of the character's life elicit sympathy (such as the unfortunate eponymous orphan of *Oliver Twist*). It is also noted that whatever makes the audience aware that the

transpiring events are not real (whether intentional or not) violates the constructed aesthetic distance. The role of the character's personality and background in terms of manipulating narrative distance is quite relevant to the current research and will be referred to in Chapter 4 when discussing character creation and morality in particular. The importance of suspension of disbelief and the construction of a plausible game world is also key to many of the techniques used in the *Mass Effect* series' narrative.

An interesting idea is provided in *Patterns in Game Design* by Bjork and Holopainen. They propose that player defined goals have a major role in encouraging involvement and emotional immersion in the game being played, though not necessarily in the narrative. This applies to all manner of games, sports and abstract games included; therefore this concept is strongly tied to the player's desire to play the game, but not always for the purpose of witnessing some form of narrative development or resolution. They note the problem with mixing interactivity (or player defined goals) with narratives, the complications it creates, yet affirm that the combination can be used to great effect. By suggesting some possible goals as more rewarding or pleasant to the player, developers give the illusion of influence through instances of relatively minor decision-making, while guiding the player in their intended narrative direction anyway (Bjork, Holopainen, 2006: 317-319).

Marie-Laure Ryan expresses a similar sentiment in slightly different words. She explains that

> the aesthetics of interactive narrative [such as in computer games] demand a choice sufficiently broad to give the user a sense of freedom, and a narrative pattern sufficiently adaptable to those choices to give the impression of being generated on the fly (2006: 99).

Clearly player choice is a significant factor in decreasing narrative distance, and this is an idea that *BioWare* have taken to heart. The ability to make significant decisions and then living with the consequences is arguably the distinguishing feature of the *Mass Effect* series, therefore most of the games' various means for decreasing narrative distance discussed in Chapter 4 are based upon this concept.

Providing the player with narrative choices is not the only way to decrease narrative distance in video games. Grant Tavinor's very helpful book *Art of Videogames* contains a chapter titled *Emotion in Videogaming*. The central point expressed is that computer games utilize what is called a 'perceptual prop': in essence, the player's avatar through which the game world is experienced. This allows the player to mentally and emotionally place themselves in the world and experience such feelings as fear, anxiety, shame, affection and pride. The player does not necessarily become literally lost in the game world, it is not a

pathology, but even these fictional situations allow for genuine emotion to be felt (Tavinor, 2009: 130-149). Naturally, this sense of emotional involvement is only increased if the game world is presented with a high degree of plausibility.

The same can be said for fictional characters. In 2004 Ken Perlin concluded that the development of interactive narrative cannot progress without the technological capacity to create and present convincing virtual actors to engage the player character within the game world. He claims that visually convincing characters that emote and articulate the way real people do are necessary in order for the player to truly care for them (Perlin, 2004). While commenting on the verity of that statement might be problematic, as there are certain to be many gamers claiming that even a sprite of 10-by-20 pixels can be made into an endearing character, graphical advancements have allowed video games to move that much closer to natural-looking and believable characters.

Motion capture technology facilitates the direct recording of real actors' movements to be used by the three-dimensional character models in-game, and advanced facial animation, while not yet perfect, allows for visually more convincing speech. Whether or not Perlin's theory can be proved, modern graphical processing power has surely aided in making video game characters more believable from both a visual and emotional perspective.

However, perhaps the most powerful tool for making the player emotionally involved in the game world has nothing to do with character animation or choice-making. In his article on the design of game narratives, Henry Jenkins (2002) calls game developers *narrative architects*, and this indeed seems an apt title. He explains that game creation is predominantly focused on building a world, not presenting a narrative string (there are, of course, exceptions). It is the design of levels and spaces for the player to explore, challenges within these spaces to overcome that is the primary concern of game development; therefore, it would not be unreasonable to think that the game world environments themselves might be the most significant instrument for manipulating narrative distance.

One can easily find any number of game journalists and enthusiasts stating the importance of game world design in the overall narrative experience (Bissel, 2011 and Online 15 are just two examples). Numerous game theorists (Tavinor, 2009: 62-85; Dunn, O'Toole, 2009: 26; King, Krzywinska, 2006: 76-77 to name a few) also agree that environmental storytelling is made particularly effective due to the way the game world is experienced. While this particular form of storytelling might not be especially prevalent in the series investigated in this paper, there have been games that present little-to-no traditional exposition or storytelling, yet are no less narratively engaging than the most skilfully verbose of RPGs. Games such as *Ico*, *Shadow of the Colossus* and, more recently, *Dark Souls* and 2012's

Journey are all highly successful examples of a minimalist approach to the use of dialogue in game narrative. Instead of explaining every detail of the game world's and characters' origins, players are put in a strange land and are more or less left to draw their own conclusions from the things they encounter and observe. All four of these games were lauded for the atmosphere of the worlds available for exploration.

This does not necessarily mean that all games should follow this approach, but raising awareness of just how helpful to storytelling a well-utilized game space and thoughtfully designed world can be would only add to game developers' already intimidating arsenal of storytelling tools.

The investigation of video game research has shown that, unfortunately, there is a severe lack of unity and mutual understanding amongst game researchers on a number of key topics. Even if the vocal disagreements have ceased as of the last few years, the information left is in disarray and has become a difficult barrier for anyone attempting to enter the field. Perhaps the greatest obstacle is overcoming the confusion caused by the **narratology-ludology debate**, even if it was essentially a large group of people repeatedly **misunderstanding** each other or misinterpreting each other's intentions.

Despite the disagreements, there have also been a great number of significant contributions to game theory that allow for new ideas to be developed. Julian Küklich's theory of how narrative structure can be depicted as a point on a triangular matrix was adapted into a similar chart. This new chart features **narrativity**, **interactivity** and **flexibility** as the three cornerstones of game narrative constructions so as to better depict the developers' choices regarding narrative distance in their game.

There has been no definitive study of manipulating narrative distance in games, and the majority of literary theories on the topic are not directly applicable either. However, this information can be gleaned from an amalgamation of various sources. Factors that alter distance include the narrative capacity for **player choice**, the emotional and visual **plausibility** of the game's **characters** and even implementation of the **game world space**. These are the primary pillars supporting the analysis of narrative techniques in the *Mass Effect* series.

CHAPTER 3: CONSIDERATIONS FOR PRACTICAL RESEARCH

The purpose of the previous chapter was primarily to establish some form of theoretical basis for the current paper, but it was also to illustrate the complexity of the truly expansive field of game research. It is virtually impossible to even enumerate all games, much less play and analyse their narrative structure. Even if one were to focus solely on games of reportedly strong narrative-oriented tendencies, the average time for a full playthrough of one such game would be roughly 40 hours. If one tries to analyse the narrative freedom given to the player specifically, more than one playthrough of each game would be necessary. That would add up to anything between 80-120 hours of play time *per game*. This prohibits thorough research of a large number of games; therefore, it is important to carefully pick one's subject of research.

In this chapter the reason for choosing *Mass Effect* as the target of the current paper is detailed. The methods of analysis and manner of providing references for the practical part (Chapter 4) of this paper are also described.

3.1. Why Choose *Mass Effect*?

First emerging in 2007 with the original *Mass Effect*, the series has since become a significant and controversial poster child for the capacity of modern computer games to tell stories. The authors of the game are revered game studio *BioWare*, creators of such RPG classics as the *Baldur's Gate* series, *Neverwinter Nights* and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*. Their games have always been known for their engaging stories, expertly written characters and, typically, at least some degree of player choice involved in the narrative proceedings. The *Mass Effect* games doubtlessly present a strong narrative element, but that alone is not sufficient reason for choosing it as the focus of the current research.

One of the first and most important requirements when selecting the game(s) to be analysed was that it has to be a good *game*, not simply a good story. A number of games have a strong story element that comes at the cost of their *gameness*, whether it is reduced interactivity or underdeveloped minute-to-minute gameplay. With the *Mass Effect* series this is most certainly not the case, and the games' review scores reflect that: the Metacritic scores for the personal computer versions (the platform the games were played on for this research) of the trilogy range from 89 to 94 out of 100 (Online 16, 17, 18), which are excellent marks for all three games to have maintained. This is important because this paper is written not only to find out how games tell engaging stories, but also to try and prove that even real, *gamey* games can utilize sophisticated narrative techniques in order to tell them.

Another important factor was that the games analysed be recent. Video games, of all modern storytelling mediums, are perhaps the most technology-dependent. Unlike literature, the narrative possibilities of which have been hardly affected by technological developments, the capabilities of a storyteller using the medium of video games greatly changes in less than a decade. This research is not retrospective, it is intended to be current and address, identify the issues of gaming today.

The games analysed also had to truly facilitate player choice in terms of their narrative proceedings. There are a number of games that do this, but perhaps none do it in as meaningful and complex a manner as the *Mass Effect* series. The games allow the players to carry their personal characters through the entire trilogy, retaining the player choices both major and minor from the previous games and reflecting them in subsequent releases.

Last, but certainly not least, the *Mass Effect* series masterfully manipulates narrative distance. Ironically, this is most evident in the extremely negative reception of the trilogy's finale – if the players were not deeply emotionally and mentally engaged in the fictional world, there is no way the ending would have elicited as strong a reaction as it did.

3.2. Research Methods

In order to provide references to games it is necessary to record actual game footage, and to give perspective on the influence of player choice, numerous playthroughs are required. For this purpose three characters were created – Alexander, Jason and Juno Shepard (only the first name of Commander Shepard can be changed due to voice-acting restrictions). However, of the three, only two characters were taken through the entirety of the first two games. As both playthroughs were done with male Shepards, in this paper Shepard will generally be referred to as *he*.

The games were originally acquired via digital distribution services and were played on a personal computer. The majority of the playthroughs was recorded using the real-time video capture utility *Fraps* at half the native resolution to save hard drive space and time spent on compression. The raw footage was then compressed using the video processing utility *VirtualDub* and many scenes that were not relevant to the research at hand were cut. In step with the writing of the practical part of this research, the footage was further edited using *VirtualDub* to produce clips relevant to every individual point made for ease of sorting and viewing. Screenshots were made via *Steam*, *Origin* (digital distribution services) or *Fraps*. If any additional material was required, such as footage from other games, it was either produced or acquired from various internet sources.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH RESULTS

Before any results are discussed, it is important to point out that some overlap regarding the nature and specifics of certain game features discussed might occur. As mentioned when defining the term, games are structures; they are complex structures at that, with many constituent parts that interweave to form an intricate construct. Even though it was not always possible to entirely separate one concept from another, a coherent and logical analysis requires such division, so that their effect on narrative distance can be discussed.

4.1. Of Character Creation

It has long since been a staple of Western role-playing games to allow players to create their own individualized characters. This sub-chapter will describe the choices presented to the player at the beginning of the original *Mass Effect* and how they affect narrative distance.

4.1.1. Gender

If the player eschews the option of playing as *BioWare*'s pre-made John Shepard, the first choice they are presented with is that of gender (02.avi 0'23"-0'28"). There is no need to explain that the gender of an individual greatly affects their perception of the world, as this topic has already been explored by other researchers.

Even though this choice is completely irrelevant in terms of gameplay and relatively minor in terms of narrative (romance options and small sections of dialogue are affected), it is nonetheless an important one in terms of narrative distance. The specific effect of picking one gender or the other is difficult to pinpoint yet simultaneously irrefutably significant in allowing the player to enact their fantasy.

Whether the gender of that realization is their own or the opposite is irrelevant. What matters is the character the player has imagined, the role the player chooses to perform. And that is largely what RPGs (some would say: all video games) are about – the players' ability to realize their fantasy, whatever shape it takes, whatever context it inhabits. Gender is certainly an important choice that already illustrates the **flexibility** of the game world in regards to the player's wishes, but only the first of many.

4.1.2. Pre-Service History

The second choice presented to the player when creating a custom character is that of Shepard's background. There are three options – Spacer, Colonist and Earthborn, which determine Commander Shepard's origin (02.avi 0'57"-1'08").

This choice has no gameplay ramifications whatsoever; it leads to one of three side-missions, unique to the selected background (the quest depicted in [04.avi] is unique to the Colonist option), and some minor, infrequent dialogue variations (02.avi 4'06"-4'16"; 03.avi 2'23"-2'34"). This might seem an insignificant feature, but it has two notable functions. The first is that it places the players in a position of making a direct story-oriented decision, one they will find themselves in repeatedly before the game is completed. It serves as a promise (or warning) of sorts, that this game means to give players choices and there will be consequences, even if they seem trivial at times. This is another, more evident example of the **flexibility** of *Mass Effect*'s narrative. The other function is connected to the explanation of aesthetic distance found on *wiseGEEK* (Online 14): the ability to relate to a character can be important in establishing an emotional connection. Though the options are presented with a distinct science-fiction flavour, they remain extensions of reality and could be used to help liken Commander Shepard to the player or the player's fantasy.

4.1.3. Psychological Profile

While the first two choices predominantly determine solely facts concerning the player character, i.e. gender and background, the third character creation step offers the first opportunity to influence the PC's personality, as well as the first indication of the series' morality system. The Psychological Profile step gives the player three options: Sole Survivor, War Hero and Ruthless, which determines the nature and most important point of Shepard's military career so far (02.avi 1'08"-1'22").

Like the previous choices, whichever one the player picks causes some minor dialogue difference (02.avi 4'16"; 03.avi 2'34"-2'44"). What makes these character creation steps significant, however, is that they are tied directly to *Mass Effect's* general philosophy, that even the smallest of choices can have consequences that one is forced to live with. This concept of cause and effect (the cause is the choices made by the player) runs through the trilogy and is a major reason for players' emotional attachment to the characters and the game world they inhabit. A more detailed description of the features and specific narrative role of the series' morality system will be provided in a later sub-chapter.

4.1.4. Appearance

Perhaps one of the most powerful means to help players connect to, identify with Commander Shepard is giving them the tools to significantly alter the protagonist's appearance (02.avi 1'30"-3'43"). Even if few players attempt to recreate themselves using the dozens of sliders and options available, they are given the opportunity to shape the hero of their (highly personalized) story themselves. It might not necessarily facilitate players' direct association with Shepard as a digital representation of their own personas, which would be the literal way to decrease narrative distance. Instead, this allows for a strong sense of identity through a character they themselves have built, which only deepens as the player progresses from game to game in the trilogy. For players, Commander Shepard might not be *them*, but the character is certainly *their own*, and the beginning of this important process is deciding Shepard's appearance.

Proof that this is an effective method can be found rather easily. *Mass Effect 2 Faces* (Online 19) is a fan-made online database dedicated to sharing the personalized faces created in the series. The site has 253 pages, consisting of 2521 entries total as of April 26, 2012, and more entries continue being posted daily. Some entries may be attempts at recreating the face of a celebrity, others are semi-jokes, but many of the posts are by players that are proud of *their* Shepard and want to share him or her with others. The fact that the customized face mattered to players was also made evident when the final game of the trilogy was released with a bug that would frequently fail to import the custom appearance of Shepard if it had remained unaltered from the original game (Online 20). Needless to say, it caused some distress among invested players. This is itself an indicator that facial customization can be an important and effectual technique for decreasing narrative distance.

To be fair, none of these choices have a particularly significant impact on the narrative of the series. Even the differences based on gender are almost entirely romance-related. However, they are an early indication of the type of game that *Mass Effect* is: a game that puts the player in a position of decision-making, and these decisions, including the most minor ones, display the **flexibility** of the game world. That players' choices have consequences is the central philosophy of the *Mass Effect* series, and even the first stage of the game is constructed so as to prepare players for the experience that is to follow and to begin building their emotional involvement in the game world and its characters.

4.2. Of Dialogues and Moral Dilemmas

The *Mass Effect* series had a number of selling points advertisers keyed in on to build anticipation for the release of the original game: its pedigree, the marriage of strong shooter and role-playing elements, the large budget and high production values. One feature of the game that was praised by the gaming press even before release was the innovative conversation system.

4.2.1. Dialogue Choices

The traditional way of presenting dialogue options in Western RPG's is listing all of the conversation choices available to the player in full length, as visible in the screenshot of *BioWare's* own *Baldur's Gate* (image01.png). At the time when this system emerged, it was the only option, as sound production and information storage restrictions left no other way to depict a conversation.

Whether due to developers and gamers being too comfortable with this classical approach to game dialogue design or the difficulty of creating an innovative *and* functional system, this method remained largely unchanged even with the arrival of fully voiced dialogue. Many games throughout the years retained this method, despite the fact that it went directly against the cinematic qualities they were trying to evoke. The stagnation is made clear when comparing the virtually unaltered dialogue systems from 1999's *Planescape: Torment* (05.avi), 2004's *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* (Online 21), 2006's *Gothic 3* (Online 22), 2008's *Fallout 3* (06.avi) and even 2011's *The Witcher 2* (07.avi). Each of these games was developed by an entirely different team, spanning well over a decade, and yet the methods for depicting dialogue have not evolved at all.

Some might argue that this is a case of something not being broken and requiring no fixing. Technically there is nothing wrong with the system, but the positive reception of the new design (Online 23, Online 24) indicates that gamers were ready for change. The problem with the classical approach to dialogue is that the dialogue tends to have very stilted, stop-and-go flow. The main reason is that the player's dialogue choices appear only once the NPC has finished speaking, and the player requires time to read through the options (which can be exceptionally lengthy at times) and select the most appropriate one for his or her character.

BioWare's revisions to this style of dialogue were four-fold. The first change was that players are shown their dialogue options shortly before the other character has finished speaking (08.avi). The awkward span of silence between the NPC's speech and the player

character's reply is reduced (or even eliminated), which significantly improves the flow of the dialogue, creating a much more natural-sounding conversation.

The second step was abridging the player's dialogue choices. Instead of providing the entire sentence or paragraph that Shepard is going to say, should that option be selected, the player is shown a brief statement, typically no longer than 5 words, that indicates Shepard's general attitude shown by that dialogue choice. It not only speeds up the process of choosing one's dialogue option all the more, but also creates a sense of intrigue, as the player cannot know exactly what Shepard's response will be.

With the revamped dialogue choices, the next step is to similarly alter the way that they are presented. In *Mass Effect* this is achieved using the so-called dialogue wheel – a circular interface split into up to six equal parts, each representing a dialogue option. Some choices branch out into other options, such as when seeking additional information (08.avi 1'08"-1'30"), but overall it is a much more manageable dialogue interface than the classical text box, where scrolling to read all of the options was not uncommon.

The decision to streamline dialogue extends beyond the visual interface as well. Choices that will lead to non-critical information are generally on the left side of the wheel (08.avi 0'34"-0'48"), while the options that will progress the dialogue are on the right (08.avi 0'23"-0'30"). Attitudes are also indicated by their position vertically, with the humanitarian and the anti-heroic choices usually placed in the top (08.avi 0'23"-0'30") and the bottom slots, respectively (08.avi 1'36"-1'44"). These numerous design revisions allow the player to go through dialogues with considerably less time spent reading and thinking, which quickens their pace and, in turn, enhances **plausibility**.

Though these innovations were well-received, there still remained possibility for further polish and perfection of the system. One of the most common criticisms laid against the abridged choices is that sometimes the wording was vague or Shepard's actual response was too strong for what seemed to be suggested. The 2010 espionage-RPG *Alpha Protocol* explicitly shows the PC's *attitude* only (Online 25). Furthermore, all dialogue options are timed, putting more pressure on the player to make quick decisions. Narrative distance is arguably decreased further by forcing the player to respond upon first, most natural impulse.

2011's *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, on the other hand, shows what *approach* the PC would take (Online 26). When one of the options is highlighted, a rewording of his actual reply is displayed. This principle is not only nearer to the way people mentally approach conversation (as in, what one wants to achieve when speaking), but also arguably an improvement from the perspective of a game, for the player can be relatively clear as to what the PC will say.

4.2.2. Voiced Dialogue

The fourth change to the traditional dialogue system introduced by *BioWare* was giving the protagonist a voice. As voiced dialogue became more commonplace in video games, Western RPG developers were met with a difficult issue – how to retain character creation while incorporating voice acting? These games typically allowed the player to choose any gender and one of at least several diverse species and personality. Voicing all of those options would be a prohibitively expensive and complicated process.

Dozens if not hundreds of games where the PC was unable to produce audible speech in reply to fully voiced NPCs was the result. In the older games where no characters spoke this was not a noticeable issue because nothing about the character not speaking seemed unusual. However, when the PC is surrounded by speaking characters, the fact that the protagonist is not a real person becomes considerably more pronounced.

BioWare took a different approach when it comes to the *Mass Effect* series. Commander Shepard can be only human, thus minimizing the need for multiple voice actors. At the expense of some player choice, the developers were able to significantly increase the **believability** of the game world and the PC by simply giving the character a voice. It might appear a rather severe limitation of the player's options when compared to many other RPGs, but the decision was justified through the narrative of the games.

In *Mass Effect* the restriction worked not only because it allowed for a voiced main character, but also because it makes sense in the context of the plot. The narrative of *Mass Effect* is largely built around the fact that Commander Shepard is a soldier in the Human Systems Alliance. The fears and prejudices of the more experienced spacefaring races against humans – newcomers in the sphere of galactic politics perceived as bold and hard-headed, is a major theme of the first two games. How the reputation of humanity is shaped in the eyes of the general populace is directly tied to another major feature of the series that is closely related to the dialogue, and that is *Mass Effect's* unique approach to morality.

4.2.3. Dual Morality Scale

Keeping track of the player's actions and storyline decisions in order to determine the "moral value" of the character they play is nothing new to gaming. The original *Fallout*, an RPG classic from 1997 featured the Karma system, which altered NPCs' reactions to the PC depending on the morality of their deeds. In more action-oriented games, such as 2009's *inFamous*, the PC's morality rating can directly affect his looks and what powers he has

access to (this mechanic is discussed in Online 27). The majority of these games feature a single rating, which is usually visualized as a bar and with a slider. The two ends of the bar represent the highest and lowest moral rating the PC can achieve, and the slider indicates the character's position on the bar (Online 28 and 29 are examples from *BioWare's* own *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*). The system is not particularly exciting, but perfectly functional, if done properly.

The designers of *Mass Effect* decided to do it differently. They introduced two separate bars, one for Shepard's Paragon (good) rating, the other for her Renegade (anti-heroic) rating. This might seem a purely cosmetic change, but because the system is such a significant part of the entire narrative experience, it carries with it some interesting narrative implications.

If in games with single-scale morality the player decides mid-game to abandon evil-doing and instead embrace a new, altruistic personality, the good deeds will gradually move the slider back up the scale, and the game will be finished with a positive or at least *more* positive morality rating. This would suggest that the terrible actions of the past are "cancelled out" by a change of heart. Again, from the perspective of gameplay, such an approach is functional; from the perspective of narrative – not so much.

The morality system in *Mass Effect*, on the other hand, represents consequence of action. No deed is ever forgotten by the game, and the player is notified by the two separate bars (circled in image02.png). Whatever choices have been made remain etched in the Paragon/Renegade scales, and no subsequent actions can decrease the rating. The bars serve as a subtle yet powerful indication of this fact. Whether or not such was the intent of the designers is not entirely relevant; what matters is that an essentially mechanical aspect of the game (explained in the following sub-chapter) in and of itself *can* hold some narrative meaning, a message, as well as enhance the **plausibility** of the game world.

4.2.4. Paragon or Renegade

Usually morality systems in games are presented through a number of binary choices at various points through the storyline. Each of these choices is assigned a moral value ('good' or 'evil'), and it is up to the players to decide how the PC would act in that situation.

In the *Mass Effect* series this system is made a little more complex from both a conceptual and a gameplay perspective. In terms of gameplay, Shepard's Paragon and Renegade scores feed directly into Charm and Intimidate – two forms of persuasion that depend on Shepard's moral rating. This allows for situations where, given a persuasion skill is high enough, Shepard has the opportunity to alter the resolution of a conversation.

Few choices are particularly significant; most of the persuasion options involve resolving situations of episodic nature, side-objectives that have little meaning in the grand scheme of things. However, the emphasis in these situations is also typically much more personal, such as helping a widow and her brother-in-law decide whether to genetically treat her unborn baby for the disease that killed her husband (09.avi). These types of situations make the game world seem populated by *real* people whose problems are far more relatable than eminent extermination by a hostile synthetic race.

On a purely philosophical level, the Paragon/Renegade options do not always so easily fall into categories of good and evil. Whether a player's Shepard is a Paragon or Renegade, his ultimate purpose is to save the galaxy. Shepard's story is that of a hero; the power is in the hands of the players to determine whether their Shepard is a champion of humanitarian principles or is capable of making the hard decisions not everyone would agree with.

This is perhaps a preferable to the usual good/evil split in terms of narrative distance: a heroic fantasy better fits our ingrained social standards. In *Mass Effect*, whichever approach the player takes, Shepard is ultimately a hero; the means with which Shepard's goals are achieved are up to the player. The result is decreased narrative distance due to a more focused narrative approach from the developers *and* a greater sense of meaning on behalf of the players and their actions, displaying strong elements of **narrativity** as well as **flexibility**.

Not everyone was entirely happy with the system, as is evident in any number of online discussions, such as one on The Escapist forums (Online 30). *BioWare* were apparently aware themselves that it was flawed in that players ended up feeling penalized for role-playing a character that was not either purely Paragon or entirely Renegade. In the third instalment of the series, they altered the system so that the Renegade and Paragon scores remained separate, yet were part of a single scale – Reputation, which affected NPCs' attitude towards Shepard and granted additional dialogue options (explained in Online 31). As a result, players are free to make their decisions on a per-case basis, not forced to stick to a single moral alignment for most of the game, which, in turn is a step towards increased **plausibility**.

An entirely different approach to the moral quandary is offered by games such as *The Witcher* and its 2011 sequel. The player is frequently made to choose one option or the other, but there is no moral scale to "grade" the player's decisions, there are simply consequences, and even those are almost never immediately apparent. The developers explain the idea in the *Decisions & Consequences* trailer for the original game (Online 32). This is certainly more life-like than assigning a rating to one's actions and might also be preferable in terms of decreasing narrative distance.

4.2.5. Quick-Time Events

One more way in which *BioWare* innovated the traditional RPG dialogue system is by introducing Quick-Time Events (QTEs) to dialogues as opposed to action sequences. Starting with the second game of the series, during a conversation the player may be prompted to press a button, which will cause Shepard to take sudden action. These button prompts are tied directly to the series' morality system, with some actions being considered Paragon (10.avi), others more Renegade-aligned (11.avi).

This approach is interesting because something that was essentially tacked on to a cinematic has become an additional means for the player to influence the minute-to-minute story. *Mass Effect's* QTEs are not tests of the player's patience or reflexes, but another form of decision-making within a 1-2 second time window. Because these instances are tied to the morality system, clicking without consideration is discouraged. Much like in real life, split-second decisions must be made while considering the consequences. This alternate form of choice helps sell the **plausibility** of the world, its characters and situations.

It is difficult to argue that the developers of the *Mass Effect* series have made a great effort to innovate certain aspects of Western RPG design: from the overhauled dialogue interface, to a different approach to moral ratings, to incorporating QTEs into dialogues. These deviations from RPG-system canon may not have solved all the problems of dialogue mechanics and morality in games, but certainly breathed fresh air into an aspect of RPGs that was in critical need of revision. So long as *BioWare* continue to improve their ideas (such as introducing the Reputation rating in *Mass Effect 3*) and other developers alter them using their own fresh ideas (as evident in the dialogue systems of *Alpha Protocol* and *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*), the narrative capacity of games is bound to grow.

4.3. Of Companions

The reason why dialogue systems are important in the first place is because humans are social beings by nature; the 1desire to communicate and establish emotional ties is an important and fundamental characteristic of the human race. Communication is also a significant means for acquiring information about various situations, experiences and the world in general. Because of this *BioWare* have always strived to surround the player with an interesting and diverse cast of supporting characters, ones that the player would be driven to get to know, befriend, even seduce. *Mass Effect* is no different; the series' supporting cast serves a number of

purposes, such as offering a new point of view, reacting to different situations in individual ways and motivating the player to complete the story of the games.

4.3.1. Perspectives, Suggestions and Opinions

Differing opinions are characteristic of humankind, as every person has their individual experience, background, principles and values. Imbuing Shepard's allies with diverse personalities and perspectives on various topics was an important step towards making characters *feel* more real, and *BioWare's* approach produced benefits in terms of both gameplay and narrative.

Almost every mission Shepard is on, he is accompanied by two squad-mates. When the player comes upon an important decision, Shepard's allies make suggestions as to the possible course of action, which is typically based on their personal experience and opinion regarding the matter at hand. One of the most notable examples is when Shepard is forced to decide whether to let the last remaining queen of an ancient and dangerous insectoid race live, potentially unleashing a great danger upon the galaxy, or executing her, effectively exterminating the species. Wrex's ancestors had been key in overcoming the Rachni threat, and he is rather vocal in voicing his opinion on the matter (12.avi 0'50"-1'00").

A similar situation is presented during the climactic space battle at the end of the first game. Shepard must choose whether the human fleet focuses their attack on the primary target or divide their attention in order to rescue the leaders of unified galactic politics (13.avi 0'50"-1'09"). From a gameplay perspective the player's allies inform her of the choices presented, but they also try to influence Shepard, much like real people would. This sort of opinionated worldview helps sell the idea that these characters are more than walking encyclopaedias or targets to draw fire away from the PC and makes them that much easier to grow attached to.

4.3.2. Narrative Flexibility

Shepard's allies do not restrict themselves to sharing their views only at major plot points, however. Throughout the games there are dozens of situations when Shepard's companions speak to Shepard or, in some cases, even one another. For example, when the assassin Thane returns to the Citadel, the seat of galactic power, he comments on the sorry state of security (14.avi). If the other companion is Garrus, who used to work at Citadel Security, he adds to the conversation (15.avi).

When exploring a section of the planet Illium, any companion the player brings has something to share, whether it is an experience or idea ([16.avi] contains some examples). They comment on the places and things they see, from sleazy night clubs (17.avi) to statues dedicated to the Krogan race (18.avi), often speaking to one another, not just Shepard (ibid.). His allies also occasionally provide input during conversations with NPCs if they have an opinion or personal connection to the matter discussed (19.avi). Every one of these occasions progresses the **plausibility** of the game world.

This progress is furthered when these reactions are not restricted to one's companions, the game world and its inhabitants also can react to the characters Shepard chooses to bring. One of the most notable examples is Legion, a member of the synthetic race considered to be a major threat to galactic safety. When Shepard brings Legion along to the Citadel for the first time (20.avi), or to the fleet of the Quarians, who created and eventually went to war with his race (Online 33), the NPCs react. Naturally, technological and monetary restrictions remain that inhibit developers' ability to accommodate every possible squad combination in every situation, but the attempts by *BioWare* to construct instances in which these mutual reactions between the game world and Shepard's allies manifest are a significant increase in the **flexibility** of the game world. Coupled with the visual and audial **plausibility** of the three-dimensional game space, these factors allow for much greater immersion and, consequently, player investment in the game narrative.

4.3.3. Motivate the Player

The last and possibly most important function Shepard's comrades serve in terms of decreasing narrative distance is that they provide additional motivation for the player. Motives for playing the game include progression of power, new items and equipment, new areas to explore and sights to see, yet these are almost entirely gameplay-based. Certainly, resolution of the central story is a significant motivator as well, but hooking a player into caring is not a simple task. This is especially the case in as fantastical a setting as *Mass Effect*'s science fiction. If the initial narrative motivation is largely curiosity regarding the game world, the later experience is driven by, in large part, a connection with Shepard's companions.

Building relationships with squad mates has always been a key feature of *BioWare*'s RPGs; this is a tradition that *Mass Effect* carries proudly. As the player completes the main story missions, Shepard's allies gradually reveal more information about themselves. How the player guides Shepard through these dialogues determines how the relationship with that character develops. When the player first encounters Salarian scientist Mordin Solus, it is only

known that Mordin was part of the elite Salarian Task Group. Through numerous conversations more of his past is uncovered (21.avi), culminating in an optional loyalty mission where the ghosts of the scientist's past are confronted (22.avi). After the mission it is possible to continue developing this relationship (23.avi).

Most of these relationships result in a connection of friendship and loyalty. In the original *Mass Effect* Garrus could be considered Shepard's protégé (24.avi), but in *Mass Effect 3*, provided he survived the events of the second game, their relationship is of mutual respect and friendly rivalry (Online 34). All three games also offer several opportunities for romance, should the relationship be developed correctly. For example, in *Mass Effect 2* it becomes apparent that one of Shepard's squad mates may have developed feelings for him (25.avi). It is up to the player whether he reciprocates these feelings (26.avi) or not (Online 35 3'30"-4'07").

The reason why any of these fictional relationships matter is tied to what Tavinor explained in *Emotions in Videogaming*, that controlling the PC allows the player to form genuine emotional connections even with the characters of a fictional world (Tavinor, 2009: 130-149). That is exactly why a strong cast of supporting characters is one of the *Mass Effect* series' most powerful tools for decreasing narrative distance.

Despite the fact that technological advancements bring new opportunities as well as new restrictions (dealing with recorded dialogue is much more difficult and expensive than purely textual), *BioWare* utilize every possibility to bring more realism and **plausibility** to even the most unlikely settings and scenarios through **flexibility** of the game world and its inhabitants. Whether it is by **inserting** their **individual opinions** or by serving as **emotional anchors** to the story, Shepard's companions are irreplaceable when maximizing emotional involvement. Without them, the narrative distance between the player and the game world would be much more difficult to deal with.

4.4. Of Consequences

For all the innovations found in the *Mass Effect* series, perhaps the most important feature from the perspective of narrative and game design both is the players' ability to transfer their Commander Shepard from game to game. The games record every choice made and the relationships established are not forgotten, and there are consequences. This intensifies the players' sense of identity connected to their own Commander Shepard as they progress through the trilogy.

4.4.1. Actions Reflected

As in real life, one's actions alter the attitude of people in *Mass Effect*. If at the ending of the original game the player chose to sacrifice the Council (27.avi), two years later the rest of the galaxy treats humans as power-hungry killers, leading to warnings on the Citadel's public service Virtual Intelligence (28.avi) and a hostile reception by a Turian merchant (29.avi). If, on the other hand, the Council was saved, the salesman is much friendlier when doing business with Shepard (Online 36).

Many of Shepard's actions are also referred to in numerous news broadcasts. If, for example, in the original game a politician was rescued from a hostage situation, in the sequel there is news of changes he made to certain Alliance policies (30.avi 0'47"-1'05"). There are also numerous allusions to the aftermath of some of Shepard's missions and choices (30.avi).

Another example is reporter Khalisah al-Jilani, a recurring character in the trilogy. Depending on how Shepard's interviews go, al-Jilani might react to him differently in subsequent encounters. If, for example, Shepard lost his temper and punched the reporter (31.avi), al-Jilani might be more guarded the next time they meet (32.avi).

Some encounters might seem almost too insignificant to note, and yet the game remembers those as well. Often in *Mass Effect 2* and *3* Shepard will receive messages from various characters from either the first or the second game, thanking the soldier for his help (image03.png) or expressing condemnation (image04.png). The developers of the games seem to have gone out of their way to let the player feel like their choices and actions matter, and this effort goes a long way towards promoting player immersion and investment. The player encounters these consequences in a myriad of forms, including their purest and most final form – death.

4.4.2. Death Minor

Over the course of the *Mass Effect* trilogy, hundreds of hostile creatures are killed, but that is a staple of combat-based video gaming. Shepard's enemies are no more than obstacles in the players' path to reaching their goals, their lives (and deaths) are meaningless. It is not the same, though, with NPCs, as they play a more complex role in the game narrative and require more care. The fact that the fate of many a minor character is decided by the player shows *BioWare*'s dedication to presenting an extremely **flexible** game narrative.

In the first game Shepard must deal with a complex bureaucratic situation in order to progress, which similarly has multiple possible solutions:

- one involves the death of a corrupt administrator and the undercover internal affairs officer investigating him (33.avi)
- another results in the arrest of the corrupt official (34.avi)
- the administrator can also be blackmailed with the evidence to his guilt in order to proceed (35.avi)

The sequel also provides similar moments, such as the choice to keep a young man from joining a fight that is likely to kill him (36.avi) or let it happen (37.avi). There are even situations where a character survives (38.avi) or perishes (39.avi), depending on the player's squad selection. This ties into the ideas expressed in a previous chapter, *Narrative Flexibility*.

The climactic point of numerous loyalty missions also involves choosing whether someone lives or dies. Shepard can let Mordin shoot his former assistant (40.avi) or stop him (Online 37 2'32"-3'07"); similarly, Jack can be coerced into killing a fellow test subject (41.avi) or sparing him (Online 38 14'12"-14'52"). Consequently, these characters either do (42.avi) or do not (43.avi) make an appearance in the following games.

These situations not only give the player a heightened *sense* of power over the game world, but also leave an actual impression on the world, potentially making every player's game unique and that much more personal. This is an excellent example of utilizing the **flexibility** of the game world to tell an emotionally engaging tale, which is made all the more poignant when the fates of major characters also depend on the player's choices.

4.4.3. Death Major

Major plot points also hinge on decisions Shepard must make. Whether a dangerous ancient race is doomed to extinction (12.avi from the previous chapter), whether the political leaders of the galaxy survive the final battle (27.avi) are choices the player must guide Shepard through. In *Mass Effect 2* the Commander is forced to choose between reprogramming the hostile fraction of the synthetic Geth race and destroying a large number of sapient beings in order to dispose of the threat (45.avi).

Even Shepard's allies are not always protected from death in the story. In one of the late story-critical missions from the original *Mass Effect* Shepard must confront Urdnot Wrex to progress. If certain conditions have not been met (or if the player feels so inclined), Wrex can be killed (46.avi). He is then replaced with another Krogan as the chief of their race in the sequels (Online 39), a role that would otherwise belong to Wrex. In an even more shocking twist, that same mission puts Shepard in a position where only one of his teammates can survive, and it is up to the player to decide which one that will be (47.avi).

At the climax of the game, it is even possible to convince the primary antagonist of the first game to kill himself (48.avi), given Shepard has a high enough persuasion rating, otherwise Shepard must battle Saren instead (49.avi). These numerous examples illustrate how the **flexibility** of the narrative extends beyond minor alterations, instead offering instances where the player can significantly affect the game world. This approach is maintained in the sequels.

In *Mass Effect 2* Shepard must travel through the Omega 4 relay, something considered equivalent to suicide, which is not far from the truth. There is a rather complex chart illustrating the numerous factors deciding the lives and deaths of the Shepard's squad during the final mission (Online 40), indicating how many factors the game considers to determine the survival of Shepard's squad.

If a character perishes, he or she is also absent from the final game of the trilogy. Even squad mates (not just NPCs) from the third game, characters with significant roles in the game's events, can be missing due to their deaths in the previous game. (Online 41) shows two possible resolutions of a major plot point. The deceased Tali is replaced by Admiral Raan, and Legion is no longer alive, but a hologram. Coupled with the emotional connection players establish with these characters, such severe consequences are a bold, if not brutal application of **narrative flexibility** and **plausibility** of the game world: the player cannot hope to make bad decisions and not suffer repercussions.

Even Shepard can perish at the end of *Mass Effect 2* (50.avi), bringing the character's story to a premature end. And this is not a Game Over screen that is an abrupt cut-off from the narrative. It is a complete, if not entirely satisfying conclusion to Commander Shepard's story and the narrative of the game. This only serves to further deconstruct the narrative distance between the game world and the player.

It is almost impossible to enumerate all of the minor facets and major details of the *Mass Effect* storyline that the player can change. Even the impressive list compiled by fans on the Mass Effect Wiki (Online 42) only includes the information that gets transferred from game to game, but there are just as many, if not more, variables within the confines of a single game. Sometimes the developers' enthusiasm in letting the player know that their actions did not go unnoticed ends up having an adverse effect, as some have criticized the games for having the smallest galaxy in the universe, considering how Shepard repeatedly encounters the same people without fail. Despite the fact, *BioWare*'s dedication to presenting a thoroughly flexible game narrative has resulted in a truly engaging narrative experience.

CONCLUSIONS

The development and evolution of the computer game industry is fascinating to observe and analyse in large part due to its sheer diversity. There are more functionally divergent platforms for video game development than there are for any other medium, which results in a broad spectrum of game experiences available, all with potential to tell stories. It is for this reason that the current research was conducted, its **goal** to discover narrative techniques unique to gaming through which players' emotional investment in the narrative could be increased. The **research question** to which an answer was sought is: What methods are available exclusively to game developers in order to reduce narrative distance between the game world and the player?

Terminology was the first matter addressed, which held some surprising challenges. Perhaps the most significant was that, despite the increased popularity of games amongst both the masses and young academics, there is no definitive point of reference for terminology regarding game research. The term *narrative distance* had to be borrowed from literary studies (an approach strongly criticized by many game researchers) because no direct analogue could be found.

The second section in the theoretical part of the research was an attempt to find some common ground shared by both narratologists and ludologists to serve as the theoretical basis for the current paper. It was noted that the available information is in need of urgent sorting and replacing, as many theories were found to be outdated or written by analysts from other fields attempting to apply their expertise to an unfamiliar medium. Nevertheless, some of the older sources provided valuable ideas. One such example is Jenkins' work, presenting the concept of games as *spaces with narrative potential*.

Julian Küklich's idea that the relationship between narrative and interactivity need not be linear was also very helpful in rearranging the perception of game narrative and developing an alternate matrix of game narrative structure. This new model places games within a triangle formed by **narrativity**, **interactivity** and **flexibility**. Tavinor's knowledgeable and fresh approach to numerous issues regarding game analysis from an artistic perspective should also be noted, as investigating his work would be beneficial to anyone attempting to contribute to the topic.

The practical part of the research was an attempt to find certain narrative techniques through which narrative distance could be manipulated. The primary focus was on one of the most narratively engaging games of modern times – the *Mass Effect* series. Creating a **plausible** world inhabited by realistic characters in terms of both appearance and personality

that **react** to the players' choices is a significant factor in the success of the *Mass Effect* series as a story, but not the only one.

The developers' dedication to giving players a variety of **divergent** and equally **viable paths** to take, even if those paths lead to largely the same end, lends the players choices a great sense of importance. This sensation is key to making them emotionally invested in a non-linear narrative. Should these decisions be taken away, the narrative of the game might remain engaging, but at the cost of the interactivity that **defines** video games. In such a case the game is focused on *narrativity*; *flexibility* and *interactivity*, the two unique features of game narratives, are sacrificed. If, on the other hand, players are given choices that have **consequences** within the game world, their emotional involvement in the game narrative is likely to increase. However, until the technological capabilities of home computers reach the point where truly emergent gameplay and narrative become possible, every narrative choice made by the player will remain within the boundaries of the temporal, monetary and technological resources of the developers.

The current paper is only a stepping stone towards a more critical and serious approach to the research of narratives in games and how they should be constructed so as to exploit the unique possibilities of the medium and entice the player to become truly emotionally invested in the game world. If the observations made in this research were combined with a broader perspective at game narratives, including games of past generations, there would certainly be patterns to be found. This information could then be used to construct a basic framework for narrative techniques in video gaming, to be applied to game research as well as game development. A better understanding of human psychology in the context of interactive game environments, the emotional reactions connected to in-game situations and characters would also help greatly in the comprehension of how the aforementioned techniques affect players.

Scholars suggest that the telling of narratives is one of humankind's most important functions and purposes, how man conveys meaning and learns. It is integral to our being and our culture. Video games might not *be* narratives, but there is great capacity for storytelling in the medium. Regardless of its humble origins, video games are a manifestation of modern expression and culture that cannot and should not be overlooked.

THESES

- For use in an academic context, a reliable and specific definition of *game* could be, 'A game is an interactive structure of endogenous meaning that challenges the player to reach a goal with variable outcomes of different values.'
- The act of telling stories is one of the most significant and fundamental aspects of human interaction, learning and culture; the created narratives transcend any one form.
- The great *narratology vs. ludology* debate was largely a string of disagreements caused by misunderstandings, misinterpretations and personal quarrels.
- Variations on the possibilities of game narrative structures can be visualized as points on a triangular matrix involving *interactivity*, *narrativity* and *flexibility*.
- *Narrative flexibility*, the degree to which the game world reacts to the player, is one of the most significant storytelling tools available only to game developers in creating an emotionally engaging narrative experience.
- Video game worlds can be compelling because, while playing, the player inhabits the avatar mentally and emotionally. The element of agency characteristic to games allows real emotional connections to be formed with a fictional environment.
- The ability to simulate realistic conversations allows for much more convincing and, consequently, engaging character interaction.
- An important factor in determining the narrative distance between the player and the game is the *illusion of influence*, where different valid paths are presented, though they ultimately lead to the same destination.
- Restricting players with a time limit to make decisions is a powerful, if risky tool for manipulating narrative distance.
- Ensuring there are clear consequences to the players' choices makes every decision more meaningful and reduces narrative distance.
- The players' ability to decide the fates of characters is one of the more important and effective examples of narrative flexibility, particularly if those are characters that the player has already formed an emotional connection with.
- A strong cast of supporting characters in narrative-focused games serves as a source of plausibility in the game world as well as emotional tethers and motivators.
- Ensuring internal logic and consistency is key to maintaining a decreased narrative distance between the game world and the player.

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