Ludonarrativity and Player Agency in Sci-Fi Crime Games

Rachel L. Wood
Ball State University
Center for Emerging Media Design and Development
Muncie, IN, USA
rlwood@bsu.edu

Keywords
agency, detective fiction, game narrative, ludology, science fiction.

INTRODUCTION
Flexibility, player agency, and divergent outcomes are often hallmarks of engaging game narrative. However, one genre must combine a fixed outcome and two parallel storylines while still maintaining compelling player input: detective stories. In these games, the outcome of one arc—that of the crime—is fixed, while the arc of the player's story of discovery must still end at a single, predefined outcome. If the gameplay is too complex or confusing, players have difficulty progressing through the game. Gameplay that is too straight-forward or obvious in its puzzle-solving, however, lacks the challenge needed for players to feel accomplished. As such, critics argue that games with detective plots are not narratively flexible enough for a player to feel in control of their gameplay experience (Ogilive 2018). To combat this issue, certain games have integrated science fiction elements into their storyworlds to increase the player's sense of agency and the immediacy of the problem-solving process.

To analyze the current state of player choice in the genre blend of detective and science fiction (sci-fi), I will study two games with gameplay segments dedicated to crime scene investigation: *Trauma Team* (Atlus 2010) and *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream 2018). These two games, while incorporating characters and tropes associated with traditional detective arcs, work in different ways; *Trauma Team* is unilinear, containing a single narrative pathway (as defined by Domsch 2013), while *Detroit: Become Human* is particularly noted for being "non-unilinear." However, both games incorporate sci-fi elements to expand the available number of player choices. This study aims to identify what mechanics are used in both branching (non-unilinear) and non-branching (unilinear) detective games to increase player engagement in reconstructing an existing narrative.

Context
In order to better understand the two-arc structure of detective stories and their function in games, I reviewed both literary analyses of detective fiction and the concepts of video game agency. Detective fiction, unlike other genres of literature, innately has a double-plot structure. According to narratologist Peter Hühn (1987), the crime itself acts as one story, while the novel's actual plot revolves around

Proceedings of DiGRA 2020

discovering the gaps in that story. Literary critics of the detective genre often cite the five codes of narrative, developed by narratologist Roland Barthes (1970) in his work *S/Z*. In terms of detective novels, the hermeneutic code is the most relevant, which he describes as an element that is not explained to the reader, creating an enigma that must be decoded. Barthes breaks this down into ten different stages that cover each step in the problem-solving arc, from initial understanding of the enigma to disclosing the true nature of the enigma.

In terms of games, this strict narrative structure should intertwine with how the player controls the narrative. Player agency, Murray (1997) notes, "…is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (123). In a game, agency is not merely the opportunity to make a choice that is important but the possibility of that choice having an actual impact on the game itself. The *illusion* of agency, however, is when a game allows players to act on the system by choosing specific actions, but these actions only lead to a single outcome (Stang 2019). True agency, which is commonly found in branching, choice-based games, lets players directly impact a narrative and change its course.

Study

To better categorize the different types of gameplay mechanisms, I identified key mechanics of the problem-solving processes in these two games. These mechanics appear in three central points of the investigation process, which I broke into the "discovery," "analysis," and "resolution" categories. I then aligned these categories with the stages of Barthes's hermeneutic code to better understand the distribution of these codes across the narrative arc (see Table 1).

	Discovery	**Analysis**	**Resolution**
Gameplay Mechanic	Autopsy, Crime Scene Investigation, Testimonials	Checklists, Assistant, Dialogue Options (*D:BH*), Evidence Cards (*TT*)	Multiple Choice Questions, End States (*D:BH*), Quick Time Events (*D:BH*)
Narrative Code (Barthes)	Thematization, Proposal, Snare	Formulation, Promise of an Answer, Equivocation, Jamming	Suspended Answer, Partial Answer, Disclosure

Table 1: Coding schematic for game mechanics as vehicles of narrative in *Detroit: Become Human (D:BH)* and *Trauma Team (TT)*

Both games also incorporate science fiction or technological elements, like 3D-rendered autopsies and instant DNA readings from scanned items, to enable a better sense of agency. To further identify trends between narrative, setting, and agency, I added two categories to each coded segment of gameplay: sci-fi integration and type of agency (see Table 2).

Mechanic	**Category**	**Narrative Code**	**Sci-Fi Integration**	**Player Agency**
Gameplay mechanic	*Discovery, Analysis, or Resolution*	*One of ten of Barthes' hermeneutic codes*	*Does the mechanic integrate elements of the game's setting?*	*Illusory, true, or choice-based agency*

Table 2: Applied coding mechanism combining narrative code, setting, and agency

I analyze these two games because of their similar narrative settings but differing gameplay frameworks. These two games use different techniques to increase the sense (or illusion) of player agency and alter how these methods are used as vehicles for narrative. After completing close readings of these games, I will use the data to answer the following questions: (1) what are the differences between linear sci-fi crime games (e.g. *Trauma Team*) and non-linear sci-fi crime games (e.g. *Detroit: Become Human*) in terms of using the reconstruction of a crime as a functioning, player-controlled narrative? (2) how does the science fiction setting influence the gameplay mechanics used? (3) how do gameplay mechanics in sci-fi crime games act as vehicles for narrative?

I will apply this coding scheme to chapters from each game: The "Locked-Room Mystery" forensics chapter from *Trauma Team,* and the narratively-connected "Partners" and "Interrogation" chapters of *Detroit: Become Human*. By addressing both the narrative and the mechanics while coding, I will be able to identify how narrative operates as a gameplay mechanic itself rather than a passive piece of game design. Combining narratological and ludological approaches through a coding schematic gives us a better understanding of how these two lenses can work together to produce a holistic overview of gameplay experience.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to my advisor, Dr. Kevin Moloney, and my committee, Dr. Tim Huang and Dr. Ben Bascom, for assisting me with this research.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Atlus. 2010. *Trauma Team.* Nintendo Wii. Irvine, California, USA: Atlus USA.
Barthes, R., Miller, R., Howard, R., and Balzac, H. 1977. *S/Z*. New York: Hill and

Wang.
Domsch, S. 2013. *Storyplaying: Agency and Narrative in Video Games.* Boston, MA: De Gruyter.
Dove, G. N. 1990. “The Detection Formula and Reading.” In R. G. Walker and J. M. Frazer (Eds.), *The Cunning Graft: Original Essays on Detective Fiction and Contemporary Literary Theory*. Macomb: Western Illinois UP.
Hühn, P. 1987. “The Detective as Reader: Narrativity and Reading Concepts in Detective Fiction.” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*. *33*(3). https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.0.1310
Murray, J.H. 1997. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. MIT Press.
Ogilive, T. 2019. “Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney Trilogy Review.” IGN. San Francisco, CA, USA. https://www.ign.com/articles/2019/04/09/phoenix-wright-ace-attorney-trilogy-review
Quantic Dream. 2018. *Detroit: Become Human.* PlayStation 4. San Mateo, California, USA: Sony Interactive Entertainment.
Stang, S. 2019. “This Action Will Have Consequences’: Interactivity and Player Agency.” *Game Studies.* 19(1). http://gamestudies.org/1901/articles/stang.