

Interactive Narrative Strategies in Videogames

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INTRODUCTION

Story-based videogames, such as *Until Dawn* (Supermassive Games, 2015) and *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012), are hybrid media combining features of both games and narratives. As such, they face a dilemma: players want games in which they feel that their choices are meaningful, but it is very difficult to create graphical videogames in which player choice can have significant narrative consequences. Branching narratives, a solution popularized in “Choose-Your-Own-Adventure” books, can work well in text-based stories, but is much more difficult to implement in storytelling with animated graphics, and this solution is generally rejected by game developers as a waste of resources. Thus, many games provide what is sometimes called an “illusion of choice”: they present players with gameplay choices that seem highly consequential, but do not actually substantially change a game’s narrative. This strategy allows developers to focus their resources on creating aspects of the game world that most players are sure to encounter.

This paper will use videogame theory, narratology, and discourse analysis to discuss several questions that are raised by the “illusion of choice” strategy. First, what methods have videogames used to suggest that player actions have significant narrative consequences? I will discuss methods internal to videogames, including ways to review past in-game events, game mechanics explicitly tied to narrative choice, and direct communication with players about the consequences of their actions. I will also review methods external to the videogame, such as promotional material and advertising.

The paper will also investigate whether these methods are successful in convincing players that their choices have significant narrative consequences, and why there is substantial disagreement among players about the degree to which certain videogames allow players to influence narrative outcomes. In this section, I analyze a corpus of published videogame reviews to determine what elements of narrative are seen as central to the determination that player choices are narratively meaningful. I also discuss some problems that have arisen based on strategies designed to foster an illusion of choice, such as changing player expectations in ways that undermine the perception of interactivity.

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OPTIONAL BIO

Jonathan Frome is an Assistant Professor of Visual Studies at Lingnan University. He has published in journals such as *Projections: A Journal for Movies and Mind*, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, and *Film Studies: An International Review*, as well as in several anthologies. His research interests include film and videogame studies, aesthetics, emotion, and documentary.

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