

# When a Game Is More Than ‘Just a Game’: Metanarrative Integration Tools in Video Games

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## Abstract

Video games are often dismissed in public discourse as ‘just games,’ implying experiences framed around play, entertainment, and escapism. Yet some titles operate across additional layers of meaning, positioning players within broader systems of cultural, ethical, and interpretive significance. This paper examines the design mechanisms through which such positioning occurs, introducing the concept of *metanarrative integration tools*. Drawing on Lyotard’s conceptualization of metanarratives as legitimizing ideological frameworks, we define these tools as devices that mediate transitions between a game’s narrative layer and a higher-level metanarrative perspective, shaping how meaning is constructed through gameplay.

Rather than being predefined, these tools were identified inductively through the analysis of autoethnographic data on contemporary games, which revealed patterns of recurrence across cases. Instead of treating interpretive depth as a thematic byproduct, we foreground how specific design choices actively integrate metanarrative meaning, offering a foundation to understand how a game can become, sometimes, more than ‘just a game.’

## KEYWORDS

metanarrative integration, ideological game design, player positioning, boundary disruption, qualitative game analysis

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## INTRODUCTION

This article takes into consideration the evolution of the concept of metanarratives introduced by Lyotard (1984), from socio-philosophical critique to its adaptation in fiction and interactive media. Lyotard's metanarratives are defined as grand legitimizing frameworks that structure moral, political, or epistemic meaning (Cuddon 2012), which in a fictional context can go beyond the level of plot or theme, and be used to introduce social commentary, ideological positioning, and challenge the established order (Waugh 2002; Currie 2010; Hutcheon 2003).

Several games that adopt a critical game design approach explore the tension between freedom, control, and the ethics of individualism. This research examines selected game examples, such as *BioShock* (2K, 2007), to demonstrate how the use of metanarrative integration as a game design mechanism constructs an objectivist ideological architecture that shapes meaning, legitimacy, and power within the gameworld.

In the well-known *BioShock* 'Would you kindly' moment, where the player discovers that a repeatedly used phrase presented as a polite request has in fact functioned as a post-hypnotic command structuring their actions, existing studies typically interpret that twist at a narrative level: a subversion of player agency that results in ludonarrative dissonance, a dramatic revelation of coerced obedience, or a metafictional commentary on control (Aldred and Greenspan 2011; Hocking 2009). While these analyses foreground plot disruption and thematic surprise, the metanarrative analysis positions the same moment differently. Here, the twist functions not only as a narrative reversal but as an ideological exposure. Rather than commenting solely on the protagonist's lack of autonomy, this moment critiques the ideological promise of individual freedom embedded within objectivist discourse.

Identifying concrete integration tools is essential, as they reveal how games transition from story-level representation to broader ideological critique, and why certain moments exert cultural force beyond their narrative function.

By summarizing the theoretical foundation here and grounding it in a familiar case such as *BioShock*, we establish the analytical logic that underpins the integration-tool typology developed in the subsequent sections.

## REFLECTIVE PLAY: METANARRATIVES AND INTEGRATION MECHANISMS IN GAMES

Research across game studies has examined multiple phenomena that intersect with the process of embedding broader cultural or ideological meaning into gameplay, even if these phenomena have not been theorized as mechanisms for metanarrative integration.

Work on reflective play, interface transparency, temporal structures, symbolic design, and ludonarrative tension all points toward the capacity of games to communicate more than plot-level meaning, but the field has yet to consolidate these observations into a systemic account of how games position players within ideological frameworks.

Reflective play research has shown that entertainment video games can prompt self-questioning and post-play evaluation, revealing how certain design elements trigger ethical or emotional reassessment (Mekler et al. 2018). Studies of diegesis and interface-layer permeability demonstrate how HUD elements, menu transitions, or representational irregularities can expose the constructedness of the gameworld, inviting players to interrogate its underlying logic (Kleinman et al. 2019). Work

on temporal loops extends this destabilization to narrative structure: repeated timelines, restarts, and recursive progressions draw attention to fictionality and resist narrative closure (Mitchell and Kway 2020).

Parallel research in player ethics has highlighted how moral tension can function as an affective driver of engagement. Jørgensen's concept of 'positive discomfort', using focus-groups, shows that constrained or morally ambiguous choices are often experienced by players not as design failures but as productive tensions that prompt reflection, emotional involvement, and ethical questioning (Jørgensen 2016). This position directly contrasts with Hocking's analysis of ludonarrative dissonance in *BioShock* (Hocking 2009), which frames the conflict between mechanics and narrative as a flaw that undermines agency. From Jørgensen's perspective, however, such dissonance can operate intentionally as a critical device, where discomfort is not an obstacle to engagement but a constitutive element of it, enabling games to confront players with complicity, constraint, and moral unease rather than offering frictionless coherence. These discussions indicate that mechanics and narrative can work at cross-purposes to produce ideologically charged tension, even when not explicitly framed as such. This compatibility between critical tension and sustained engagement also resonates with Salen and Zimmerman's (2003) concept of 'double consciousness,' in which players maintain simultaneous awareness of the game as system and as fiction without collapsing one into the other.

From a cultural perspective, Denning's argument that games shape public understandings of politics and history (Denning 2021), a position that aligns with Ledesma's analysis of commercial titles as bridges between fictional scenarios and real-world power structures (Ledesma 2022). Salen and Zimmerman's notion of meaningful play (Salen and Zimmerman 2003) reinforces this view by positioning mechanics as carriers of value-laden messages, not merely as functional systems. More interdisciplinary work further emphasizes that design choices inevitably encode assumptions about agency, identity, labor, and social order (Hunicke et al. 2004; Paul 2018; Šisler 2008), examine its narrative, ethical tensions, and moral inversions (Andergard 2017; Murray 2016), or describe how its symbolic cues and confrontational design are framed within narratological interpretations and context (Keogh 2012; Payne 2014).

Similar issues arise in existing literature on *BioShock*, where the '*Would you kindly*' twist, its moral economy, and its systemic contradictions have been widely discussed but rarely positioned as structural means through which ideology is conveyed or contested (Aldred and Greenspan 2011; Berg 2012; Ruch 2010).

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study adopted an autoethnographic research design to examine how fourth wall breaks and related boundary disruptions are experienced during play, particularly in relation to emotional involvement and critical reflection. Autoethnography is well suited to this task because the phenomena under investigation, like shifts in player positioning, affective disruption, reconfiguration of agency, and frictions between fiction and system, emerge moment-to-moment during gameplay and are not fully accessible through narrative description alone. As Ellis, Adams, and Bochner note, autoethnography enables the systematic analysis of personal experience to understand broader cultural processes (Ellis et al. 2011, p. 273). In interactive media, where meaning arises through embodied engagement, this situated perspective provides access to dynamics that are difficult to capture through

textual analysis or post-hoc interviews (Chang 2016; Wall 2008; Forber-Pratt 2015). Importantly, the metanarrative integration tools discussed here were not predefined aims of the study but emerged inductively through analysis as recurring mechanisms became apparent across titles.

The methodological procedure followed a two-stage structure separating immediate experience from later analytic interpretation. During gameplay, unstructured experiential logs documented affective responses, perceptual shifts, and moments of cognitive or ethical tension as they occurred, in line with recommendations to preserve experiential immediacy in autoethnographic work (Ellis et al. 2011). These logs were subsequently revisited through an iterative coding process grounded in the principles of credibility, dependability, and confirmability articulated by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Analytic focus was placed on observable design elements, such as symbolic cues, agency manipulation, interface disruption, sensory distortion, and enforced moral constraint, that mediated shifts in player positioning.

Rather than treating subjective experience as findings in itself, the analysis aimed to identify recurrent design mechanisms operating consistently across games. Through comparative examination and thematic convergence of coded moments, individual gameplay events were abstracted into broader categories of integration tools. To strengthen analytic validity, the identification of experiential shifts was contextualized against established models of player experience, namely the SCI Model of Immersion (Ermi and Mäyrä 2005) and Calleja's Player Involvement Model (Calleja 2011). These models did not function as instruments of measurement or formal triangulation, but as external theoretical reference points through which observed patterns could be situated within recognized dimensions of immersion and involvement, helping distinguish recurrent engagement structures from idiosyncratic affective responses.

Categories were identified inductively through iterative autoethnographic engagement across multiple playthroughs and cases. Rather than seeking inter-coder reliability, the analysis focused on pattern recurrence, cross-case comparison, and conceptual coherence in relation to the layered framework outlined above. Autoethnography functions here as an exploratory apparatus for identifying patterned design features that mediate transitions between narrative participation and metanarrative positioning, forming the basis for the typology presented in the following section.

### **Scope, Positionality, and Limitations**

This study employs an autoethnographic approach and therefore reflects a situated, experience-based perspective. While this methodology affords detailed access to moment-to-moment experiential phenomena, its findings cannot be assumed to represent broader player populations. The patterns identified here should be understood as analytically grounded observations rather than generalizable claims.

The corpus analyzed in this article consists of entertainment games that explicitly engage social and political metanarratives and represents a subset of a broader ongoing study encompassing additional titles. Other genres, design traditions, and narrative forms fall outside the scope of the present analysis. The objective is not exhaustive coverage, but to document recurrent integration mechanisms within a coherent analytical framework.

This research reflects the positionality of the two authors, both male researchers based in Portugal, with academic backgrounds in game studies, media theory, and communication sciences. Both authors are also experienced players, and one

is pursuing a PhD in Media Arts, with research focused on game studies. This dual positioning, as players and researchers, shaped our sensitivity to narrative, mechanical, and ideological cues.

Subjectivity is intrinsic to autoethnographic research and is treated here as a methodological condition rather than a flaw to be eliminated. Reflexive practices were employed throughout the study to document assumptions, interpretive shifts, and analytic decisions. Transparency is maintained through detailed experiential logging and the explicit articulation of analytic criteria. Future empirical work will extend this exploratory analysis through participant-based research, but the present study remains focused on the identification of recurrent design mechanisms within a reflexive autoethnographic framework. These measures aim not to neutralize perspective, but to situate it transparently within a broader confirmability process (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

## Game Selection

Game selection followed a progressive, theory-driven process rather than a predefined corpus, genre classification, or thematic taxonomy. The broader research project, of which this article presents a focused subset, comprises a corpus of ten games analyzed through a dual-cycle autoethnographic protocol. This article does not attempt to reproduce or exhaustively discuss that full corpus. Instead, it draws on a reduced set of representative cases selected to illustrate how metanarrative integration tools were identified across the wider analysis.

The research originated with two emblematic cases, *Spec Ops: The Line* (2K, 2012) and *BioShock*, whose most-discussed moments raised an initial conceptual tension. Although these moments have been widely examined in relation to agency, complicity, and social critique (Jørgensen 2016; Fernández-Vara 2015; Ruch 2010), existing literature generally excludes them as fourth wall breaks under traditional definitions (Conway 2010; Özdal and Çatak 2022). Yet experientially, these moments consistently registered as direct address to the player rather than as purely character or narrative-level devices. This tension mirrors earlier analysis on player positioning in existing literature, which describe the player's structurally dual role as both external operator and embodied participant within the fictional world (Pinto 2024). Recognizing this discrepancy motivated a reassessment of how boundary disruptions operate in interactive media and informed the theoretical and methodological development of the present study.

As the conceptual framework evolved, the corpus expanded through analytic induction and theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Charmaz 2006). Additional games were incorporated to test whether similar experiential effects emerged through different narrative, mechanical, and aesthetic strategies. Two titles in particular, *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe, 2013) and *The Beginner's Guide* (Everything Unlimited Ltd., 2015), functioned as baseline cases for alienation-driven exclusively critical engagement, while other games demonstrated convergence-oriented or ideologically embedded mechanisms operating without explicit narrative address (Pinto and Luz 2024). Several widely discussed titles were deliberately excluded to avoid redundancy with existing literature and to prioritize analytically generative cases.

For the purposes of this article, a distilled subset of five games was selected: *Spec Ops: The Line*, *BioShock*, *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios, 2014), *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017), and *Doki Doki Literature Club* (Team Salvato, 2017). These titles span a range of representational strategies, affective intensities, and design configurations, making them suitable for illustrating how

integration tools were identified and compared across the broader study.

Accordingly, the aim of this paper is not to report the results of the full autoethnographic corpus, but to explicate the methodological process through which recurrent metanarrative integration tools were traced, contrasted, and conceptualized across multiple games.

## METANARRATIVE INTEGRATION TOOLS WITHIN THE CASE STUDIES

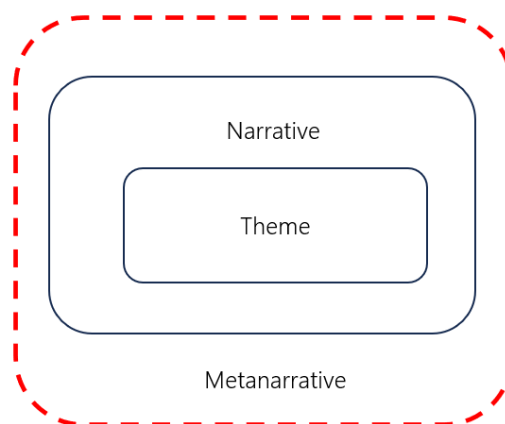
In this section we will articulate the core contribution of this article: the identification and categorization of *metanarrative integration tools*. Building on the conceptual framework introduced, these tools are defined not as ideological content in themselves, but as design mechanisms that mediate transitions between narrative and metanarrative layers during play.

### Representational Layers

This paper adopts a layered understanding of meaning in video games to clarify how metanarrative integration occurs (see Figure 1). **Theme** refers to the general subject explored by a game, while **narrative** denotes the structured sequence of events and character developments within the fictional world that develops around that theme. A **metanarrative** layer, by contrast, designates the broader ideological framework through which themes and narratives are situated within cultural and political systems of meaning. In video games, this layer is not accessed through plot alone but becomes legible through how gameplay structures position the player in relation to agency, morality, and legitimacy. While analytically distinct, these layers interact dynamically during play.

In this article, *player positioning* refers to how a game's design structures the player's agency and responsibility within an ideological system. Positioning is not treated as a purely interpretive effect, but as a design outcome produced through affordances, constraints, reward structures, and progression logic.

Recognizing this layered structure provides the conceptual basis for identifying how specific design features facilitate transitions from narrative engagement to ideological positioning, which is examined in the following subsection.



**Figure 1:** Representational layers identified

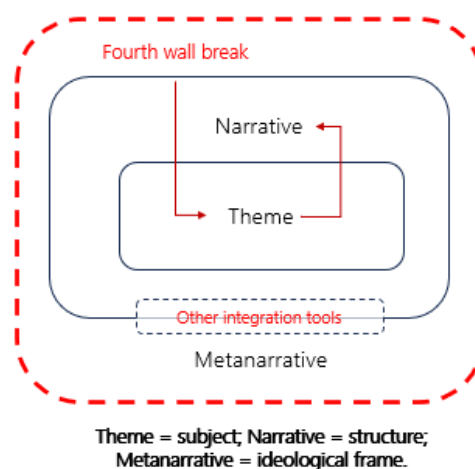
This layered analysis can be exemplified by briefly analyzing *Spec Ops: The Line* in broad strokes. While the game's **theme** addresses the psychological toll of war, its **narrative** follows a descent into moral collapse. The **metanarrative** operates

at a higher level, reframing these events as a critique of Western militarism and interventionism in the Middle East. Design elements such as the inverted American flag, the forced white phosphorus strike, in which the player is required to deploy chemical weaponry only to later confront civilian casualties, and the end sequence, where the player is compelled to account for their actions within a collapsing chain of command, function as ideological cues by directly implicating the player. These moments transform narrative events into confrontations with systemic responsibility rather than isolated plot twists.

### Definition of Metanarrative Integration Tools

In this research, a **metanarrative integration tool** is understood as any narrative, mechanical, or aesthetic device that positions the player in relation to an ideological framework by shaping how meaning, agency, and responsibility are experienced. These tools do not simply convey ideology through representation; rather, they operate by structuring the player’s involvement in systems of legitimacy, morality, and power.

Crucially, integration tools function at the boundary between narrative and metanarrative (see Figure 2). They enable games to move beyond the depiction of ideological themes and toward the active production of ideological positioning through affect, constraint, symbolic framing, and interaction. Their effectiveness therefore depends not on their formal properties alone, but on how they realign the player’s role within the game’s representational structure.



**Figure 2:** Representational layers with integration tools positioning

The diagram represents fourth wall breaks separately from other integration tools. This distinction reflects their functional specificity: whereas most metanarrative integration tools operate continuously throughout narrative development, fourth wall breaks function as punctual interventions. They take the form of momentary ruptures that cut across narrative progression and retroactively reorganize thematic meaning. This distinction is examined in detail in the following subsection.

## Tool Typology

Across the analyzed corpus, five recurrent categories of metanarrative integration tools were identified. These categories are not mutually exclusive, and individual games frequently employ multiple tools in combination. While all five categories recur across the titles included in this article, the examples discussed below are illustrative rather than exhaustive and are used to show how these devices manifest within specific game contexts.

### *Fourth wall breaks / Boundary disruption tools*

These disrupt the assumed separation between fictional world and player, reconfiguring how responsibility and awareness are distributed. In the case of fourth wall interactions, this disruption may produce either *alienation*, by foregrounding the constructed nature of the medium, or *convergence*, by collapsing fictional consequence and player accountability into a shared experiential space (Pinto and Luz 2024).

*Doki Doki Literature Club* illustrates this distinction clearly. Sayori's suicide, retrospectively framed through the player's prior dialogue choices, functions as an affective fourth wall break that generates a convergence effect, per Pinto and Luz 2024, by blurring fiction and reality to provoke emotional engagement and feelings of responsibility toward youth mental health. The narrative remains structurally unchanged, yet the moment operates metanarratively by repositioning the player within the game's ideological frame, foregrounding the issue of mental health in teenage populations. By contrast, Monika's later direct address of the player also breaks the fourth wall but produces an alienation effect (Brecht 1949), exposing the game's artifice and shifting attention toward its constructed nature. Together, these moments demonstrate that metanarrative integration depends not on the presence of a device such as a fourth wall break, but on how it is deployed to position the player ideologically.

As mentioned earlier, fourth wall breaks are highlighted differently in this research because, unlike most other integration tools, they operate as momentary and often unexpected interventions rather than as continuously present design structures. While many integration tools persist throughout play, linking ideology to narrative, mechanics, or aesthetics over time, fourth wall breaks function as punctual ruptures whose impact often lies in their capacity to retroactively reframe both theme and narrative.

This effect is evident in the concluding sequence of *Spec Ops: The Line*, where Konrad's retrospective address operates as a fourth wall break that creates a convergence effect and abruptly reorients the game's thematic frame. What had previously been experienced under the assumption of heroic intervention is reframed as complicity and moral failure. This sudden thematic shift compels a retrospective reappraisal of the narrative, transforming earlier actions, once interpreted as justified or necessary, into evidence of the player's implication within a system of moral disengagement. Looking back, Konrad's question, '*Do you feel like a hero yet?*,' appears less directed at Walker as a character than at the player, crystallizing the shift from narrative identification to personal implication. A comparable mechanism operates in *BioShock*'s '*Would you kindly*' moment, which likewise exposes player compliance within a system of control and redirects attention from character motivation to player complicity.

The key difference between these cases lies in their narrative aftermath. *Spec Ops: The Line* ends (almost) immediately following this confrontation, leaving the

ideological rupture unresolved and ethically destabilizing. *BioShock*, by contrast, continues beyond the revelation, offering a form of narrative catharsis that partially absorbs the rupture back into a restored sense of agency. In both cases, fourth wall breaks function not as isolated devices but as amplified integration moments whose force derives from their timing, framing, and capacity to reorganize the player's ideological positioning.

### *Agency-Subversion Tools*

Agency-subversion tools destabilize the player's sense of autonomy by revealing choice as constrained, illusory, or retrospectively coerced. Rather than removing agency outright, these tools expose how player action is structured within ideological systems that limit what can be chosen, justified, or resisted. Their effectiveness lies in reconfiguring agency from a presumed player attribute into an object of interrogation.

In *BioShock*, the 'Would you kindly' moment reframes prior gameplay as an exercise in programmed obedience, repositioning agency as an ideological construct embedded within the game's systemic logic rather than a function of player freedom. A comparable mechanism operates in *Spec Ops: The Line* during the white phosphorus mission, where progression is possible only through the execution of an atrocity. The player's lack of alternative options transforms compliance into implication, exposing how moral responsibility is enforced through mechanical necessity rather than narrative choice.

*Doki Doki Literature Club* presents a different articulation of agency subversion: scripted dialogue choices and the writing poems mini-game, create the illusion of influence and player control, while subsequent events retroactively invalidate that agency, repositioning the player as complicit within a preordained system.

Across these cases, agency-subversion tools function not by eliminating player action, but by making the limits of action visible. By confronting players with the structural conditions under which choices are made, these tools integrate metanarrative critique into gameplay, transforming agency itself into an ideological site of reflection.

### *Symbolic-Environmental Tools*

Symbolic-environmental tools embed ideological meaning within spatial design, iconography, soundscape, and environmental composition. Rather than relying on explicit exposition or dialogue, these tools operate through persistent atmospheric cues that frame how players interpret the world they inhabit. Ideology is thus conveyed indirectly, through what the game world emphasizes, naturalizes, or renders oppressive.

In *Spec Ops: The Line*, the inverted American flag, visible in the menu and intro credits (see Figure 3), before narrative context is established, signals ideological tension from the outset. Drawing on a widely recognized symbol of protest against U.S. military intervention, particularly during the Iraq War protests of the early 2000s, this visual cue frames the game's events within a critique of Western interventionism (see Figure 4). This framing is reinforced by Dubai's progressive collapse, where buried landmarks and sand-filled interiors reflect moral and civilizational decay. A comparable logic operates in *BioShock*, where the architectural ruin of Rapture and its environmental storytelling communicate the failure of objectivist ideology through spatial exploration rather than authorial exposition or narrative declaration.



**Figure 3:** Inverted flag in the menu of *Spec Ops: The Line* (2K, 2012)



**Figure 4:** Iraq war protests – Dupont Circle; Washington, DC (29 September 2002)

*This War of Mine* embeds ideology in domestic environments marked by scarcity and deterioration, positioning civilian survival spaces as sites of structural violence and political neglect. *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* extends symbolic–environmental integration beyond the visual, using sensory distortion and binaural audio to structure perception itself, reflecting how meaning is constructed under psychosis, visually through pattern recognition, audibly with intrusive voices, symbolizing epistemic instability overall.

Across these cases, symbolic–environmental tools function as persistent ideological scaffolding, framing player interpretation through space and sensation rather than explicit statements within the game or the narrative.

### *Ethical-Structure Tools*

Ethical-structure tools integrate ideology by organizing play around moral constraint, unavoidable trade-offs, and responsibility bottlenecks. Rather than presenting ethics as optional or explicitly articulated choices, these tools embed moral positioning into the conditions under which play progresses, limiting the possibility of ethical detachment.

In *This War of Mine*, scarcity, irreversible consequences, and the absence of optimal outcomes position the player within the ethics of civilian survival under siege. Decisions such as stealing from other survivors or neglecting the ill become structurally unavoidable, transforming mechanical necessity into moral implication. The system does not ask the player to judge right and wrong; it forces them to inhabit morally degraded conditions.

A similar but less explicit logic operates in *Spec Ops: The Line*. Many ethically

charged moments are not presented as clear or binary decisions but are embedded within narrative flow and mechanical escalation. Actions such as choosing between saving Gould or the civilians, or how the player responds to civilians' attack after Lugo's death, are sometimes framed ambiguously and, in other cases, not signaled as choices at all. Their ethical implications often become apparent only retrospectively, or across repeated playthroughs. Moral responsibility is therefore obscured rather than foregrounded, allowing the player to act according to their own moral intuition before later being implicated without having been granted reflective distance at the moment that action took place and they made their decisions.

Across these cases, ethical-structure tools operate by shaping what kinds of actions are possible, visible, or unavoidable. Moral engagement emerges not through explicit branching paths, but through systems that bind progression to ethical compromise, revealing how responsibility is allocated through design rather than choice presentation.

### *Systemic-Framing Tools*

Systemic-framing tools integrate metanarratives by embedding ideological assumptions directly into gameplay systems, progression loops, and reward structures. Rather than conveying values through dialogue or explicit narrative claims, these tools define what counts as success, efficiency, or rational action through the logic of play itself. Ideology is therefore not represented but enacted: players must conform to the system's priorities in order to progress, regardless of their narrative intentions or personal values.

While ethical-structure tools operate at the level of decision architecture and responsibility allocation, structuring how players become morally implicated through constrained action, systemic-framing tools operate at the level of normative horizon. They do not primarily reorganize individual decisions, but define the standards of rationality, success, and legitimacy within which those decisions acquire meaning. If ethical-structure tools bind progression to moral compromise, systemic-framing tools determine what counts as reasonable or necessary within the system itself.

Although these categories may appear overlapping in their effects, the distinction lies in their mode of implication: ethical-structure tools confront players with morally compromised decisions under constraint, whereas systemic-framing tools normalize and reward those compromises through the logic of the system itself.

*This War of Mine* offers a clear illustration. Survival depends on actions such as theft, exploitation, or moral compromised choices that often conflict with the humanitarian values articulated everywhere in the game's fiction. The mechanics do not present these acts as failures; instead, they are structurally necessary. There are no "wrong" choices in mechanical terms, only justifiable ones under systemic pressure. Stealing food or medicine from vulnerable civilians becomes rational, even defensible, because the system frames survival as the primary metric of success. Scarcity thus functions as a metanarrative about civilian life under war economies, where moral agency is constrained by structure rather than intention.

Related dynamics appear in *Spec Ops: The Line* and *BioShock* through ludonarrative dissonance. In both cases, progression systems reward violence, compliance, or efficiency while the narrative critiques those very behaviors. Rather than signaling a design flaw, this dissonance operates as a systemic-framing tool: players are compelled to participate in ideologically compromised systems in order to advance. In *BioShock*, the reward loop reinforces instrumental obedience long before the 'Would you kindly' revelation reframes that compliance ideologically. In *Spec Ops*, mechanical escalation normalizes increasingly destructive actions,

rendering ethical collapse a function of systemic momentum rather than explicit choice.

Across these cases, systemic framing positions players within ideological logics, such as utilitarian calculation, militarized rationality, or survivalist ethics without requiring explicit narrative endorsement. The metanarrative emerges not from explicit narrative declaration, but from the systemic rationalities that the player must enact in order to continue.

### **Cross-Game Recurrence**

Across the analyzed corpus, the integration tools discussed above recur with varying degrees of emphasis and explanatory weight. Individual games privilege certain mechanisms over others, yet the repeated appearance of boundary rupture, agency subversion, ethical structuring, symbolic-environmental framing, and systemic constraint indicates a shared structural logic. This recurrence does not arise from overlapping themes or genres, but from comparable strategies for repositioning the player from narrative participation toward broader ideological implication.

Other mechanisms, such as flashbacks and retrospective recontextualization, foreshadowing, and metareferential commentary, are also present across the corpus and contribute to metanarrative articulation. However, in the context of the present analysis, these elements function as supporting or auxiliary mechanisms rather than as primary integration tools. For example, metareferential commentary appears in most of the examined titles, but with limited structural impact when compared to tools that directly reconfigure agency, responsibility, or systems of progression. Their role is therefore complementary rather than foundational within the typology developed here.

The goal of this section is not to exhaustively catalogue every mechanism involved in metanarrative construction, but to identify recurring categories based on their functional role in mediating transitions between narrative engagement and ideological positioning. By foregrounding tools that consistently reorganize player responsibility, affordance, and evaluative frameworks, this research proposes a functional typology rather than a closed taxonomy. This approach supports comparative analysis while remaining open to refinement as additional mechanisms and configurations are examined.

## **DISCUSSION**

This article approaches metanarrative integration not through isolated case readings, but by tracing recurrent design mechanisms across a selected set of entertainment games. Tables 1 and 2 synthesize these patterns, mapping both the technical means through which integration occurs and the thematic concerns toward which it is directed. Rather than presenting results in a conclusive sense, this discussion reflects on the structural implications of these recurrences.

Table 1 highlights the distribution of integration tools across the corpus. Fourth wall disruptions, agency subversion, ethical constraint systems, environmental storytelling, and systemic framing mechanisms recur across titles with varied genres and aesthetic traditions. Their distribution confirms that metanarrative integration does not depend on a single technique or genre convention, but on the repeated use of design structures that reposition players in relation to responsibility, agency, and interpretation. While individual games emphasize different tools, no title relies on narrative alone to articulate its broader critical stance.

Tool	Spec Ops	BioShock	This War of Mine	Hellblade	DDLC
Fourth wall Breaks	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ludonarrative Dissonance	✓	✓		✓	
Environmental Storytelling	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Ethical Dilemmas	✓	✓	✓		✓
Sensory Techniques	✓			✓	✓
Symbolism	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Subversion of Agency	✓	✓			✓
Moral Decision-Making Systems	✓	✓	✓		

**Table 1:** Comparative analysis of metanarrative integration tools across selected games.

Table 2 complements this structural view by showing convergence at the thematic level. Despite differences in setting and genre, the analyzed games repeatedly orient integration toward concerns such as illusion of choice, moral ambiguity, psychological struggle, and social or political critique. The alignment between tables 1 and 2 suggests that these themes are not merely representational topics, but emerge from the way integration tools operate in concert. Ideological meaning is thus enacted through play rather than conveyed through exposition or narrative resolution.

Theme	Spec Ops	BioShock	This War of Mine	Hellblade	DDLC
Critique Ideological Extremes	✓	✓	✓		
Psychological Trauma/Mental Health	✓		✓	✓	✓
Illusion of Choice and Freedom	✓	✓	✓		✓
Moral Ambiguity/Ethical Conflict	✓	✓	✓		✓
Social/Political Critique	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Reality and Fiction Blurring	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Psychological/Emotional Struggle	✓		✓	✓	✓

**Table 2:** Comparative analysis of thematic metanarrative integration across selected games.

Several patterns stand out across both tables. Agency is consistently destabilized, either through explicit revelation, as in *BioShock*, or through delayed implication, as in *Spec Ops: The Line*. Ethical responsibility is rarely presented as a clear decision point; instead, it emerges retrospectively, through scarcity, irreversible outcomes, or structural coercion. Sensory and environmental design further support this process by embedding ideological cues into perception itself, as seen in the ruined spaces of Dubai and Rapture, or in the audiovisual distortions of *Hellblade*. In *Doki Doki Literature Club*, sensory techniques operate through contrast rather than environmental storytelling: the game's pastel visuals, cheerful music, and dating-sim aesthetics sharply conflict with its themes of depression and emotional neglect. As the game progresses and its fictional structure collapses, audiovisual glitches, visual artifacts, and distorted sound cues become increasingly intrusive, reframing affect itself as a site of metanarrative disruption rather than a stable aesthetic layer. Even in *Doki Doki Literature Club*, where environmental symbolism is minimal, systemic and affective tools perform analogous positioning functions.

Taken together, these patterns support the central claim of this article: metanarrative integration in video games operates through identifiable, recurring design mechanisms rather than through exceptional narrative moments. While additional tools and techniques exist beyond those systematized here, the typology developed in this paper aims to capture the core structures through which entertainment games consistently transition players from narrative participation to broader ideological implication.

The value of this contribution lies less in cataloging every possible device than in establishing a functional vocabulary for analyzing how games become, at times, more than ‘just a game.’ By focusing on integration tools as design practices rather than interpretive outcomes, this framework opens pathways for future empirical work on player reception, comparative genre analysis, and experimental studies of ideological engagement in interactive media.

## **FUTURE WORK**

This article represents one stage within a broader, multi-year research programme examining how video games create emotional involvement and use it to integrate ideological meaning through design. The present contribution focuses on identifying and systematizing recurrent metanarrative integration tools through autoethnographic analysis. Several complementary lines of inquiry are currently underway or planned, extending this foundation in both theoretical and empirical directions.

First, a related proceedings article, for publication in 2026, establishes the broader research gap concerning the under-theorization of metanarratives in video games when understood through Lyotard’s original conceptualization. That work situates this study within a larger critical game studies context, clarifying why existing approaches to narrative, ethics, or serious games do not fully account for how games legitimize, reproduce, or interrogate ideological frameworks through play.

Second, a forthcoming journal article that formalizes the autoethnographic model employed here as an analytical model for game studies. That paper focuses explicitly on the methodological contribution, detailing how experiential logging, iterative coding, and reflexive auditing can be systematically combined to study player positioning, affective rupture, and ideological implication without collapsing analysis into subjective reportage.

Third, an additional empirical study is planned that triangulates the autoethnographic findings with data collected from player participants interviews. By comparing experiential patterns identified by the researchers with player-reported responses, this work aims to examine the degree to which games consistently affect perceptions, emotions, or reflective effects across different audiences and how they contribute to social discourse. Together, these studies will extend the present typology beyond exploratory identification toward a more robust empirical grounding.

These strands are intended to remain analytically distinct but conceptually aligned. Rather than converging prematurely on definitive claims, the broader project treats metanarrative integration as a layered phenomenon that benefits from methodological pluralism and iterative refinement.

## **CONCLUSION**

This article has argued that video games can become more than ‘just games’ not through exceptional narratives or explicit political statements, but through recurring design mechanisms that reposition players within ideological frameworks during play. By identifying and categorizing metanarrative integration tools, this study shifts attention away from thematic interpretation alone and toward the structural means by which ideology is enacted interactively.

Across a diverse corpus of entertainment games, the analysis demonstrates that metanarrative integration operates through boundary disruptions, agency subversion, ethical constraint, symbolic-environmental framing, and systemic reinforcement. These tools do not merely communicate ideas; they structure involvement, redistribute responsibility, and condition how legitimacy, morality, and agency are experienced. Their recurrence across titles and genres suggests a shared design logic rather than isolated authorial intent.

Importantly, this typology is not proposed as an exhaustive taxonomy, nor as a claim about authorial motivation or player reception. Its value lies instead in offering a functional vocabulary for analyzing how games transition players from narrative participation to ideological implication. By treating integration tools as design practices rather than interpretive outcomes, the framework accommodates variation in genre, aesthetics, and player response while retaining analytical coherence.

In doing so, this article aims to contribute to ongoing debates in game studies concerning agency, immersion, ethics, and production of meaning in interactive media. It also aims to provide a foundation for future empirical, comparative, and methodological work on how games engage players not only as audiences or operators, but as positioned participants within broader cultural and ideological systems.

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