

Portraying Unfavorable Sociocultural Circumstances Through the Videoludic Picaresque

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Picaresque literature has portrayed the lives of people from the margins of society since the 16th century (Maravall 1986; Ardila 2015). Focusing on rogues, it reflected on how oppressive sociocultural circumstances gave birth to new creative and unlawful ways of surviving outside the norm. These literary texts mirrored real sociocultural circumstances from the different cultures that produced them. The real-life problems that the lower classes and ethnic minorities faced in incipient urban spaces were fictionalized and dramatized in different criminal contexts. Novels like *Lazarillo de Tormes* (Anonymous 1554), *Guzmán de Alfarache* (Alemán 1599-1604) or *The English Rogue* (Head and Kirkman 1665-1680) featured narrative episodes and characters where delinquency, institutional corruption or racial and economic discrimination became the bread and butter experienced by the main characters. Sometimes with intention of criticizing the downfall of society or pitying the lower classes, sometimes showing exotic adventures of charismatic hyperbolic antiheroes, picaresque fiction acknowledged the pressure that some parts of society received.

As part of what it has been called the “literature of the poor” (Rodríguez Gómez 2001), picaresque literature showed early fictionalized examples of intersectionality. It was one of the first genres that considered the effects of class, gender, ethnicity and even sexuality in oppressive settings with rogues as protagonists (Maravall 1986, 12; Cruz 1999). Rogues embodied all sorts of adverse sociocultural circumstances that were relevant in the cultures that used them, becoming characters frequently used to portray hardships non-normative ways of living, and delinquency. Through the popularity of rogues, picaresque literature quickly expanded its influence across European literature and other media until it reached the birth of video games in the last decades of the 20th century.

Since then, rogue characters and picaresque settings have become popular and frequent in video games, creating a new renaissance of picaresque fiction in a completely different cultural medium. This popularity seems to be tied to the interest in portraying contemporary sociocultural challenges that different cultures face across the world. In fact, current sociocultural and economic circumstances have

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similarities with those that gave birth to picaresque literature centuries ago, connecting the past and the present through the life of rogues. For example, oppressive urban spaces with high population density where the economic differences were explicit and abundant (Maravall 1986, 132; Wilde et al. 2016; Cabrera-Barona et al. 2019;).

As happened centuries ago, rogues are used as tools to express how people may react or may be treated in certain oppressive settings based on their sociocultural circumstances. Gender, racial discrimination and social class are recurrent topics in the depiction of rogues in contemporary video games. The portrayal of these social and political identities follows the literary traits that we observe in picaresque literature but updated to new sensibilities. This way, consciously or unconsciously, developers and players express and experience the conflicts that arise when certain identities are mistreated in favor of others.

This proposal analyzes how current sociocultural challenges are portrayed through the videoludic picaresque. It compares these circumstances with those that gave birth to picaresque literature many years ago, showing that, in both cases, picaresque fiction is part of an ongoing cultural interest in exploring non-normative ways of living in oppressive societies. It gives a socially conscious and historicist answer to why rogues are so popular nowadays and how their current videoludic portrayal is intertwined with literature, other media, and society.

This research also demonstrates that video games are children of their time and circumstances, linked to their historical context consciously or unconsciously. Similarly, it shows that players may experience the effects of intersectionality in video games through certain characters and stories connected to different cultural traditions. Thus, it follows the socially conscious path made by previous game scholars like Souvik Mukherjee (2017), Bo Ruberg (2020) or Abraham Benjamin (2022).

As an additional point, this research acknowledges the intermedial differences and coincidences between media influenced by picaresque fiction that had an impact on the videoludic picaresque and the rogue as a literary myth. I have talked about this circumstance before (Matencio 2024a; Matencio 2024b; Matencio and Apperley 2024; Matencio 2025), but it keeps being researched and expanded due to its many nuances and cultural implications.

To achieve the objectives of this research, I obtain data through close playing video games that feature rogues and picaresque stories. Some of these games are *Thief* (Eidos-Montréal 2014), *Dragon Age Origins* (BioWare 2009) and *Dragon Age 2* (BioWare 2011), *Final Fantasy XII* (Square Enix 2006), *Mafia III* (Hangar 13 2016), or the *Baldur's Gate* series (1998-2023), *Metaphor Re:Fantazio* (Studio Zero 2024) among others. The list of video games is susceptible to extensions since this is a work in progress. Similarly, I close read relevant literary picaresque sources from the 16th century to the 21st century to obtain pertinent literary data. The data obtained is analyzed considering previous theories that link picaresque literature with sociocultural and economic circumstances in certain time periods (Maravall 1986; Rawlings 1992; Mierau 2019; Kalifa 2019); current research about contemporary adverse sociocultural contexts (Neilson 2015; Milanovic 2016; Shin et al. 2023), and Game Studies research on the representation, implementation and consequences of these contexts in video games (Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter 2009; Mukherjee 2017;

Ruberg 2020; Planells de la Maza 2021; Benjamin 2022; Torres-Toukoumidis et al. 2023; Eklund et al. 2024).

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