

Aesthetics of Holarchic Narrative Design: Participatory Pleasures of Game Storyworlds

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ABSTRACT

Many contemporary video games distribute narrative information across fragmented, optional elements rather than presenting a single, linear sequence. This paper examines this design approach through the concept of Holarchic Storytelling (HS), a narrative system in which players construct meaning by engaging with interconnected yet self-contained narrative units such as notes, recordings, environmental details, or short sub-stories. Based on Arthur Koestler's holon theory – a part that is simultaneously a whole – the paper argues that these fragments function as autonomous narrative experiences while contributing to the coherence of a shared storyworld.

Rather than framing HS solely as a structural technique, the paper approaches it as an aesthetic system shaped by player activity, emphasising the interpretive labour involved in exploration, pattern recognition, and narrative inference. Situating HS within theories of storyworlds, systemic narrative, and participatory aesthetics, the paper shows how games such as Alan Wake II, Elden Ring, and P.T. mobilise fragmentation and coherence to make interpretation itself a central aesthetic experience.

Keywords

holarchic storytelling, story holons, storyworld, creatorship, narrative system.

INTRODUCTION

As Victor Sanchez previously mentioned, a narrative system often relies on not only to be played out, but also to be influenced by players, which is feasible by “creating a system that provides the rules on how the narrative unfolds” (Sanchez, 2018). Rules are often critical in shaping a player's relationship with game mechanics and the overall experience, to the point that the beauty of a game sometimes relies on how players bend these rules to shape the system. Within this sense, as Miguel Sicart suggests, all aesthetic theories about video games are ultimately theories of gameplay (Sicart, 2023, p. 3). To understand the aesthetics of a narrative system is to understand how a set of rules actively shapes players' experiences and expectations, and ultimately how a system arouses “emotional responses” in players (Hunicke et al., 2004). In other words, the aesthetics of a narrative system can be investigated only through an understanding of its structure, and such structures are shaped by rules – determining which elements are meaningful and which

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are not (Meakin, 2024). All this is to say that a narrative system, although still contributing to a controlled experience, paves the way for more storytelling possibilities driven by players.

It is worth noting that there is no singular narrative system (Sanchez, 2018), which makes it necessary to narrow what type of narrative system is the subject of discussion. In this article, the aim is to explore the aesthetics of a narrative system that has become more prominently used in video games in recent years – holarchic storytelling (HS). It is a narrative design approach in which designers rely on story collectibles – such as notes, recorded messages, or VHS tapes – to develop a sense of a storyworld in which a collection of sub-narratives coexists. Each of these story collectibles is independent in itself, meaning that it has a beginning and an end; at the same time, they are interconnected, whether thematically, sequentially, or implicitly. In this paper, these story collectibles are referred to as *holons*, meaning “part–whole,” a concept rooted in the work of Arthur Koestler (Edwards, 2017), to emphasise that a holon functions independently within a system while simultaneously contributing to a larger whole. Subsequently, HS can be understood as the communication of narrative information through interconnected and fragmented story holons. By analysing the aesthetics of HS, three aspects will be explored: (a) the dynamics between designers and players, (b) how HS functions as a system, and (c) how HS can be evaluated in comparison to other common narrative structures in video games.

TOWARD A THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDING OF HOLARCHIC STORYTELLING

One of the key subject matters of Arthur Koestler in his book *The Ghost in The Machine* (1967) is about differentiating between hierarchical and holarchic systems. Koestler used a parable to explain this distinction: the story of two watchmakers who assemble watches using comparable but structurally different methods. One assembles the watch bit by bit, with each tiny component added directly to the whole. The other divides the watch into multiple standalone sub-assemblies, each of which can be built independently before being integrated into the final mechanism. The problem with the first method is that if the structure breaks, everything must be disassembled and reassembled from scratch. In the second method, if a sub-assembly fails, it can be repaired without disturbing the rest of the system. Koestler emphasises the importance of these sub-assemblies: the section responsible for showing the date, for instance, does not disrupt the rest of the watch when broken, yet when functioning, it contributes meaningfully to the larger mechanism while retaining its own distinct purpose.

He relied on this parable to develop a broader argument, more accurately, a critique, of how we tend to perceive and emphasise hierarchical structures in ways that remove the element of relativity and, in doing so, atomise a part from the other parts to which it belongs (p. 67). “An individual is usually defined as an indivisible, self-contained unit, with a separate, independent existence of its own,” Koestler wrote, “but individuals in this absolute sense are nowhere found in nature, or society, just as we nowhere find absolute wholes.” An individual subjectivity is always defined in relation to larger structures, family, community, society, and the study of the self is impossible without considering the broader whole in which that self is embedded. Koestler developed this argument in response to the rise of atomistic approaches in scientific fields, particularly those shaped

by behaviourism and reductionism, in order to highlight the systematic interdependence between parts of a whole rather than treating each part as if it existed in isolation from the factors that shape it.

The reason these parts can behave in an independent manner while remaining connected to a larger system tie back to two kinds of rules that create what Koestler calls “stability” and “cohesion” (p. 54). Koestler differentiates between the rules that govern a part internally and the rules that govern its relationship to other parts. For example, a university is typically composed of multiple departments, mostly educational, some administrative. Each department has its own internal rules, focus, and procedures, yet all operate under the broader regulations of the university to align with the institution’s overarching agenda. The self-governing rules of each entity are designed to achieve goals consistent with the university’s broader vision, while still intersecting, collaborating, and communicating with the other departments within the organisation. This whole, the university in our example, can be dissected into multiple parts, but it cannot be reduced to the sum of those parts. A university cannot be reduced to the relationships between its departments, nor can it be reduced to a single shared vision.

Koestler also acknowledges that it is almost impossible to find a hierarchy so monolithic that it forms a perfectly rigid structure. Even in a control hierarchy – such as a totalitarian regime – the channels of authority are so strict that each holon cannot function independently of the system. A linear, nominal form of storytelling may fall into such a category, where each holon – character, plot, scene, dialogue – cannot be meaningfully separated from the whole. A holarchic structure, on the other hand, permits a degree of fluidity, where each holon constitutes a hierarchy in itself because it possesses its own set of rules that enables it to retain a sense of independence. He also notes that in some complex holarchies it becomes more difficult to dissect each holon from another, as he wrote: “all hierarchies have a ‘part within part’ character, but this is more easily recognised in ‘structural’ than in ‘functional’ hierarchies – such as the skills of language and music which weave patterns within patterns in time” (p. 59). Essentially, a structural hierarchy is more evident and physical, so the role of each holon is easier to detect. A book is a clear example: it consists of chapters, each chapter contains sections, each section contains sub-sections, and each sub-section embodies a collection of sentences, and so on. In writing this piece, for instance, it has been necessary to quote sentences or paragraphs from the original sources; each quotation functions as a holon, and can be separated from the holarchy because it is simple to identify the beginning and end of that unit. In a more functional holarchic structure, however, identifying individual holons becomes less tangible. A philharmonic orchestra may deliver a harmonious performance composed of many instruments and sonic layers, yet during the act of listening it is difficult to dissect each holon, even though the “patterns within patterns” remain present.

Almost five decades after Koestler, and in response to ambiguity surrounding defining transmedia as a term, James Dalby (2021), in *Holarchic Media: When Transmedia Just Isn’t Transmedia Enough*, proposes a key distinction between transmedia as a noun and transmedia as an adjective. Henry Jenkins (2017) had earlier suggested that, when used adjectivally, transmedia must always modify a specific domain, such as storytelling, design, or education. In this sense, a transmedia experience refers to a constellation of multimedia elements that together produce something “greater than the sum of its parts” (p. 2).

When treated as a noun, however, transmedia has undergone a degree of conceptual drift. This confusion is further reinforced by the existence of Transmedia Studies as a field, which implies the presence of a definable object called “transmedia.” By comparison, we do not encounter a field called Digital Studies in isolation; rather, we find terms such as digital media, digital culture, or digital storytelling, where “digital” consistently functions as a modifier. In its nominal form, transmedia is often used to describe large-scale, interconnected media experiences, but this usage has expanded to the point where almost any contemporary media configuration can be considered transmedia. As a result, the term risks describing too much, and therefore loses analytical precision.

To move away from these ambiguities, Dalby proposes the use of an alternative term – *holarchic media* – to describe uniquely transmediated experiences. These are configurations in which each component operates as a self-contained encounter while simultaneously contributing to a larger, unified whole. As Dalby notes, such experiences exhibit the characteristics of a holarchy: from one perspective, they form part of a coherent and identifiable system with discernible boundaries, while from another, they function as distinct touchpoints with their own identities. In response, Dalby introduces a terminology that parallels Arthur Koestler’s framework.

What remains less developed in Dalby’s formulation, however, is the degree of flexibility present in Koestler’s concept. Koestler emphasises that, depending on the structure and function of a system, the boundaries – or “edges” – of a holon may become difficult to identify. A structural holon may retain clearly defined limits, whereas a functional holon may be embedded within ongoing activity and therefore resist isolation. This becomes particularly visible in *Control* (Remedy Entertainment, 2019), where short films appear in two distinct forms. Some are integrated directly into gameplay and trigger automatically, functioning as inseparable parts of the moment-to-moment experience; others appear as collectible videos distributed throughout the storyworld, which players can access independently. The former, due to their integration, are difficult to separate from the larger system, whereas the latter possess more clearly defined boundaries, with identifiable beginnings and endings.

James Dalby further elaborates his concept of Holarchic Media through the example of Instagram. On a platform such as Instagram, each component is connected to others through the underlying logic of its programming. This structure not only enables smooth transitions between different functions but also contributes to a sense of aesthetic coherence, as all elements operate within a shared hierarchical system. More specifically, Instagram is composed of an effectively limitless number of channels – some public, others private; some focused on particular themes, such as sports news, while others remain more varied in content. Each channel contains posts made up of images, videos, and accompanying text. In addition, there are short-form visual elements – “stories” – which can be highlighted and preserved at the top of a channel. In this configuration, Instagram operates as the overarching whole, while its components function as semi-independent nodes that collectively produce the experience we identify as the platform.

What is particularly significant in Dalby’s development of Holarchic Media is his emphasis on the underlying logic that connects these holons, a logic that becomes especially visible in the Instagram example. This logic is implemented through programming: rather than simply aggregating a large body of related content, as might be the case with subscription

services that aim to simulate an “ultimate” experience without strong internal cohesion, Instagram’s architecture establishes clear relationships between its elements, thus forming a structured hierarchy.

The same analogy can be traced in video games. Thus far, the aim has been to theorise a type of narrative system in video games where all parts are distributed across the storyworld, creating a unique experience individually while shaping the bigger experience. It is a plausible question to explore that why recently such narrative has become more common in video games.

FINDING CREATORSHIP IN HOLARCHIC STORYTELLING

It has been more than a decade since the rise of competing entertainment platforms, particularly subscription-based services, have placed commercial pressure on game developers and publishers to increase both the perceived value and the attention-retention of their work. As Brendan Keogh explains, “The general leading business model of the game industry right now is about holding players within a game service for as long as humanly possible... You want players to just hang around for as long as possible and not go play something else” (Amenabar, 2022). In *The Video Game Industry Does Not Exist* (2023), Keogh further argues that the ever-increasing complexity of game production often prevents artists and designers from resisting these pressures. Many developers, he notes, would prefer to make work that reflects their own creative vision, but the economic conditions of the industry push them toward practices and structures, such as excessive content, retention-driven design, or inflated runtimes, that they might not otherwise choose if financial stability were guaranteed.

Nonetheless, some of these practices are a healthy, creative response, while others are described as “predatory,” such as loot boxes, where players are tricked into believing they are drawing randomised items out of boxes in exchange for payment (Bedingfield, 2022). The focus here, however, is on one of the creative responses that requires more investigation: practices that seek deeper player involvement through participatory storytelling and enable what has been referred to as cognitive autonomy. To understand this more fully, we need to pay attention to a broader movement in video game development. Alongside the commercial pressures mentioned above, the advancement of both hardware and software technologies has given developers the opportunity to design broader and more interconnected spaces in their games. This shift has significantly contributed to open-world games becoming the norm for highly budgeted video game productions. For instance, in 2007 only seven games were released in this category, while within the span of ten years, by 2017, this number had surged to twenty-five (Moreno, 2025). Open-world often refers to games that “provide a large, freely explorable environment, where players can move and interact with the game world with minimal restrictions” (Anto et al., 2024, p. 2). One key detail must be added: the ability for players to move between different sections of the map without encountering load screens or any sense of discontinuity in their experience. This level of seamlessness was made possible by more powerful hardware and by development tools capable of rendering these large environments efficiently.

This spatial evolution was not only about an increase in scale; the level of visual detail also noticeably improved, as did the number of interactable objects within an environment. All of this paved the way for a more systematic approach to narration in video games, to a

point where it became less about storytelling and more about storyworld-telling. According to Sebastian Domsch (2013), “a storyworld in a video game is a mental construct made by the player that is triggered by a number of forms the player encounters during, but often also before and after gameplay” (p. 29). The emphasis here should be on “mental construct,” as it is critically connected to the cognitive autonomy of players: they must gather information, evaluate it, and form an understanding of the storyworld for themselves. This characteristic is central to the concept of the storyworld and helps delineate it from terms such as lore, mythos, or fictional world. As David Herman (2009) explains, the storyworld is a “global mental representation enabling interpreters to frame inferences about situations, characters, and occurrences either explicitly mentioned or implied by a narrative text or discourse” (p. 106). Marie-Laure Ryan (2019) similarly argues that the storyworld is inseparable from the textuality that underpins immersive experience; in other words, a video game storyworld plays a fundamental role in shaping the tone, theme, logic, and characteristics of the experience. Although it invites players to fill intentionally incomplete gaps within the narrative, “this experience cannot take place without the sense that the text projects a world that encompasses both characters and events” (p. 81). Taken together, these perspectives show that a storyworld does not serve as a blueprint for expanding audience imagination in the manner of collaborative participation. Rather, it operates as a lived experience that involves players in the active meaning-making of events, which aligns more closely with the concept of creatorship.

While authorship and readership theories imply a hierarchical relationship between the creator and the work of art, creatorship legitimises the audience’s role in shaping the experience to a significant degree (Fiadotau, 2015). This framework challenges the conventional binary of *authorship* versus *readership*, instead situating creatorship along a horizontal axis where authorial intent and player agency occupy opposite poles (Siewald, 2023). The closer a game aligns with authorial intent, the less agency players have to disrupt its hierarchical structure; conversely, the closer it moves toward player agency, the more the game itself functions as a creative tool.

Creatorship has increasingly emerged as a dominant way of engaging with storytelling across multiple artistic fields over the past few decades. To understand the need for creative participation in video games, it is useful to trace recurring patterns in other forms of art. One such example is the cut-up technique developed by Brion Gysin and William Burroughs, in which the artist rearranges snippets of text or images into new combinations to create an original work. “Cut-ups establish new connections between images, and one’s range of vision consequently expands,” Burroughs explained. “Plot has always had the definite function of stage direction, of getting the characters from here to there, and that will continue, but the new techniques, such as cut-up, will involve much more of the total capacity of the observer. It enriches the whole aesthetic experience, extends it” (Burroughs et al., 1978, pp. 10–12).

Notably, Burroughs did not treat creative participation as an alternative to more traditional, nominal experiences; rather, he viewed creatorship as an aesthetic expansion – an invitation for the audience to become more actively involved in meaning-making. He also criticised his contemporaries for their reluctance to embrace new technologies in storytelling, describing such resistance as an objection to innovation (Burroughs et al., 1978, p. 9).

If participation can be understood as a form of aesthetic pleasure derived from freedom of choice and multimediality, then what kind of pleasure emerges that is absent in nominal or even directed forms of participation? For many practitioners, art has long referred and redirected the audience toward social conditions, ideologies, or political agendas (Atkins, 2008, p. 55). Over time, however, this referential tendency evolved toward a more conversational mode of engagement, a type of work in which the audience can actively enter into dialogue with such topics (Frieling, 2008, p. 36). In this way and following Bourriaud's theory of relational aesthetics (2002), audience subjectivity can only be defined through encounters with other subjectivities (White, 2013, p. 24). Thus, creative and collaborative participation invite the audience to readjust their sense of self in relation to others – to reflect, evaluate, and assume responsibility for their position within that network (White, 2013, p. 25). This self-aware negotiation of one's subjectivity, rather than maintaining distance from it, is perhaps the aesthetic pleasure that arises from creatorship.

Sometimes, however, aesthetic pleasure arises from going against the grain – from seeking a sense of self in opposition to the nominal experience. Dadaism and its anti-aesthetic use of film and imagery exemplify this impulse, where “vision is made complex, connections between images are obscured, [and] sense and meaning are questioned” (Rees, 2011, p. 43). It was common in Dadaist films to see figures portrayed against light, objects physically placed on the film strip, abstract shapes layered over frames, or images multiplied and infused with taboo-breaking iconography. Tristan Tzara's *Seven Dada Manifestos* (1977) makes this agenda explicit, revealing how Dada sought to dismantle conventional structures to make room for radical individuality. Of course, it can be argued that the Dada movement was not entirely original in prioritising subjectivity over the established norms and values of the bourgeoisie. Yet Dada's approach to individuality aligns closely with the concept of creatorship: the artist rearranges fragments of reality – magazines, newspapers, found images – to construct new meanings. The resulting work, though built from the materials of the real world, reshapes that reality in accordance with the artist's perspective. Hannah Höch's *Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany* (1919) stands as a striking example of this practice.

This pattern is also traceable in experimental studio music, where the traditional role of the composer has been transformed into something altogether different. As sound recording technologies advanced, producers gained the ability to capture and manipulate sonic textures that could better express their ideas. Artists are no longer bound by a single language or a fixed set of instruments to translate their concepts; instead, studio composition allows them to combine, reshape, and recontextualise pre-existing sounds into new experimental experiences (Eno, 2017, pp. 185–187). Here, the line between artist and audience becomes increasingly blurred, as studios and digital software not only grant individuals access to vast libraries of sounds but also enable them to rearrange these materials into something closer to their own perceived realities.

It is plausible to think that when a user, a consumer, or an artist aims to take the helm of their experience, what they are really looking for is an epistemic access to their own autonomy, a kind of self-awareness that comes from voluntarily following certain rules. As Sageng (2014) notes, this is similar to the way the comic effect makes us aware of an incongruence in our cognition (p. 5). The same idea of autonomy can be found in Tzara's

notion of individuality in the Dada Manifestos, and in Burroughs's argument that individuality depends on the capacity of the observer. Sageng points out that autonomy is not only about being self-governed, but that it unfolds on two different layers. There are actions in which our desires shape the affordances we use to reach a goal when the world can be slightly bent towards our intention. This is called conative autonomy. Then there are actions in which those affordances shape our beliefs about how to reach a goal, and limit what kinds of actions are possible. Here, a person has to readjust and find the most appropriate path within those limits. This is known as cognitive autonomy (Sageng, 2014, pp. 5–6). For example, the Dadaists' desire to break the conventions and boundaries of art represents a form of conative autonomy. Their goal was clear, and their actions were not restricted by any existing belief system, since they could simply act to undo the norm. Burroughs's cut-up technique, on the other hand, sits closer to cognitive autonomy: even though the artist rearranges and recombines words and images, they must also respond to the materials at hand, adjusting their thinking to what the medium allows. In both cases, autonomy becomes a way of measuring how the act of creation shifts between control and negotiation.

Building on the ideas above, the distinction between creatorship and collaborative participation becomes much clearer. Creatorship is often a negotiation between a network of demands and a network of desires (Siewald, 2023, p. 722). In other words, an author may still structure a work to guide its outcome, yet the audience remains autonomous enough to reach that outcome through their own processes of thinking, evaluating, and forming personal strategies. In *Hollow Knight: Silksong* (Team Cherry, 2025), for instance, players must progress through the world of Pharloom by either confronting the formidable guardian at the grand gate or finding an alternative route filled with complex platforming challenges. The decision depends on the player's self-assessment: how confident they are in their skills, what they have in their inventory, and whether they are mentally ready to face each challenge. This is a form of cognitive autonomy, the aesthetic pleasure that arises from becoming self-aware of one's own subjectivity in action. By contrast, collaborative participation diminishes authorial control to such an extent that the player's agency alone determines the outcome, resembling what Sageng (2014) calls conative autonomy: when desire itself shapes the available affordances and bends the world toward intention.

THE EMERGENCE OF HOLARCHIC STORYTELLING

The concept of HS goes beyond theory and is regularly applied to various video games of all different scales. Its first emerging signs can be traced back to *Zork* (Infocom, 1980) and *Metroid* (Nintendo, 1986) to fully integrated applications of it into the gameplay by *Alan Wake II* (Remedy Entertainment, 2023) and *Blue Prince* (Dogubomb, 2025). Since HS tends to divide information of multiple narratives into different multimedia fragments, this has given developers opportunities for creating more gameplay values, turning their artworks into escape rooms. An escape room is restrictedly called a puzzle game "with a time limit, set in a locked room, played with a team, in the real world." (Hall, 2021) Conceptually, however, there are significant similarities between HS and escape rooms. In escape rooms, for example, participants are expected to gather all information they find, piece them together, and build solutions that can actively help them to escape the room. In HS, sometimes the end goal is actually to escape, such as *Prey* (Arkane, 2017) or to solve puzzles in general such as *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios, 2023), or at the very least,

gaining deeper understanding about a storyworld such as *Prince of Persia: The Lost Crown* (Ubisoft Montpellier, 2024). Escape rooms usually require a form of inductive thinking to go from pieces to greater conclusions, but the beauty of HS lies in its strength that can be used for both inductive and deductive thinking. Inductive thinking is a bottom-up approach where users understand a bigger fact based on multiple premises, while deductive thinking is the opposite, where the fact is obvious, but degrees of fact hinge upon finding multiple evidence (Sauce & Matzel, 2017). For example, from the beginning moment of *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware, 2022), players are notified that a major character called Godwyn the Golden is assassinated but the plot behind this event remains as a mystery to players to use their inductive thinking, piece together information, and find the degree of his assassination. Contrary, in a single psychological horror demo such as *P.T.* (Kojima Productions, 2014), in order to understand the situation players deal with, it is necessary to gather, interact, and theorise about every pieces of holons distributed in each loop.

Rule	Function
Holon Autonomy	Each narrative holon operates as a self-contained experience with a discernible beginning and end, allowing it to be encountered independently.
Holon Interdependence	Each holon contributes to a broader narrative configuration through thematic, contextual, or causal relations with other holons.
Distributed Narrative Structure	Narrative information is dispersed across multiple elements rather than delivered sequentially, encouraging non-linear engagement.
Conditional Accessibility	Access to holons depends on player action (e.g., exploration, interaction), resulting in variable narrative exposure.
Interpretive Gaps	Information is deliberately fragmented or withheld, requiring players to infer and reconstruct relationships between elements.
Systemic Coherence	All holons operate within a shared underlying logic, ensuring consistency across the storyworld despite fragmentation.
Cognitive Engagement	The system invites both inductive and deductive reasoning, positioning interpretation and reconstruction as central to the aesthetic experience.

Table 1: Aesthetic Rules of Holarchic Storytelling

The aesthetic experience of HS, however, does not arise solely from how narrative elements are represented, but also from how the system directs players to think through them. *Alan Wake II* provides an illuminating case study for expanding on the aesthetic dimension of HS in video games. Players initially assume the role of Saga Anderson, an FBI agent who arrives in Bright Falls to investigate a series of murders seemingly connected to a cult. Early in the experience, players encounter a radio show in which the host recounts an independent story about an elderly man with dementia who claims to have seen a woman presumed dead. This sub-narrative functions as a self-contained unit while simultaneously contributing to the thematic expansion of the broader storyworld. Each episode of the radio show is individually coherent, yet additional episodes are distributed throughout the game, allowing players to gradually assemble a more complete

understanding of the narrative. These fragments are not presented in a strictly linear sequence; instead, they are encountered across different acts and revisited through the “Mind Palace,” a system that allows players to organise and reflect on collected information. Through this process, players begin to recognise patterns and relationships between fragments, constructing a sense of narrative continuity from dispersed elements.

Access to these narrative units is often conditional. Players are required to solve puzzles, overcome obstacles, and progress through challenges in order to uncover them. This conditional structure increases the value of each fragment, as narrative information becomes both a reward and a tool, at times providing practical benefits such as codes or clues, and at other times revealing key developments in the story. At the same time, not all narrative elements are presented with the same degree of clarity. While some sub-narratives unfold in a relatively coherent manner, others are fragmented, non-linear, and deliberately ambiguous. The case of Thomas Zane, whose relationship to Alan Wake remains uncertain, exemplifies how the game invites interpretive engagement. Rather than resolving these ambiguities, the system encourages players to speculate, connect disparate elements, and construct their own interpretations. This process often extends beyond the game itself, as players engage in collective discussion and theorisation, reflecting a form of participatory “creatorship” associated with convergence culture, as described by Henry Jenkins (2006).

Crucially, this interpretive activity is made possible by the underlying coherence of the system. Despite its fragmentation, the storyworld operates according to a consistent internal logic, allowing players to assume that connections between narrative elements are meaningful rather than arbitrary. It is this balance between fragmentation and coherence that enables HS to function as an aesthetic system – one in which the experience emerges through the player’s active process of discovering, organising, and reconstructing narrative meaning (see Table 1).

CONCLUSION

In the literature, it has often been discussed that video games operate within a twofold structure: players are granted enough agency to individualise the act of play – allowing them to overcome challenges in different ways – yet when it comes to narrative, they frequently encounter a more fixed and less responsive structure. Over time, the concept of creatorship has enabled developers to extend this variability into narrative experience, whether by leaving gaps that stimulate players’ imagination or by constructing systems that require players to actively engage with the narrative. In such systems, players are encouraged to explore, collect fragments of story, connect them, and derive meaning through their own interpretive processes.

In this paper, this mode of narration has been conceptualised as Holarchic Storytelling, based on Arthur Koestler’s notion of the holon to emphasise that this form of storytelling operates as a system composed of interrelated yet self-contained elements. More importantly, HS has been examined here not only as a structural arrangement, but as an aesthetic system. Its aesthetic experience does not solely emerge from narrative representation, but from the cognitive processes it activates – namely, the player’s engagement in discovering, connecting, and reconstructing distributed narrative elements. In this sense, HS foregrounds the role of interpretation as a necessary condition of narrative experience, rather than a secondary outcome.

As the analysis has shown, developers retain significant control over how deeply HS is implemented within a game. In some cases, such as *Inscription* (Daniel Mullins Games, 2021), holons conceal layers of narrative that require sustained inductive reasoning to uncover. In others, such as *Nobody Wants to Die* (Critical Hit Games, 2024), players are guided through deductive processes, breaking down a larger narrative into smaller, interpretable components. These variations demonstrate that HS is not a fixed model, but a flexible system that can be adapted across different design contexts and player experiences.

This paper opens several directions for future research. If HS fundamentally operates through cognitive engagement, it raises questions regarding how these cognitive demands can be calibrated within game design, how HS can be more seamlessly integrated into gameplay systems, and to what extent it can be adapted across different genres and formats. It also invites further investigation into the kinds of cognitive challenges players encounter when engaging with holarchic narrative systems. While these questions extend beyond the scope of this paper, the primary aim here has been to name and articulate a form of narrative organisation that has remained largely untheorised, and to distinguish it from other narrative structures in video games.

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