

Video Games as Unnatural Narratives

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Introduction

What I aim to undertake here is to approach video games from a territory within postclassical narratology hitherto largely untouched by ludologists. The study of unnatural narratives is one of the most recent fields within contemporary narrative theory and deeply intertwined with the endeavour to understand how human beings make sense of narrative texts and artefacts across media that cannot be sufficiently accounted for or analysed using traditional narratological theories (Alber et al. 2010, 113). So this article seeks to open up a new field of ludo-narratological enquiry targeted, in particular, at games that push ludo-narratological boundaries and call out for meta-ludic debate and reflection, albeit not necessarily with an avant-garde agenda in mind. In fact, the games that I'm going to look at in the analytical part of this study are commercially traded and played by global audiences, possibly because rather than despite the fact that they *prima facie* go against the grain, and call out for

42 meta-ludic debate, specialised analytical tools and conceptual frameworks.

The idea for this project grew out of my previous monograph project on *Literary Gaming* (Ensslin 2014), which is situated at the junction between indie games, electronic literature and ludo-stylistic analysis. For this book I deliberately chose the title literary “gaming” rather than “games” because literary games proper (in the sense of games that embed literary structures and encourage literary reading interwoven with gameplay) are only one sub-form of what I see as a continuum between ludic digital literature (where literary reading is foregrounded and games and play are integrated in digital literary structures) and literary games as I’ve just described them. So in a nutshell, the study of literary gaming looks at hybrid digital media that combine different types of gameplay and literary reading which cause clashes and creative interplay between what Hayles (2007) calls “hyperattention” and “deep attention” in reader-players. Ludic forms of digital literature correlate mostly with the deep attentive side of the spectrum, while literary games are experienced in a mostly hyperattentive state.

The term literary gaming spans a wide range of ludo-literary media including poetry games,¹ literary/narrative auteur games,² interactive fiction,³ ludic and meta-ludic types of hypertext and hypermedia,⁴ as well as more linear ludo-literary digital narratives produced in Flash, Shockwave and other interactive

1 For example, by Jason Nelson, Jim Andrews and Gregory Weir.

2 For an explanation of this term, see Ensslin (2014). For examples of such games see those by Mike Bithell, Jonathan Blow, Tale of Tales, and Galactic Café/Davey Wreden.

3 For example, works by Nick Montfort, Emily Short and Aaron Reed.

4 For example, by geniware, Deena Larsen, Robert Kendall and Richard Holeton.

This essay forms a first step towards my new book project (co-authored with digital stylistician Alice Bell) called *Unnatural Narratives and Digital Fiction* (Ensslin and Bell, forthcoming), which applies theoretical and analytical concepts of unnatural narratology to various types of digital fictions (including hypertext fiction, Flash fiction, interactive fiction and narrative games). I'm going to discuss some ways of understanding unnaturalness in games, using two very different definitions of the unnatural in comparison, and explore the extent to which they may be useful to close analysis. I will begin by providing some theoretical background on videogames' narrativity, on unnatural narratives and unnatural narratology. I'll then move on to a dual argument based on two divergent definitions of unnaturalness: given a broad conceptual framework, I propose that – in many ways – videogames are unnatural narratives *par excellence*; therefore the term can be seen as somewhat tautological when it comes to ludic narrativity.

Taking a more narrow, aesthetically oriented definition as a starting point, I contend, in a second move, that some games are more “unnatural” than others, and that the idiosyncratic ludonarrative mechanics exhibited by them allow us to apply, adapt and further develop existing concepts and tools developed by unnatural narratologists. In the analytical part of this essay I'll then have a look at three games in particular that showcase some key aspects of unnatural narratology at work: Tale of Tales' *The Path* (2009), and its uses of unnatural spatiality, Jonathan Blow's *Braid* (2009) and its uses of unnatural temporality and, finally, Galactic Café's *The Stanley Parable* (2013) and its uses of unnatural narration – in particular the role of the would-be omniscient

5 For example, works by Serge Bouchardon, Kate Pullinger and Christine Wilks.

6 For example, by Andy Campbell and Judi Alston.

- 44 narrator and his conflict with the player-character. In my closing remarks I'll sum up some of my initial conclusions about the relevance and feasibility of unnatural narratology for the study of games, and I'll make some suggestions as to how we may develop this analytical approach further to accommodate the media-specificity of digital games and gaming.

Ludo-narratological Assumptions

The ludo-narratological approach taken here is set against the background of what are by now widely agreed assumptions about the narrativity of games. First, a game isn't a *narrative* in the sense of a pre-scripted sequence of events, or indeed "any semiotic object produced with the intent of evoking a [pre-intended] narrative script in the mind of the audience" (Ryan 2004a, 9). Instead, they *possess narrativity*, as Marie-Laure Ryan puts it in *Narrative Across Media* (2004a, 9), which means that they have the potential to evoke multiple, individualised narrative scripts through settings, characters and other elements that players interact with through choice and with the intention to solve problems and make progress. Thus, in gameplay, users are turned into characters, and as players we enact the destiny, or the trajectory, of the game world *autotelically* (Ryan 2004a, 349), that is, through our own motivated actions rather than being told about or shown events as we are in fiction, drama or film.

- In a more detailed analysis, Henry Jenkins (2004) breaks the narrative properties of games into three core concepts:
- "Environmental storytelling" means that games are designed as environments, as worlds full of characters and props for players to interact with (much like Disney World and other amusement parks). Players explore games spatially, in an episodic way, and this nonlinear model is kept coherent by an overarching goal and repetitive mechanic. Games also form part of a larger storytelling ecology, which brings to mind Jenkins' (2006)

theory of transmedia storytelling, which assumes that stories develop and evolve across media, rather than simply being re-mediated or adapted). Finally, games are evocative spaces with large mnemonic potential in that they evoke the structures of existing stories and the genre traditions of other media.⁷

- “Emergent narratives” refers to the ways in which players create their own stories by exploring the game world (corresponding roughly to Ryan’s (2004a) autotelic enactment). These stories become manifest in oral storytelling or participatory media, such as gamer fora or on YouTube, where gamers post their own playthroughs, walkthroughs, Let’s Plays etc.
- “Embedded narratives”, which are any non-interactive narrative sequences integrated into or surrounding gameplay, such as cut-scenes, backstory descriptions or dialogues (written or voiced-over). They tend to be embedded in such a way as not to impede the interactive flow of gameplay, and they may function as rewards or level-up markers; they may help drive the story forward or bridge loading time. Needless to say, their usefulness and aesthetic potential are controversial topics amongst gamers, and there are significant cultural differences with respect to accepted duration and player patience (Ensslin 2011, 166).

Arguably there’s a lot more to say about videogame narrativity more generally, but I’ll now move straight on to the core theoretical interest of this essay: the varying concepts of “unnatural” narrativity and how they may or may not contribute to understanding video games as ludo-narrative media.

7 For example, *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) vis-à-vis the Western genre, the *Lego* series, *Star Wars* or *Indiana Jones*.

Unnatural Narratives – Unnatural Narratology

Before embarking on an examination of what unnatural narratives are, it needs to be acknowledged that the term is highly evocative of numerous problematic meanings and uses: it carries ideology-ridden connotations of hegemonic “normality”, of discursively constructed social and cultural hierarchies, and oppositions and binary thought more generally. Furthermore, the school of “unnatural narratologists” (much like that of “natural narratologists”) is deeply rooted in western, Anglo-American scholarship, and the vast majority of texts studied under this theoretical umbrella are authored by Anglo-American writers, which leaves a large part of global narrativity unaccounted for. Finally, popular notions of “unnaturalness” are negatively connoted, as it is often used to “denounce certain types of behavior (as well as sexual orientations or practices) which the speaker considers to be deviant or perverse” (Alber and Heinze 2011, 2), and this of course adds to the controversy surrounding terminological choices underlying this theoretical apparatus.

Having said all that, the term “unnatural” as used by narratologists carries a highly specialised set of meanings, and can only be comprehended in the context of its derivation. It was borrowed from Monika Fludernik’s idea of a “natural narratology”, which is anchored in a cognitive approach to human experientiality and the ways in which narratives and narrativity can be re-evaluated from the point of view of “natural”, or “naturally occurring” storytelling in the Labovian sense (1996, 13). So the derivate “unnatural” and its surrounding theories form a response to Fludernik’s concept, and – despite its somewhat misleading negative prefix – the term needs to be understood in a distinctly positive, productive sense for purposes of cognitive narratological analysis:

[t]he aim of an unnatural theoretical approach is to approximate and conceptualize Otherness, rather than to stigmatize or reify it; such an approach is interested in various kinds of narrative strangeness and in particular in texts that deviate from the mimetic norms of most narratological models. (Alber and Heinze 2011, 2)⁸

One of the most frequently quoted definitions of unnatural narratives is by Jan Alber, who describes them as a “subset of fictional narratives” (2013a). According to Alber (2013a) such a narrative:

violates physical laws, logical principles, or standard anthropomorphic limitations of knowledge by representing storytelling scenarios, narrators, characters, temporalities, or spaces that could not exist in the actual world.

In other words, unnaturalness is defined *ex negativo* in opposition to the “natural” (see above), which relates to the cognitive frames and scripts we have derived from our actual experience of being in the world. So according to Alber’s fairly broad and inclusive notion, unnaturalness refers to both physically and logically impossible narrative structures, which includes the supernatural in fairy tales as much as it does, for example, multiple contradictory endings of a story, or two parallel timelines that unfold at different speeds.

Another, more narrowly defined and aesthetically oriented concept of unnaturalness is put forward by Brian Richardson. To him, unnatural narratives:

conspicuously violate [...] conventions of standard narrative forms, in particular the conventions of nonfictional narratives, oral or written, and fictional modes like realism that model themselves on nonfictional narratives. Unnatural

8 Of course, the boundary between “natural” and “unnatural” isn’t clear-cut; unnaturalness has to be understood as a matter of degree rather than an absolute quality.

narratives furthermore follow fluid, changing conventions and create new narratological patterns in each work. In a phrase, unnatural narratives produce a defamiliarization of the basic elements of narrative. (Richardson 2011, 34)⁹

Again, he defines unnaturalness *ex negativo* as narrative structures that are anti-mimetic, which means they are “clearly and strikingly impossible in the real world” (Alber et al. 2013, 102) and defy the principles of: (a) mimetic, realistic fictional storytelling, and; (b) the conventions of nonfictional narratives, oral and written for purposes of aesthetic innovation, critical pleasure and meta-level reflection (Richardson 2011, 34).

Hence, whereas Alber puts both physical and logical scenarios in one “unnatural” basket, Richardson makes a crucial distinction between so-called *non*-mimetic (or physically impossible or fantastic) and *anti*-mimetic narrative structures, which defy the principles of reality and realistic storytelling, but also the conventions of existing media genres we tend to be familiar with, and not in a deliberately negative, or alienating way, but rather in a creative, productive manner that engenders various types of reflective thinking in audiences.¹⁰ Hence, Richardson’s concept is geared more towards the audience’s (projected or likely rather than empirically tested) response than a textual quality. What matters to him is “the degree of unexpectedness that the text produces, whether surprise, shock, or the wry smile that acknowledges that a different, playful kind of representation is at work” (Richardson 2015, 5).

The study of unnatural narratives, called unnatural narratology, is a subdomain of postclassical narratology (Herman 1999), which

9 Cf. Shklovsky (1965).

10 According to Alber, Richardson’s “distinction between non- and anti-mimetic elements is identical with [his] distinction between conventionalized and not yet conventionalized instances of the unnatural” (Personal correspondence, May 30, 2015).

represents a departure from classical structuralist narratology¹¹ in that it is both transmedial and transdisciplinary:

1. It broadens the scope of analytical objects from print-based, literary fiction to narrative media more widely, as well as non-fictional forms of storytelling (in the Labovian tradition of oral storytelling).
2. It expands the narratologist's analytical and conceptual toolkit by integrating non-literary disciplines such as post-Saussurean linguistics (for example, discourse analysis, possible-worlds semantics etc.), gender theory, ethnography, cognitive science (schema and frames and scripts theory), film and media studies.

As far as its cross-media remit is concerned, unnatural narratology has reached out to drama, film, comics, nonfictional testimonies and hypertext fiction, but very little work exists (to my knowledge) that deals with the idiosyncratic narrativity of videogames. So this is where my theoretical and analytical contribution lies with this project.

It's not surprising that many, if not most, unnatural narratologists have looked at postmodernist narratives (novels, short stories, films) when developing their theories. So if I'm proposing in this essay that in many ways mainstream videogames are unnatural narratives *par excellence*, I'm doing something quite unconventional, or theoretically unnatural in its own right, because I'm arguing that "unnatural" is actually quite "natural" (or rather conventionalised) when it comes to videogames (according to Alber's definition), and that the body of games that we can meaningfully refer to and analyse as "unnatural" (using Richardson's definition) is still fairly small (but growing, and an exciting development to follow within the indie sector in particular).

When studying unnatural narratives, a core, classical narratological distinction is usually made between unnaturalness

11 Associated with Genette, Chatman, Bal and Prince.

50 at story level (which concerns the actual underlying fabula, or that which is told), and at discourse level (which is the level of the telling, that is, of narrative organisation, sequentialisation or design). So, for example, unnatural temporality at the story level happens in time-travel narratives (where the protagonist may criss-cross between different historical periods consecutively), whereas at discourse level the story may remain unaffected by discourse-level fragmentation, mixing or reversal, such as in Nolan's *Memento* (Heinze et al. 2013). For games, this distinction has to be substituted for by a concept that allows for the executability of the underlying code, and Jenkins's (2004) idea of emergent narrativity, where the player's interaction with the coded interface produces as many stories as there are players and playthroughs.

Reading Strategies and Conventionalisation

We've established earlier that unnaturalness can be understood in terms of unconventional and defamiliarising structures and experiences. Surely, however, what we've come to accept as "conventional" hasn't always been such: basic cognitive frames develop over time and the more often we're exposed to specific "impossible" scenarios, the more readily we'll integrate them into our repository of "the possible" – so we naturalise (Culler 1975) initially unfamiliar, or defamiliarising structures, by embedding them into our cognitive frames of reference. And these mental repositories of ours tend to be genre-bound. We've become used to, for example, speaking animals from fables, fairy tales and other types of fantasy (which are non-mimetic but not anti-mimetic according to Richardson), we've conventionalised the omnimentality of the omniscient narrator (which is a humanly impossible quality – no-one can know everything, least of all what other people are thinking exactly, but we've become used to it especially from classical realist novels), and we're perfectly

well-accustomed to time-travel narratives (as they often occur in sci-fi) and physically impossible geographies such as flying islands.¹²

So why and how does conventionalisation happen? Essentially, it's within our human nature that, when we encounter anything unfamiliar, or strange, as we do in unnatural narratives, we try to make sense of it in some way, by applying a range of reading strategies. As Alber puts it, we are "ultimately bound by [our] cognitive architecture, even when trying to make sense of the unnatural. Hence, the only way to respond to narratives of all sorts (including unnatural ones) is through cognitive frames and scripts" (2013b, 451–54), so on the basis of cognitive theory, Alber proposes the following reading strategies employed by readers (in any combination and any order (cf. Alber 2013c, 49)) to help them "come to terms with the unnatural" (2013b, 451):

1. Frame blending: here we blend pre-existing frames that we previously considered to be incompatible (for example, that the flow of time may be tied to the direction in which you move, which is the case in world four ("Time and Place") of *Braid*).
2. Generification: evoking genre conventions from literary and media history. So here the blending has already happened and we've integrated it as a possible convention in a given genre or medium (for example, time travel in sci-fi narratives; or super-human jump heights in platformers).
3. Subjectification: here we attribute the unnatural to internal states, such as dreams, nightmares, or hallucinations. We know it's perfectly natural for our unconscious mind to produce highly surreal scenarios, so this option is part of our explanatory repository, especially when we're dealing with an unreliable narrator or a vulnerable, victimised protagonist (such as the six sisters in *The Path*, who all have to meet "their" wolf in the form of an age-specific traumatic experience).

12 Laputa in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726).

- 52 4. Thematic foregrounding: here we identify specific thematic elements in a narrative that recur, in various configurations, to form an *idée fixe* (for example, the relationship between time and human experience, in *Braid*, or the meta-ludic conflicts in *The Stanley Parable*).
5. Allegorical reading: here we understand unnatural structures as part of an extended metaphor about the human condition, or the world in general. In this regard the impossibility of meaningful play in *The Stanley Parable* can be seen as an allegory of illusory agency (McCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2007) in gameplay more generally.
6. Satirisation and parody: this occurs when narratives try to mock either other narratives or elements of the world in general; the zero-player game *Progress Quest* for example is unnatural in that it doesn't allow players to do anything other than watch the game "play itself", thereby parodying massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) such as *Everquest* (and particularly their auto-attack function, which is extremely passive).
7. Positing a transcendental realm: here we attribute the unnatural to some kind of supernatural setting, for example heaven or hell (think of the god game, *Black and White*, where players have godlike powers over characters and are infiltrated by voices of good (an angelic character) and evil (a demonic guide)).
8. Invitation to "free play", where mutually contradictory storylines, or endings, are seen as an invitation to create one's own story, which is a common feature of hypertext fiction, but we may well ask other players what their preferred ending of *The Stanley Parable* is, since we're dealing with a game that thematises non-closure, multi-linearity, logical contradiction and cyclicity.

And yet we may just as well adopt an unnaturalising reading strategy (Nielsen 2013), in an attempt to accept the impossible as it is without trying to make sense of it. This approach goes

against “domesticating the unnatural” (Alber 2013a), and can be described in terms of a “Zen way of reading” (Alber 2013c, 83–84). We adopt the stoic position of simply leaving things unexplained and accepting the feeling of confusion, frustration, or discomfort that the narrative experience may evoke in us.

Video Games as Unnatural Narratives

Having covered a lot of theory, let’s now turn to videogames as unnatural narratives. I was wondered, while writing, whether I should put a question mark on the title this essay, but I think it is fair to claim that in many ways games are unnatural narratives *par excellence*. Having said that, this proposition only holds true if we adopt a broad concept of unnaturalness as, for example, put forward by Alber (2013a), who defines it as that which is physically or logically impossible when measured against the foil of our real-world cognitive frames. In actual fact, we may go as far to say that under this definition the unnaturalness of games is what makes them so attractive to vast amounts of people around the world. The unnaturalness of games enables us to escape into realms of what’s normally thought to be humanly impossible or unthinkable. Furthermore, we have to bear in mind that games are perhaps the most readily “naturalising” media of all because they integrate in their procedural mechanics the very structures (unnatural or not) and “ecological” interactions (Linderöth 2011). Players are meant to internalise these structures and interactions as effectively as possible for fast progress through the game and to achieve high levels of satisfaction during play.

Clearly, mainstream videogames are full of *physical* impossibilities. These are just a few examples:

- Respawn and rebirth are crucial replayability factors (violating the truth condition of singular mortality).
- Games thrive on using fantasy traditions from other media such as talking animals, monsters and other forms of non-human yet anthropomorphised creatures.

- Human or not, the anatomic dimensions of some hyper-sexualised characters would be anatomically impossible in the real world (think of the early Lara Croft's athletic abilities vis-à-vis her hyper-feminised physique).
- Warping, or teleporting, between geographic areas is a standard form of fast in-game movement (violating the limitations of physical movement).
- Similarly, there are highly dexterous types of movement in some games that are more akin to those of animals than human beings (think of the wall runs in Prince of Persia (1989), the jumping art of SuperMario (1985) and other platform characters, the superhumanly fast-paced balancing act of Mirror's Edge and quite generally the fact that falling or jumping off high edges often doesn't result in character death or even the slightest degree of harm).
- Multiple impersonations of one and the same player are a key attraction of role playing games (RPGs) and MMOGs: either synchronously (with more than one avatar of the same player in a game world simultaneously) or asynchronously (anatomically shape-shifting avatars through customisation).

But games also exhibit a range of conventionalised *logical* impossibilities:

- The fact that avatars are "us" in the game world makes them the interactional metaleptic tool par excellence (Ryan 2004b), yet metalepsis (in the sense of transgressing ontological boundaries, and especially those of fictional and actual worlds) is both physically and logically impossible because we can't all of a sudden lose our anatomic materiality; nor can we be in two places at the same time, especially if they're in different time zones.
- The success of a lot of games is based on the fact that they offer multiple and either contradictory or incompatible endings. Dragon Age: Origins (2009), for example, converges (despite seemingly countless choices throughout)

to four endings (which is a comparably low number, incidentally). Each ending sees different characters ruling the game world, and some characters either dead or alive (which is a logical incompatibility).

So does all this mean that we should stop here and simply conclude that unnatural narratology doesn't work with games because "video games as unnatural narratives" is a tautology? To me this would be slightly myopic because, clearly, when we look at Richardson's anti-mimetically oriented conceptualisation and move beyond the conventionalised "unnatural" media-specificity of games, there's actually quite a lot we can do with a specific type of game: games that seek to defamiliarise and innovate the gaming experience through highly idiosyncratic ludo-narrative mechanics.

So in a second move I would argue that some games are more "unnatural" (in a Richardsonian sense of aesthetically "more estranging") than others because they deliberately violate the ludo-narrative conventions of their genre and the medium itself in order to evoke meta-ludic and meta-fictional reflections in the player – as well as other types of philosophical and critical processes. With this premise in mind, I shall now move on to the analytical part of this essay and demonstrate three aspects of unnaturalness at play: unnatural spatiality in *The Path*, unnatural temporality in *Braid* and unnatural narration in *The Stanley Parable*.

Unnatural Spatiality in *The Path*

According to Alber (2013a), "impossible spaces undo our assumptions about space and spatial organization in the real world". So typical types of unnatural spaces include:

- containers that are bigger on the outside than on the inside, or vice versa
- shape-shifting settings
- non-actualisable geographies

- visions of the infinite and unimaginable universe
- metaleptic jumps between different ontological spheres.

What interests me most here is how the impossible, in the sense of anti-mimetic spatial design, contributes to reflexivity, and one game where this can be shown quite nicely is Tale of Tales's *The Path*.

The Path is a short horror game in which the adolescent female characters we can choose to play are exposed to different types of trauma – tailored to their age. The game world and our interaction with it is designed in such a way as to evoke horror and premonitions of what may happen. Such contemplative affects are partly created through slow movement through the game world (it's impossible to run for more than a few seconds and the forest of the game world seems endless, which is augmented by a wrap-around structure that causes the player to move in circles). Whenever a girl meets her wolf (and experienced spiritual death as a result), she ends up lying in front of her grandmother's house, which on the outside looks fairly small. As she enters the house, however, it becomes gigantic, and the semi-cut-scene after her "fall" takes us through seemingly endless corridors with countless doors and huge rooms displaying objects evocative of her nightmarish experience. So the logically impossible spatial dimensions of the house (the incompatibility between outside and inside) can be read in terms of Alber's subjectification strategy (the attribution of unnaturalness to internal states; trauma in this case).¹³

Another interesting element of unnatural spatiality is the treatment of paratext vis-à-vis the game world: the girls' journals, retrievable from the game's official website, read very much like they've been written by the fictional characters. However, numerous real-world comments have been posted by players

13 Another way of understanding this spatial incompatibility would be in terms of positing a transcendental realm (Alber 2013c) – that of some kind of highly unsettling afterlife.

of the game, which are interspersed with pre-scripted posts by fictional characters, creating an ontological blurring between the player's actual world and the fictional world of the game. In fact, this occurrence of interactional metalepsis (or transgression between logically distinct ontological spheres) adds to the eerie but also philosophical and reflective atmosphere of the game. We accept the unnaturalness of this design feature because we can read the game as an allegory (one of Alber's (2013b) strategies) of the trials and tribulations of young women, and this allows our actual world and the game world to converge.

Unnatural Temporality in *Braid*

My second analysis focuses on unnatural temporality. In an essay on temporal paradoxes in narrative, Ryan (2009, 142) proposes four core intuitive human beliefs about time:

1. Time flows, and it does so in a fixed direction.
2. You cannot fight this flow and go back in time.
3. Causes always precede their effects.
4. The past is written once for all.

In fiction, of course, at least some of these dictums are regularly subverted, for example, in time-travel narratives or postmodern, multi-linear, filmic narratives such as *Groundhog Day* (1993) or *Run Lola Run* (1998). Hence, some elements of (fictional) unnatural temporality have already been conventionalised depending on individual levels of exposure and culture-specific media ecologies.

According to Alber (and his broad definition of unnaturalness), "unnatural temporalities [which revolve around Ryan's principles] challenge our real-world ideas about time and temporal progression" (2013a). So for this study we need to add the assumption of anti-mimetic defamiliarisation as part of the developer's intent.

Typical unnatural temporalities (Richardson 2002) include:

- retrogressive/antinomic temporality, where the scripts of everyday life are reversed (for example, in Martin Amis's 1991 novel *Time's Arrow*)
- eternal temporal loops/circular temporalities, where the narrative, or a character, seems to be going round in circles (a common feature of hypertext fiction)
- conflated time lines (or "chronomontages"), which conjoin different temporal zones, such as the time traveller landing in the historical past (for example, Kevin from *Time Bandits* (Gilliam 1981), catapulted into Ancient Greece, in his own contemporary clothes, taking photos with his Polaroid camera)
- reversed causalities, where the present is caused by the future, like in D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* (1981) where the protagonist's pain is caused by an anticipatory projection of a future event
- contradictory temporalities, in which there are mutually exclusive events or sequences, for example, in Coover's 1969 short story "The Babysitter", where Mr. Tucker both did and did not go home to have sex with the babysitter
- differential time lines, such as different aging speeds between characters like in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928)
- multiple time lines, plotlines that begin and end at the same time yet take different periods of time to unfold, for example, in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c1590).

A game that embeds a number of unnatural temporalities quite firmly and unavoidably in its mechanics is Jonathan Blow's *Braid*. It's a 2D platform game where the protagonist, Tim, is on a quest to save the Princess, beg her forgiveness and live happily ever after (although we later learn that she doesn't actually want him). The game as a whole can be read as an allegory of the Trinity nuclear bomb test of 1945, which directly preceded the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Hence, against this backdrop, the impossible temporal mechanics of the game can meaningfully be read as an allegory (see Alber's reading strategies) of the irreversibility of human action and suffering, while the mechanics seem to suggest that the rules of temporal logic can be lifted by Faustian ambitions.

Each world in *Braid* has its own impossible temporal mechanics, which have to be internalised by players (against their real-world and genre-specific assumptions) in order to be successful. I'll only mention three examples here:

- Retrogressive temporality. You can go back in time in exact reversed order by holding the shift key (and speed up the time as needed); hence Tim can “un-die” (rather than respawn) indefinitely, and indeed certain achievements only become possible through this rewind function.
- Reversed causality (which goes against the principle that causes always precede their effects). In world three (Time and Mystery), the player's actions can be rewound whilst other elements in the game world remain unaffected by the reversal. For example, using the rewind function, a key can be brought back to the immediate past (without losing the key) to open a door that otherwise wouldn't be possible to open because Tim would be stuck forever in a pit that he's jumped into to grab the key.
- Differential timelines. In world six (Hesitance), the player can slow down time to get certain things done – time moves slower in the proximity of the all-important ring, marked with a halo, enabling Tim to, for example, escape certain monsters while either he or they are in a time warp, or to manipulate the velocity of moving objects, such as clouds, to facilitate forward movement.

Unnatural Narration in *The Stanley Parable*

Finally, I'd like to examine an instance of unnatural narration. Again, unnatural narration can quite simply be any physically

60 impossible narrator (according to Alber), such as an animal, a baby, a human bodily organ, a plant or object. Or it can, and in my mind more powerfully so, manifest itself in unconventionalised forms of extreme narration, such as second-person narration, multiperson narration, certain forms of unreliable narration and de-narration (a narrator's negation of previously stated or assumed truths; see Richardson (2006) for a comprehensive overview). Strangely or not, omniscient, or authorial narration is also generally held to be unnatural, largely because no-one can possibly know as much as a standard omniscient narrator tends to, and the fascination associated with this paradox is reflected in recent fictional creativity beyond print, as my example will show.

What's important to note here is that unnatural narration in games is in itself tautological. A narrator, or narrative voice telling the story, is impossible in videogames because it would subvert or hinder the player's decision-making process in the game world, as well as their individualised emergent experiences.

The game I'm going to look at, *The Stanley Parable* by Davey Wreden/Galactic Café (the remake version of 2013), experiments with this paradox by employing an intriguing type of unnatural narration – a shape-shifting, intrusive narrator whose would-be omniscience is deconstructed by the player's subversive behaviour. The game stages combat between player and narrator. The narrator, as it turns out, isn't as empowered and omniscient as he pretends to be, and is ultimately at the mercy of the player and, of course, the essence of the gameplay and its impact on the narrative design. By the same token, we as players are confronted with the limitations of our own agency as even the choices we can make are pre-scripted.

At this juncture, let me say a few words about omniscient narration. It was the standard form of realistic storytelling in nineteenth-century realism, was then superseded by reflector mode and internal narrative styles in literary modernism (for example James Joyce and Virginia Woolf) and has more recently,

in twenty-first-century fiction, seen a revival, yet in very different forms that reflect the impossibility of godlike or representative knowledge or insight. Writers such as Zadie Smith, Salman Rushdie and Martin Amis have been experimenting with more vulnerable, fragmented, confessional forms of authorial narration that reflect both a crisis of fiction writing and, at the same time, the ambition to create new forms of literary authority and thereby regain cultural capital vis-à-vis popular culture (Dawson 2013). So if, in *The Stanley Parable*, we are confronted with an experimental battle between would-be omniscient narrator and player-character, we have to see this design as a reflection of two current trends: (a) the media-ecological crisis and cultural ambitions of twenty-first-century fiction writing, and: (b) the literary gaming movement that's been evolving over the past 15 years or so.

According to its official site, *The Stanley Parable* is "an exploration of story, games, and choice. Except the story doesn't matter, it might not even be a game, and if you ever actually do have a choice, well let me know how you did it" (Mularczyk, n.d.). So what the game tries to get across is the question of how much agency and choice players actually have in a game and that agency is ultimately illusory (MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2007) given that choices, paths and endings tend to be pre-coded. We also learn through procedural rhetoric that subversiveness on the part of the player is a *sine qua non* to escape from illusory agency, which makes cheating not simply a legitimate but indeed a recommended form of player engagement.

The protagonist is Stanley, an office worker in a Kafkaesque corporate, bureaucratic environment, who pushes buttons upon command, day-in, day-out. Initially Stanley, played in the first-person, sets out on his quest to find out what's happened to his co-workers, who have all disappeared. The narrator accompanies him on his way throughout, giving instructions as to where to go next yet not in a directive, command form, but in the past tense indicative, thereby making propositions about what Stanley *did*

62 (before he gets a chance to do so) rather than suggestions about where he *might* go. Whereas in a film or print narrative, past tense indicative narration is the accepted, default standard of storytelling, in a game it completely goes against the grain and seems patronising at best. This makes us, as players, suspicious about the reliability or trustworthiness of the narrator right from the outset, and the more we attempt to deviate from the narrator's propositions, the more stand-offish and annoyed he becomes, so much so that in some extremely deviant endings his comments, behaviour and designs suggest frustration, despair, resignation, or even madness.

The narrator (or implied author) becomes our main enemy in the game because there aren't really any further major obstacles or enemies to overcome. This battle between implied author (manifested in the choices built into the game) and the player who strives to undermine his or her "implied" counterpart (personified by the conformist, Stanley) is orchestrated in at least 18 different paths or endings.

In what follows, I'm going to briefly look at three of them to demonstrate the transformation of the narrator's projected authority. First, the life ending, which follows the path of maximum conformism and obedience; secondly, the choice, or real person ending, where you unplug a phone that you were supposed to answer; and thirdly, the museum ending, which adds another ontological sphere, or diegetic level, to the game world, lifting the story experienced so far onto a symbolic or allegorical plane.

The main decision players have to make for Stanley is at a set of two doors, where the "correct" path is left and the "deviant" path is right (paradoxically or not). Stanley can still "go wrong" after taking the "right" door, and very drastically so, going by the narrator's perplexed reactions. If the player follows all the narrator's propositions precisely, in the life ending, they'll be rewarded with a "win". Stanley switches off the controls in the Orwellian Mind Control Facility and steps out into the open.

However, this is not the point of this game, which is indicated two-fold: by the ensuing cut-scene, which leaves the player passively watching and listening to the narrator's freedom monologue on Stanley's alleged "happiness"; and by the fact that, after the cut-scene the player is sent straight back to the beginning, that is, to Stanley's office, with the interspersed loading message "the end is never the end", suggesting that they're supposed to explore the paths of deviance or defiance.

Fig. 1 shows the diegetic levels of the game world as evoked by the life ending. The big box contains the diegetic, or fictional space of the game, with the intradiegetic, or character level embedded in the narrator's diegesis. We as players are extradiegetic or outside the story, but since we implement the narrator's story, which he tells to a narratee on his level, by steering Stanley, we're also inevitably part of the game world. Therefore the membranes between the levels, or spheres, are shown as semi-permeable: we can see that there are a lot of metaleptic cross-overs happening already, even though the narrator isn't actually addressing us directly (which he does in other endings).

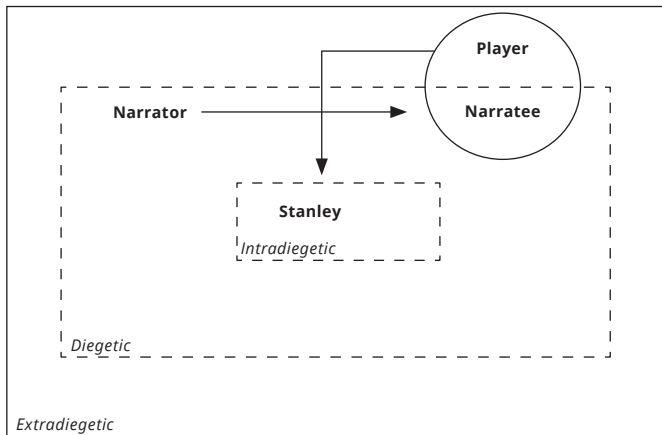


Fig. 1: Diegetic levels of The Stanley Parable life ending.

- 64 A striking example of the narrator's reaction to player deviance is the choice, or real person ending. Here the player opts to unplug a phone that Stanley was supposed to answer, thereby undertaking an action not contained within the narrator's script. This act of transgression causes the narrator to sense that there's someone else behind Stanley's incorrect behaviour, and after first addressing Stanley and realising Stanley couldn't possibly have devised such an act, he turns to the implied player thus:

Oh no, no, no! Did you just unplug the phone? That wasn't supposed to be a choice. How did you do that? You actually chose incorrectly, but I didn't even know that was possible. Let me double-check *[shuffling his papers around yet finding no evidence of this choice in his script]* ... I don't understand. How on earth are you making meaningful choices? What did you ... Wait a second ... How had I not noticed it sooner? You're not Stanley. You're a real person. I can't believe I was so mistaken. This is why you've been able to make correct and incorrect choices, and to think I've been letting you run around in this game for so long! If you'd made any more wrong choices you might have negated it entirely. It's as though you'd completely ignored even the most basic safety protocol for real-world decision-making. I'm going to stop the game for a moment so we can educate you properly on safe decision making.

This is followed by a satirical educational video about the life-threatening potential of human decision-making. So in this instance the narrator breaks the fourth wall and moves the metaleptic interaction onto an (implied) extra-diegetic level. Another observation that can be made here is that this particular ending shows how indirect communication works between the developer and the player outside the fictional world (extra-diegetically; marked by the dotted arrow in Fig. 2), as we learn that the narrator is not responsible for the phone that can be unplugged as a pre-programmed choice. So here the actual author

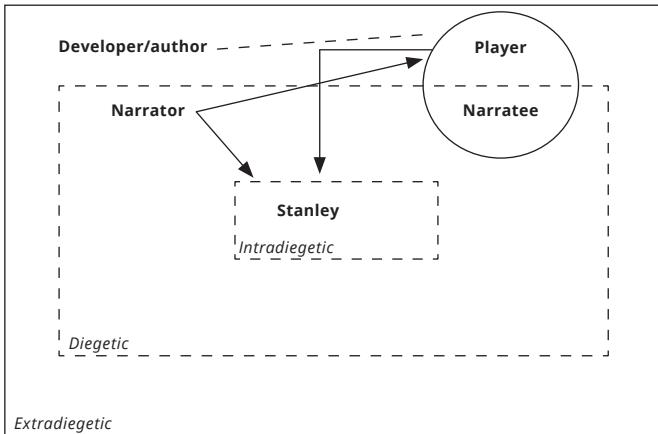


Fig. 2: Diegetic levels as suggested by the Choice Ending.

communicates implicitly with the actual player, who implements the communicated option intra-diegetically.

Interestingly, as the camera returns to the game world and the room with the telephone, we find the space transformed into a postmodern pastiche (Fig. 4), and the narrator says, “Ah welcome back! You may have noticed that this room has begun to deteriorate as a result of narrative contradiction” and, “We just need to get you home as soon as possible before the narrative contradiction gets any worse. Unfortunately it seems this place is not well equipped to deal with reality”. So here the narrator himself explicates the anti-mimetic, logical impossibilities embedded in the game’s narrative design.

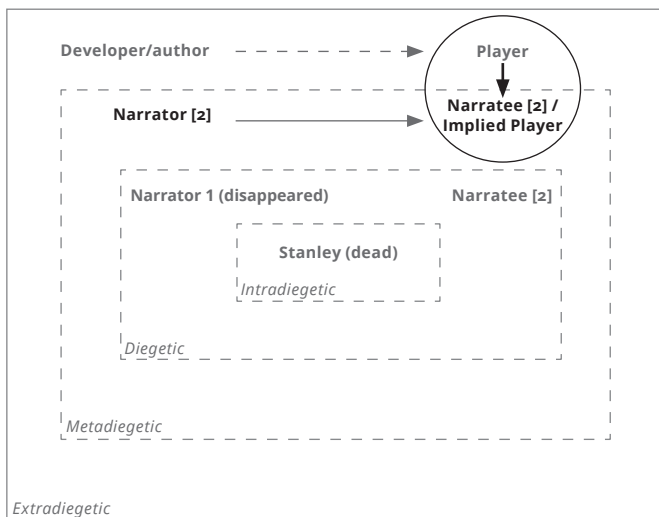


Fig. 3: Diegetic levels as suggested by the Choice Ending.

Finally, in the museum ending, Stanley meets his intra-diegetic death after choosing to take the escape route, branching off the “correct” track to the Mind Control Facility. He’s killed by some kind of machine, yet again we find that the game goes on and the player (now playing their own alter ego) finds him or herself in a fictional developer’s museum, which exhibits all sorts of in-game props and concept art. Strikingly, here we encounter another narrator, a female voice, which seems to be superordinate to the diegesis of the initial male narrator, who now seems to have disappeared along with Stanley. The female narrator comments on the paradoxical love-hate relationship between player-character and narrator and advises the player to stop the game to put an end to the endless, meaningless cycle of “walking someone else’s path”. And here, finally, is where the player’s alter ego in the game dies, crushed by the “metal jaws”. After this ending players have

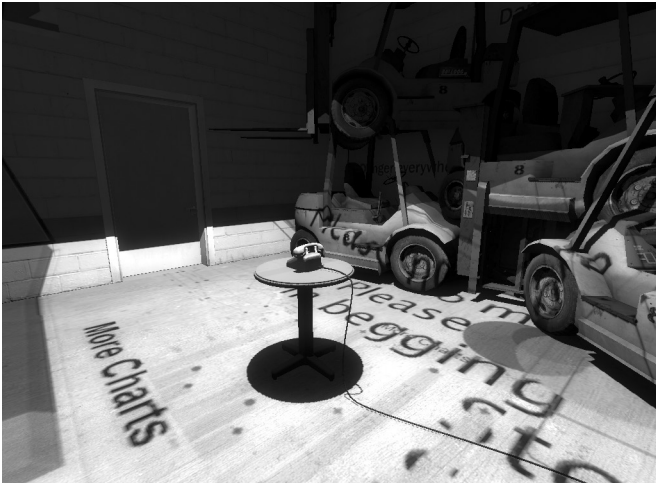


Fig. 4: Postmodern telephone room in the choice ending.

to physically reload the game by starting again from the main menu.

In Fig. 4 we can see that another level of diegesis, call it meta-diegesis, has been added to the ontological universe of the game, and the female narrator speaks to us directly as implied players. Interestingly, though, although the female super-narrator seems to be more empowered than the male narrator in the other endings, she is equally subject to the player's choices (and of course the game design). She frantically tries to prevent the player from having his or her alter ego killed in the game world, and from endlessly perpetuating the cycle of following pre-designed paths and subjection to illusory agency.

To wrap up this analysis, *The Stanley Parable's* procedural rhetoric reinforces the decoding strategy suggested by its title (a parable is an educational allegory). As players we are made to read it as an allegory of illusory agency built into games to give players the illusion of choice, power and control. In fact, we as players are all

- 68 Stanley because again and again we willingly or even enthusiastically subject ourselves to the constraints set by the games we play, except of course when we cheat – and this is where we have the power to “defeat” the implied author-programmer.

Concluding Remarks

To sum up the main insights I've drawn from this research so far, if we want to move toward an unnatural ludo-narratology, there are several things to be aware of and take into account. First, not every definition of unnaturalness is useful for close game analysis, but if we take anti-mimeticism and defamiliarisation – for the sake of entertainment, flow, innovation and critical reflection – as a starting point, we can begin to make sense of the kinds of “unnatural structures” that feature, for example, in meta-games like *The Stanley Parable*, or generally in games that push the boundaries of ludo-narrative design.

Second, the “naturalising” and “unnaturalising” reading strategies put forward by Alber (2013b) and Nielsen (2013) are useful starting points, yet they have to be augmented by game-specific ways of making sense of what Jesper Juul (2005, 132) calls “incoherent worlds”, that is, by explaining unnaturalness in terms of the rules of the game. Furthermore, there's still a lot of work to be done on studying players' individual nuances in understanding unnatural ludo-narrative structures and their underlying and resulting play styles and strategies. Closer insights into these processes can only be gained through empirical player research.

Finally, I'd propose an inductive approach to developing a medium-specific toolkit for unnatural ludo-narrative structures, taking into account the multiple ways in which game mechanics allow us to execute procedural rhetoric to “read” design features, such as illusory agency, slow gaming, action reversal and character duplication, functionally and with a view to gaining a deeper understanding of videogames as a narrative art.

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69

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