ICGAN2025: “Adapt, Adopt, Adjust: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Adaptation, Storytelling, and Simulation”

Abstract

Adjusting the Virtual Dial:
Video Game Adoptions and Adaptations of the Radio

In his video essay, “Radios in Video Games: The Coolest Feature We Take For Granted,” YouTuber _crustbag_ notes that “the most common usage of radios in video games is communication” (1:13). He quickly rattles through a range of examples of games where radios are used for player-to-player, NPC-to-player, and environment-to-player communication before concluding, dismissively: “however, at the end of the day it mostly just boils down to overhearing radio chatter and that's kind of boring. Most of it is just regular in-game communication, only with a high pass filter layered on top” (2:15-2:27). Most of _crustbag_’s video essay is actually concerned, not with *radios* in video games (in the form of virtual simulations of mechanical transmission/communication devices), but with *radio stations* in video games (and, more particularly, the originality and quality of the programming of these stations) that can be listened (or half-listened) to while the player is doing something else--like recklessly driving a car in the *Grand Theft Auto* series. Concerning these virtual radio stations, _crustbag_ acknowledges they are “super cool but ultimately not fully necessary” (24:02) for the game’s story or the gameplay.

In contrast, I argue that the radio has been used in video games for ways other than ‘boring’ radio chatter and ‘regular’ in-game communication and has properties that offer particular advantages for gameplay and storytelling. Given _crustbag_’s commonly shared view that “radio is…a dead medium…entirely being held up by old people” (0:07-0:17), it therefore seems puzzling that the radio, both in its one-way (receiver) and two-way (‘walkie-talkie’) manifestations, should appear as a central feature in some contemporary video games given that video games are generally perceived as the newest of new entertainment media and the media of young people. The presence of the radio in video games is all the more puzzling when one considers the highly visual immediacy of most communication in contemporary gameworlds (e.g, face-to-face conversation with NPCs), and the disembodied, mechanically-mediated, audio-only character of radio communication. This therefore prompts the question: what is the value of the radio for gameplay mechanics and narrative exposition?

Radio technologies and cultures have a rich history, and, *pace* _crustbag_, have continued to reinvent themselves and remain relevant (Cox; Crissell; Lindgren and Loviglio). Bolter and Grusin’s concept of remediation, where new media takes up and explores creative possibilities by reimagining earlier media and their technologies is relevant in this context, and this paper will argue that radio adoption and adaptation (or radio simulations) in video games has been a fruitful locus for rediscovering and reimagining radio as an interactive and storytelling medium, as well as offering interesting gameplay mechanics, in a variety of game genres. This paper will survey a range of games that feature radios (see the ‘Ludography’) to explore how their perceived limitations and obsolescence actually open up interesting possibilities for gameplay design and for storytelling, as well as how these games reintroduce to game players an earlier form of communication technology and the cultures in which it operated, enabling reflection on the changing nature of how we keep in touch with each other and the world.

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How *Tchia* Uses Licensed Music to Create Deeper Meaning

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Abstract:

Tchia (2023) is more than an action-adventure rhythm video game with rhythm game elements; it is also, as the game's composer Robert Matz describes, "a musical." (Matz, 2024) Along with its original music composed by Matz, the game features licensed music from New Caledonia—the country that inspires the aesthetics of *Tchia*—in the game as well. For example, the song playing during the opening credits is the song "Wabeb Bulu" (2005) by New Caledonian band Gurejele. The music of *Tchia* is noteworthy in its implementation, as has been noted by Dr. Nina Penner through the lens of scoring for storytelling and narrative progress (Penner, 2024). Penner notes that the dynamic music in the game responds to larger story beats as opposed to small changes like other games do (e.g. a combat theme and a non-combative exploration theme, triggered by proximity to enemies). The usage of licensed music can be seen as building on this idea of music conveying a story and conveying how the story evolves, scoring for the "macro narrative" of *Tchia*. For those already familiar with the pre-existing licensed New Caledonian music, meanings within the music can be used to strengthen the story and the storytelling ability of *Tchia.* Pre-existing musical cues have been argued to convey affective meanings when used in film (Goldschmitt, 2023). Using this established understanding of licensed music as metaphor through pre-understood themes by a target audience, I argue the use of this licensed pre-existing music in *Tchia* serves many ends. Not only does it serve to strengthen the game's themes, but as well, thanks to the interactivity of the medium of video games and the role music has in the game, this music can be used to assist an experience the viewer creates, as opposed to an experience the user merely views and internalizes (e.g. films). Licensed music and its established meaning within the pieces can be recontextualized within an interactive narrative, and an experience crafted in part by the player. This impacts many aspects of narrative – worldbuilding, strengthening feelings of identity within a simulated world, accurately reflecting real-world culture within game spaces, and even symbolism used as a tool for conveyance. This phenomenon, explored thoroughly when applied to film, deserves to be explored through a medium like video games as well. The applications for this kind of adoption of pre-created work could very well be many in such a medium.

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A Primary Analysis on the Narrative Driving Mechanism of *Cyberpunk 2077: Phantom Liberty*

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ABSTRACT

Videogames being regarded as performances (Fernandez-Vara 2009) puts videogames on an equivalent position with theatres as well as other performative forms. For videogames "provide the player with an avatar in order to navigate the experiences on offer," (Alton 2017) role-playing videogames (RPGs) present this avatar as human-like characters, which would usually be the protagonist(s) to be controlled by the players. Players tend care more about the fate and relationship of protagonists or related non-player characters (NPCs), which would drive players to continue to explore further narrative paths or branches.

As the narrative expansion pack to *Cyberpunk 2077*, the RPG developed by CD Projekt, *Phantom Liberty* provides an enhanced narrative driving mechanism. In *Cyberpunk 2077*, V, the protagonist, possesses an ultimate demand of eliminating the other consciousness existence in his/her brain, which drives the controlling player to unlock upcoming storylines by completing serial tasks. In addition to the demand, the relationships between V and Solomon Reed or Song "Songbird" So-Mi, 2 of the core NPCs in the expansion pack, are highly emphasized in *Phantom Liberty*. Whether realizing the demand or not, V would have to take the emotional connections with Reed or Song into serious consideration when deciding narrative branches, since Reed or Song's fate are largely synchronized with V's. This would somehow force the players to not only travel with V down the preset storylines, but also examine the ongoing relationships between V and Reed or Song when making decision for V. Meanwhile, the level of engagement with V's fate would emerge the player's action from "making decisions for" into "being." In summary, with the enhancement of relationships between the protagonist(s) and NPC(s), storylines in the game would be driven with a stronger sense of engagement of

the player(s).

In addition, designed user-definable characteristics of V allows players to "reflect themselves onto the character." (Sasaki 2006) Therefore, players' "making decisions FOR V" could be transformed into "making decisions AS V" in certain situations. This would also amplify the connections between V (the player) and Reed or Song.

With detailed analysis on several essential narrative branching points where V needs to decide the next action, and how the decision would change V, Reed or Song's lifepaths, the thesis attempts to identify or determine how the relationships between protagonist(s) and NPC(s) would enhance narrative driving mechanism.

KEYWORDS

narrative driving mechanism, *Cyberpunk 2077: Phantom Liberty*, role-playing videogames, character relationships

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Press X for Drama: Quick Time(r) Events as an Adaptation of the Digital Medium for Narrative-focused Games

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1 EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The digital medium's affordances give it the potential to create multisensory representations of a reality that offers participants the necessary agency for their "active creation of belief" in the virtual world [6]. This can support participants' narrative engagement—which impacts their enjoyment, story-consistent beliefs, and attitudes [1]—while tapping into their conscious, reflective learning abilities [10]. These experiences might feel more "real", impactful, and memorable because participants' actions directly influence the unfolding story [11] so that they take on participatory, engaged, and proactive roles in the unfolding narrative [16]. This predisposes audiences towards examining the narrative and its messages more deeply by expanding their narrative comprehension and meaning-making with planning, choice, and action [2].

The introduction of the digital medium also brings new design challenges. Creators must be careful not to distract from the narrative with cumbersome controls [5]—which is generally poor user experience (UX) design—or other tasks unrelated to the narrative because it negatively impacts narrative engagement [1], detracting from the intended message [8, 16]. To retain the power of narratives, we must adapt the digital medium to support them while affording the audience ways to impact those narratives. This is a fundamental goal behind the design of Interactive Digital Narratives (IDNs): narrative forms implemented in digital systems that interactors experience via a participatory process where they have a non-trivial impact on the narrative's progress, perspective, content, and/or outcome [2].

One way to do so in narrative-focused digital games, a type of IDN, is to make mechanical gameplay aspects simple enough that the emotional experience gained from story and characters dominates the overall experience [14]. If narrative comprehension stresses a participant's cognitive and emotional capabilities [1], the mechanics in narrative-focused games should avoid taxing them further when participant's need to focus on the narrative. Ideally, the mechanics are decoupled from specific technologies and platforms so that creators can focus on the creative and narrative aspects the mechanics afford such as character and narrative construction, narrative twists, and metaphors and symbolism [16].

Quick Time(r) Events (QTEs) are a simple, effective game mechanic that offers cinematic experiences while avoiding breaks in a story's flow. This is how game designers used them in notable QTE games like *Dragon's Lair* (Figure 1a) and *Shenmue* (Figure 1b) [9]. Both of these games use QTEs to forward their cinematic and/or dramatic aspects: during development, the *Dragon's Lair* team focused on its film aspects, using QTEs to decide which fully-animated scene played next (i.e., story progression or death)[1]; *Shenmue* uses QTEs so that players actively participate in dramatic scenes rather than passively watching them.

At their core, QTEs are context-sensitive, time-limited reaction challenges that require players to accurately enter a given input sequence [4, 9]. Game designers often integrate them with cinematic game sequences to give players limited control over their avatar to create action sequences that do not fit the game's control scheme, or to constrain what actions the player makes at critical moments. The intent is to enhance player engagement or to create an isolated cinematic experience outside of normal gameplay. Effectively, QTEs stress physical skills: reaction time, accuracy,

[1] https://www.dragons-lair-project.com/

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(a) *Dragon's Lair* (1983) [G1] [2]

(b) *Shenmue* (1999) [G2] [3]

Fig. 1. Early examples of Quick Time(r) Events

hand–eye coordination, and—in some instances—pattern-based timing. While it is not accessible in terms of the physical skill itself—which most strongly appeals to children, young adults, and men—it is accessible in terms of number of inputs and cognitive load so that players can focus on what else is happening in the game [3]. There are at least three components to consider when designing QTEs:

- How to inform players about and present them (i.e., **feedback**). Non-diegetic (i.e., explicitly show the control scheme) methods are common, but diegetic presentations (Figure 2) might be more effective in making the audience "feel" like they are part of the narrative because it does not break the "fourth wall" [7].
- What **controls** players use to respond. Buttons are common (Figure 3), but other options are available (Figure 4) which designers can leverage to mirror the player's actions to their in-game ones [12] and perform the narrative moment [13].
- How to evaluate the players' performance (i.e., **outcomes**). This can be a binary pass/fail, or graded (Figure 5). The penalty for "failing" a QTE should not be harsh (e.g., redoing an entire sequence) because it can absorb the player's attention that should be focused on the narrative aspects [15].

The simplicity of QTEs as game mechanics makes them ideal for narrative-focused games, and might be an example of a concrete implementation of the "scripting the interactor" principle [6] so that players can orient themselves in their role and surrounding story world [2]. By analyzing their context and components, we will better understand how to design and apply QTEs in narrative-focused games to promote players' narrative engagement.

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[3] https://youtu.be/8cAEQH_JHhQ?t=24437

(a) The crocodile in *Resident Evil 2* (2019) [G3] telegraphs its movements to players so they know where to go [4]

(b) Enemies in *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (2019) [G8] telegraph their attacks to players so they know when to parry [5]

Fig. 2. Examples of diegetic QTEs

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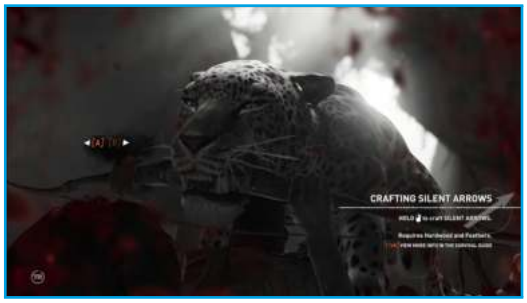
(a) In *God of War Ragnarök* (2022) [G12], players tap the left shoulder button to mirror Kratos's single arm use of his shield [6]

(b) In *Resident Evil 4* (2005) [G4], players press both trigger buttons simultaneously to switch to and hold Leon's knife ready [7]

(c) In *Final Fantasy XVI* (2023) [G13], players mash single buttons to push back and overpower opponents during special "Cinematic Clashes" [8]

(d) In *Kingdom Hearts 2* (2006) [G14], players must mash two buttons so that both Sora and Riku rush to reflect incoming laser attacks [9]

(e) In *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* (2012) [G16], players must hold their button presses to sustain the effort needed to pull themselves out from under their fallen horse [10]



(f) In *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* (2018) [G6] for Windows, players must alternate button taps to struggle against and escape the deadly jaguar [11]

Fig. 3. Examples of QTE button inputs

[6] https://youtu.be/RAk2HDH8gvQ?t=310
[7] https://youtu.be/T5ko8mLALd4?t=42
[8] https://youtu.be/90mFcptkvOE?t=20998
[9] https://youtu.be/MPBMQmHxy8c?t=396
[10] https://youtu.be/HlkKdj2dMU4?t=4271
[11] https://youtu.be/veU1qzJqUko?t=4242

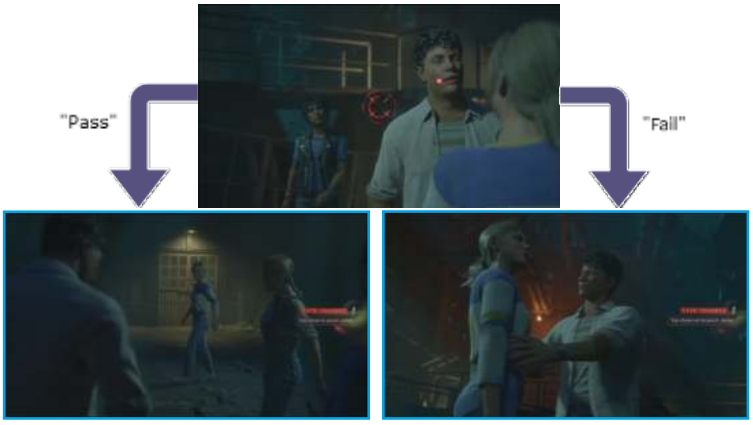
(a) *Heavy Rain* (2010) [G10] uses the joystick[12] and controller shaking[13] for different movement-based QTEs

(b) *Heavy Rain: Move Edition* (2010) [G11] replaced joystick and controller shaking inputs with motion controls[14]

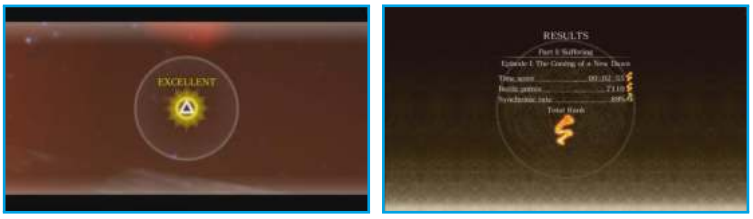
(c) *The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass* (2009) [G9] uses stylus movements[15]

Fig. 4. Example QTEs inputs that do not rely on buttons

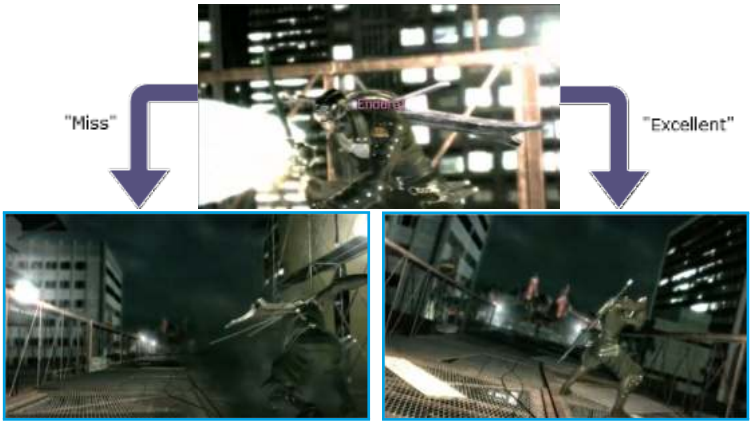
[12] https://youtu.be/VnyrPsqEg3c?t=60
[13] https://youtu.be/VnyrPsqEg3c?t=80
[14] https://youtu.be/62qSs0u2zoI?t=413
[15] https://youtu.be/AgxWwBI4z-Y?t=432 (Note that I needed to source a higher quality screenshot than the video affords)



(a) In *The Casting of Frank Stone* (2024) [G15], players choose to punch Jaime or not by "passing" or "failing" [16]



(b) In *Asura's Wrath* (2012) [G5], QTEs like the "Synchronic Chance/Impact" feed into a "Synchronic Rate" that grades the player's overall performance in an episode [17]



(c) During some boss fights in *Ninja Blade* (2009) [G7], the player's "grade" on a QTE determines how far away a player gets pushed back in the moment [18]

Fig. 5. Examples of QTE evaluations

[16] Compare a "Pass" (https://youtu.be/kxYJS7WoMvg?t=161) to a "Fail" (https://youtu.be/kxYJS7WoMvg?t=121)
[17] Overall QTE performance (https://youtu.be/EYcYq_eGZi8?t=1119) feeds into a "Synchronic Rate" evaluation (https://youtu.be/EYcYq_eGZi8?t=1273)
[18] Compare a "Miss" (https://youtu.be/N3dePHUmooI?t=2201) to an "Excellent" (https://youtu.be/N3dePHUmooI?t=2290)