Adapting the Network Narrative to Videogames through *Return of the Obra Dinn*

Abstract

This presentation will explore how *Return of the Obra Dinn* (2018) adapts the cinematic structure of the network narrative to the videogame form through combining it with the 'hidden story' mode of narrative design and gamifying its construction. *Return of the Obra Dinn* is a puzzle adventure game created by Lucas Pope that sees the player in the role of an insurance inspector for the East India Company in 1807 investigating the titular Obra Dinn, a ship that was set to sail around the Cape of Good Hope before going missing in 1803 with its 60-person crew entirely unaccounted for. To complete the game, the player-as-investigator must fill in a logbook detailing the names and fates of all lost souls on board.

In centring its process of discovery on a large social network of characters in the form of the crew, *Return of the Obra Dinn* can arguably be compared to the narratological structure of the network narrative. Network narratives, also known as multistrand (Campora, 2014; King, 2005) and hyperlink (Ebert, 2005) stories, are a form of narrative structure that scholars and screenwriters have identified across film and television (Berg, 2006; Bordwell, 2007, p. 189; Narine, 2010). Network narratives tend to be organised in what Kerr (2010, p. 38) refers to as "the n-degrees-of-separation template, 'thread structure' or tales of interlocking lives and converging fates", essentially turning such films into the manifestation of a social network of connections using a massive cast and quantity of plot threads. Network narratives are not new in cinema; Hollywood has used them since *Grand Hotel* (1932) to cram in as many stars as possible (Berg 2006, p. 15) and many historical and contemporary examples exist, such as *Nashville* (1975), *Magnolia* (1999), *Gosford Park* (2001) and *Syriana* (2005) in cinema, as well as shows like *24* (2001-2014), *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) and many soap operas (Johnson, 2006, p. 109). Network narratives are so numerous that Aronson (2010) describes their use in popular screenwriting book *The 21st Century Screenplay*. She provides them with alternate names yet again, such as ensemble film, tandem narrative and consecutive narrative, but they all come back to a single distinguishing feature: "a large cast and a series of stories that run simultaneously and chronologically in the same time frame" (2010, p. 186).

I argue that *Obra Dinn* is a notable case of videogame narrative design due to how it combines the conventional mystery design of other narrative-driven games with the adapted form of the network narrative, gamifying it in the process. In adapting the network narrative to videogames, *Obra Dinn* temporally reorients it by centring it on the player character as investigator who alternatively does not witness these networks develop in real time, but must reconstruct them retroactively. In doing so, the *Obra Dinn* integrates the network narrative with the intramedial affordances of videogame design where narrative can be conveyed through separating the past and contemporary temporal levels through what is often termed the 'hidden story' or 'mystery game' approach (Neitzel, 2005; Ryan, 2004, p. 352; 2006, p. 201; Wood, 2017). In turning the network narrative into a puzzle that must be retroactively constructed, *Obra Dinn* also turns the narrative structure into a game itself; one that can only be completed by 'solving' the social network of characters through mapping the names, relationships and fates of all sixty crew members. This presentation will therefore argue that adapting the network narrative to the videogame medium in *Return of the Obra Dinn* turns the complex network of connections into a narrative puzzle that the player must unravel.

Author Statement

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Democracy, Desire, and Disappointment: Silent Hill Ascension and Decision Systems in
Massively Interactive Narrative Games

Although Netflix recently announced that it is abandoning interactive storytelling and removing
most of its existing library, Genvid has only just begun its intervention into the medium, which
will soon include several adaptations of existing intellectual properties. On Halloween, 2023,
Genvid rebooted the *Silent Hill* franchise with *Ascension*, an interactive computer-animated
series that it describes as a Massively Interactive Live Event (MILE), which ran until July 2024.
Drawing on the history of interactive cinema, this talk examines *Ascension* to understand how its
design both facilitates democratic gameplay and undermines this aim through the competing
desires that emerge in audience participation; this work builds on critiques of desire and
capitalism from both Todd McGowan and Jodi Dean. Episodes of *Ascension* live-streamed
Monday to Friday and audiences determined its narrative direction by voting, participating in
rallies (a mechanic that boosts losing options), and playing mini-games that drove its Hope and
Fate decision systems. Episodes were also frequently accompanied by pre- and post- shows
hosted by *Ascension*'s producers, featuring commentary and guests (including Genvid's CEO,
Jacob Navok). While Genvid describes MILEs as "a new form of entertainment like no other,"
Ascension takes clear inspiration from television, interactive films, full-motion games, and
"Twitch Plays *Pokémon*."

Through its complex decision system, *Ascension* promised to be more adaptive than self-
contained branching narrative games, as the story arc is not fixed and the minutes long episodes
were easily altered between broadcasts. While the system is transparent to its audience in some
ways (labelling choices as Redemption, Suffering, and Damnation and reporting live results for
decisions), the long term impact of decisions were both ambiguous and numerous. As Navok
explains in a Post-Show interview, "people were asking whether those branches were real last
night or not. They're absolutely real we have a group of people whose whole job it is to sort
through the simulation, get the right recording out there, and post it afterward. That's a lot of
content. We have one scene in week four that has 45 variations on that one scene. We have a
thousand different ways the simulation can go . . . it's crazy, like it's all a massive branching
narrative and so we're updating these things in real time. We're changing these things in real
time" (Day 002). Navok's description of the game conjures visions of an interactive narrative
that is not only far more complex than any previous work, but one that facilitates democratic
participation.

In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in democratic gaming given the increasingly
polarizing and radical political climate (Massanari 2024). In examining the political context of
early interactive works like *Kinoautomat* (1967), Marina Hassapopulous argues that "democracy
is . . . not synonymous with any form of equal participation" (2024). "Democracy," she writes,
"is a dubious concept that, like other ideologies, can be manipulated into serving the interests of
a privileged few" (140). For Hassapopulous, interactive works effectively demonstrate the
contradiction of democracy by revealing the limits of our choices. *Ascension*, however,
complicates this critique of democracy through both its mechanics, that seemingly create more

democratic gameplay, and its complex interaction with the competing desires that motivate player actions.

Drawing on Lacan's claim that one's "desire is the Other's desire" (525), McGowan argues that desire is critical to fuelling capitalism. As McGowan explains, "[t]he capitalist subject constantly wonders which object is the most desirable or the most desired by other subjects" (35). Capitalist's fantasies perpetuate our desire, but these fantasies "have nothing to do with the subject's own satisfaction and work actively to deprive the capitalist subject of its freedom" (47). Attempts to reject the Other's desire, however, are not liberating, as one's desire remains defined in relation to the Other. Capitalism, Dean argues, "captures critique and resistance, formatting them as contributions to the circuits in which it thrives" (2).

Through its decision system, *Ascension* reveals the interrelationships of desire. Even in a system which is, in theory, limitless, outcomes are still constrained. As Navok discovered, audiences overwhelmingly gravitate toward "Redemption" choices for characters. As this talk will analyze, this trend is informed by a complex interaction of variables including desire, adaptation, game conventions, and rival factions formed as a result of *Ascension*'s system. As their first MILE, *Ascension* is a valuable case study not only for the reflections shared by its producers during pre- and post- shows, but also the live experimentation that occurred during its release as developers attempted to adapt and adjust to audience desires. Through an in-depth analysis of *Ascension*, this talk examines the challenges faced by a platform designed to overcome the limitations of interactive storytelling and dismantles the fantasy of democratic gaming.

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History cast in two dimensions: Encyclopaedic Description and World-building in Digital Games

Item and creature descriptions are one of the most common forms of writing in digital games. As Sky LaRell Anderson (2019) has pointed out, these descriptions have their basis in tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs), where paratexts like the *Monster Manual* (Gygax, 1977) give information about the game's world through a descriptive, encyclopaedic format. More recently, digital games like *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011), *Nier: Automata* (PlatinumGames, 2017) and *Destiny 2* (Bungie, 2017, p. 2) have employed a narrative form where crucial information about the game's world is largely provided through these descriptions. They function as a form of intertextual "flavour text" (Crutcher, 2017), providing information that is "useless" to complete the game's story (or reach the credits), but collectively fill out the "information space" of the game world (Jenkins, 2004). They are, in other words, lore or exposition which help cross the bridge between our own "real" lived and experienced "zero world" (Suvin, 1972), and fictional worlds with a high degree of "invention" (Wolf, 2012). These are often worlds with ontological rules, geographies, biologies, and histories that are vastly different from our own. Oftentimes, large "forensic" (Mittell, 2015) or "archaeological" (Caracciolo, 2022) fandoms surround these game worlds, as players put down the controller and pick up the keyboard to analyse and speculate on these descriptions through platforms like Reddit, Discord, YouTube, GameFAQs, and most importantly, the Wiki (Mittell, 2009).

There have been few academic attempts to discuss the formal qualities of this prose style. In this presentation, I propose that these descriptions employ a kind of "encyclopedic" writing (Clark, 2012), a style that originated in the Enlightenment's project to demystify the world through abstraction, taxonomizing, and ownership (Lee, 2020) – a venture that had both humanist and colonial underpinnings (Struve, 2021). The encyclopedia "constitutes a structure of information" (Barthes, 2010) across its various entries, describing our world through partitioning it into pieces of information that signify towards the "real" (Barthes, 1989). Through a close reading of several items and creature descriptions, I will show how these short texts similarly act as an intertextual network of partitioned

information that signifies towards the "real" aspects of the fictionally "incomplete" storyworld (Van de Mosselaer & Gualeni, 2022). I show that this form is an outgrowth of what Edward Mendelson described as the "encyclopedic novel", expansive works like *Ulysses* (Joyce, 1993) and *Don Quixote* (Cervantes, 2005) that attempted to attend "to the whole scale and linguistic range" of the authors' nation (Mendelson, 1976). Similarly, games that employ this encyclopaedic form of taxonomizing and description are often concerned with building the entirety of a fictional world, as impossible as this task may be.

In particular, the paper is supported by a close analysis of Freehold Games' science fantasy roguelike *Caves of Qud* (Freehold Games, 2015)*,* and its "Look" and "Examine" actions. Using these actions, players can read a description for nearly any object or character within the game (Fig. 1), fleshing out the low-fidelity ASCII-adjacent graphics (Johnson, 2017) with detailed textual description. These descriptions, far from being purely encyclopaedic, employ a poetic, complicated prose that pays special attention to the described object's materiality and history. The description of the "table" object is an evocative example of this:

> Branches of the living tree were resorbed and reformed into trunk knots. Then, hundreds of years later, the oiled saw of a gorge woodworker disarranged the arbor geometry and flattened it for civil use. That history remains cast in two dimensions, powdered with dust and scratched in pencil.

Analysing this description and others, I show that *Caves of Qud* is a valuable case study in that it reveals the tensions underpinning the encyclopaedic and rationalising impulse found in many item and creature descriptions. Whereas the point in many of these descriptions is to familiarise the player with a fictional world, I argue that *Qud'*s descriptions *defamiliarize* us from its world, increasing "the difficulty and length of perception" (Shlovsky, 2004) of objects, even those familiar to us. Through this, I propose that not only the very inclusion of descriptions as a means of world-building has important ideological implications, but that the way these descriptions are written tell us crucial things about how structures of information guide our understanding of fictional worlds.

Figure 1 - Caves of Qud screenshot

I hope this presentation contributes to the growing field of literature on world-building in games, drawing out the wider ideological implications of world-building as a practice. It will conclude with a call to analyse the "insignificant" narrative elements of games, which may not contribute to the player's progression through the simulation, but which nonetheless play an important part in understanding the game world.

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Finn Dawson is a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney researching the politics of worlds and world-building in digital games. He employs methodologies from literary studies, philosophy and critical theory, and has a keen interest in the relationship between games and capitalist social relations. He has spoken at conferences on the world-building of *Disco Elysium* and *Dark Souls,* and has co-authored a report on South by Southwest (SXSW) Sydney 2023 titled "Maximising the Potential of SXSW Sydney Games: Report on SXSW Sydney 2023 as a Games Industry Event".

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