For Empowerment's Sake: Rethinking Video Game Adaptations Of Real-Life Experiences

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ABSTRACT

From Empathy to Empowerment: A New Approach to Game Adaptation

In adapting real-life experiences into interactive narratives, video games have prioritized empathy-building as a central design goal (review in Schrier & Farber, 2021). This often involves crafting stories and gameplay mechanics that allow players without direct exposure to experiences such as mental illnesses, queerness, trauma, or forced migration—to better understand and emotionally connect with these realities. This focus on empathy can be seen as commendable and serving a critical purpose for broadening awareness and encouraging understanding. However, researchers, game developers and people with said experiences have raised critique against the rhetoric of empathy. Common arguments against these video games include minimizing the lived experiences, labeling them as "other" and promoting appropriation of affect (Ruberg, 2020). Prioritizing players without these experiences overlooks the opportunity to address the needs of those who have lived them. These players might not seek to feel empathy, but instead could benefit from video games that reflect their own stories and emotions, providing them with opportunities for healing, empowerment, and self-reflection. We believe there is a need for games designed explicitly with these audiences in mind and argue for an expansion of design goals in video game adaptations of real-life experiences including empowerment through feelings of catharsis.

Catharsis as a Mechanism for Empowerment

We view catharsis as a key component to fostering empowerment. Derived from Aristotelian concepts, catharsis refers to relieving tension and intense emotion by expressing them in a safe context (Kettles, 1995). To date, psychological research on catharsis in video games has largely focused on its connection to violent video games (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2014; Kersten & Greitemeyer, 2021). This limited focus has led to a gap in understanding how catharsis might operate as a constructive mechanism within video game narratives. We advocate reframing catharsis as a tool for processing emotions, promoting healing, and empowering players.

In our study of Reddit posts about Silent Hill 2, we examine how the game fosters cathartic experiences through its themes of trauma, guilt, and grief. Many players describe how the emotionally charged narrative and immersive world resonate with their own struggles, offering a space to process and confront difficult emotions. The ability to resonate with the game's themes and process emotions through catharsis makes playing Silent Hill 2 an empowering experience for its players.

Co-Creating Stories: Designing for Affected Communities

To illustrate the potential of empowerment-focused video game adaptations of real-life experiences, we would like to present an ongoing participatory design project involving people with experiences of forced migration (Harshina, 2024; Harshina & Harbig, in press). Our project employs a collaborative methodology, combining surveys and iterative feedback sessions to co-create a game framework. By directly involving affected individuals, we aim to ensure that the resulting narratives authentically represent their lived experiences and emotional journeys.

Our design framework is structured around two distinct pathways: one tailored to players with lived experiences of forced migration and another aimed at promoting empathy among broader audiences. For the former group, the focus lies in crafting narratives and mechanics that provide cathartic, resilience-building experiences, reflecting their struggles and triumphs. For the latter, we emphasize creating opportunities for meaningful engagement and shared understanding through immersive storytelling. Additionally, we explore how a single game could serve as a bridge between these audiences, cultivating dialogue and mutual understanding. By combining empathy and empowerment within a single narrative, we envision games as a space where individuals with diverse perspectives can come together, challenge biases, and build solidarity.

Reimagining Video Game Adaptations

We argue for a reimagining of video game adaptations of real-life experiences that:

1. Ground narratives in authentic stories told by those directly affected.
2. Consider affected people as target audiences.
3. Strive for empowerment through cathartic and resilience-building experiences, rather than solely aiming for empathy.

Empowerment-focused narratives invite players to connect with their own emotions and stories. Our proposed dual-path approach—focusing on both empathy and empowerment—reframes how video games adapt real-life experiences. By centering affected individuals and embracing catharsis as a design principle, games can create meaningful connections across diverse audiences. We encourage game designers and researchers to collaborate with affected communities to craft narratives that resonate deeply, connecting storytelling, personal growth, and societal impact.

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AUTHORS' STATEMENTS

Imke Alenka Harbig is a psychologist and PhD candidate working as a university assistant at the University of Klagenfurt, Austria. Her research explores the effects of playing video games on personal growth. Imke's interdisciplinary approach includes qualitative and quantitative methods. She has shared her findings on international conferences, such as SPSP 2024, DGP 2024, and the GALA Conference 2024. Her work contributes to a deeper understanding of video games as tools for empowerment, education, and human development.

Kseniia Harshina is a PreDoc researcher at the University of Klagenfurt, Austria, specializing in game studies, game engineering, and AI. Her doctoral research explores how VR can cultivate empathy and empower players by addressing complex social issues, such as forced migration. She has presented her work internationally, including this year at CHI PLAY 2024, GALA Conference 2024, EXAG 2024 and FROG 2024. Kseniia's interdisciplinary approach combines technology and storytelling to drive social impact.

The 2025 International Conference on Games and Narrative presents: Adapt, Adopt, Adjust: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Adaptation, Storytelling, and Simulation

Abstract

In most videogames, death usually correlates with restart, reset, or reload. Whatever progress players achieve are lost, items are returned, quests or missions must be initiated once again, and bar the experience and knowledge acquired until that point, there is no in-game experience to be gained in most deaths or failures. Some games, however, take that approach towards new directions and implement mechanics that make death not only an as an undesirable and avoidable feature, but diametrically opposed, it is implemented as a gameplay feature – supposed to help characters evolve, and enhance players' progress. This paper will analyze different ways in which death can be implement in videogames, and how by subverting the traditional *game over* screen, some developers encourage ultimate failure as a means to evolve, both within the narrative as well as with the character himself.

When a player sees the *game over* screen, it usually leads to a repetition of tasks, missions, actions or choices previously done, and interrupted by a momentary failure. With death, however, there is also a retention of accumulated knowledge regarding a level, an enemy, a choice to be made, or not made within the narrative. Moving beyond that resetting of actions, and retention of knowledge, some developers choose death not only as an interruption, a reorganization of approaches, or a reframing of accomplishments, but rather engage in death as a narrative and gameplay strategy, an integral part of the player experience.

Several games implemented different narrative consequences and strategies following one character's death, such as *Until Dawn* (2014), *Hades* (2020), and *Sifu* (2022). While in *Until Dawn* (and subsequent Supermassive games) death is, beyond a gameplay feature, also a

narrative tool which affects the outcome of the story, and even the paths one takes to get to the ending, in *Hades* and *Sifu*, death is a means to evolve the characters beyond their original abilities.

To best analyze these different approaches to death, I draw from the work of Christian Roth and Ivar Vermeulen, and their differentiation of "global" and "local" agencies in interactive storytelling. In *Until Dawn* local player choices lead to separate endings, thus affecting the narrative structure itself. An action which is performed by the player has an immediate consequence (local agency), such as helping a friend and saving them, or leaving them to die. While the consequences of local agency are perceived immediately, this action creates unforeseen consequences in the structure of the narrative (global agency), leading to other deaths, or even to the game ending prematurely.

On the other hand, in games such as *Hades* and *Sifu*, death does not affect the global narrative, but dying is somewhat encouraged by the gameplay elements associated with it. In *Hades*, each new death leads the main character to develop new powers, learn new abilities, which in turn facilitate the players' experience. The ending is not altered, with each failure, but gameplay is enhanced. *Sifu*, similarly to *Hades*, uses death as gameplay mechanics, opening up certain skills with each death. Death brings, in practical and metaphorical ways, the idea of the knowledge acquired through experience, which is one of the premises of the game: "mastery through experience". Beyond the factual knowledge of the enemies players will encounter, which is similarly gained in most action games, *Sifu* also adds both perks as well as limitations with each death. New skills are available, others are lost for the duration of that run.

By contrasting these two different approaches to death within the narrative structure, this paper seeks to illuminate gameplay choices and how they can lead to engaging mechanics around death.

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Ricardo Martins, Ph.D.

Ricardo Martins is a Visiting Assistant Professor in Modern Languages and Literatures & Media Studies at Rhodes College, Tennessee (US). His currently interests include interactive narratives, videogames, Latin American cinema, and the representation of Latin Americans in media in general.

His most recently publication, **“**Desire and Delusion: Fetish of Brazilian Favela in Videogame (Mis)representation”, examines how Brazilian favelas are consistently depicted through negative lenses in media, a trend that persists and is amplified in contemporary videogames. This work exposes how these (mis)representations, rooted in stereotypes dating back to the 1950s, contribute to the fetishization of the favela as a space of exoticized otherness. This process reinforces inaccurate and limited portrayals, which in turn continue to promote biases and stigmas surrounding the favela and its residents.

Ricardo has taught courses on videogame representation, on remediation, and currently teaches the intersections of videogames and environmental issues.

Presentation Title:

Shadowing the Shadow Broker: Transmedia Detectives and Media Heterarchy in *Mass Effect*

Presentation Abstract (259 words):

In asking players to engage and organize an overwhelming amount of information, *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story requires players to shadow Liara T'Soni in her position as Shadow Broker. Their actions move them in and out of the games to other media, offering a whole gambit of transmedial agency in choosing how and when they engage the mediascape, adapting their game and game world knowledge across media. Players explore these media as they would in an extended ARG or as a player-character in a game world: piecing together a puzzle of interconnected stories as both a character within the system and the player situating this presence. Their participation allows them to function as information brokers and detectives who interact with the franchise to ensure its existence as, Dalby (2016) explains, "Transmedia arguably cannot exist independently, they require audiences for their existence" (82). Focusing on the necessary participatory engagement needed to traverse *Mass Effect*'s media, I argue the transmedia detective parallels the player-character, and by applying player-character theory to transmedia storytelling, we can better understand how transmedia works on various levels of player ontology within and across the narrative co-creation that occurs in this multiplatform story. Following that logic, my presentation offers an assimilation of player-character theory (Lankoski, 2011; Dalby, 2016; Alton, 2017; Hart, 2017) and transmedia studies (Jenkins, 2006; Bertetti, 2014; Geraghty, 2018; Bourdaa, 2019; Blom, 2023) to examine how the transmedial engagement with *Mass Effect* mirrors the player-character connection within video game narratives as players develop, adapt, and resist narrative co-creation along side the Shadow Broker as transmedia detectives.

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Description of the Contribution: Paper or Video Essay Submission

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Gregory Blomquist is an ATS Assistant Lecturer in the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta. His research focuses on the intersections between game studies and transmedia storytelling, real-time strategy games and narrative, player-character connection, and monstrosity in video games. He has published in academic peer-reviewed journals including *Games and Culture* and *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*, as well as the middle-state publication *First Person Scholar*.

The Detective in the Furnace: Belief and Fictional Illegibility

Erick Verran

International Conference on Games and Narrative 2025

CENTRAL FURNACE – A thick layer of coal dust covers the furnace, colouring it pitch-black.

YOU – Look inside the furnace.

CENTRAL FURNACE – It's dark and grimy here. In the darkness, you can hear *chatter*. It's coming from above. A voice -- or several voices -- talking to each other, near the smoke chamber upstairs.

PERCEPTION (HEARING) [Medium: Success] – The echo is so prominent, it's impossible to discern what the voices are saying. Or what's producing them.

KIM KITSURAGI – "What are you doing?" the lieutenant asks when he sees you climb half-way inside the furnace.

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The Detective in the Furnace: Belief and Fictional Illegibility

Abstract
In the last few years, videogames such as the Sokoban-style *Baba Is You* have made it possible to instantiate distinct environmental states and win conditions through a focus on the combinatorial possibilities of syntax. Baba, a white sheep-like creature, is able to manipulate each level's logic operators by pushing around word tiles into horizontal or vertical configurations, while *Leximan*, about a junior wizard-in-training, lets the player cast spells corresponding to the order in which they choose to combine floating word fragments. As with performative utterances empowered to affect *social* reality, rule-changing tiles and spell casting are susceptible to what J.L. Austin (1962) referred to as "infelicities": wrongly ordered, the syntax does not parse, the environment remains as it was. Perhaps more so than any game in the computer roleplaying genre, all but the most rudimentary actions in *Disco Elysium* are gated by language, such that branching conversations, often determined by skill checks, unlock new deductions about one's environment in the form of perceptual, interpersonal, or logical insights and, in turn, further access to its kaleidoscopic story of spiritual redemption under late capitalism. As Harry DuBois, a boozy detective with a missing gun and questionable methods, early on the player is tasked with investigating a derelict building behind a bookstore from which a ghostly sound is emanating; flashlight in hand, eventually a scene is triggered wherein Harry is said, but not shown, to "climb half-way inside" a large industrial furnace. For Wolf Schmid (2010), the absence of causal linkages with respect to a given fiction—the gap between what a player is told occurs (that Harry climbs into the furnace, in this case) as compared with what may be seen to—is illustrative of our role in furnishing that which is missing via make-believing. If we consider *Disco Elysium*'s narrative imbalance, missing animations, or rather the actions to which they refer, "are nonetheless existent in the narrated world, and are concretized by the reader" (p. 3). Whether or not what we are told is always what we see, there is an implicit hierarchic inequivalence which, against its authoritative counterpart, trumps mimesis: Harry climbs into the furnace, though he doesn't.

Interactive fictions, then as now, have afforded players an explorative agency, one that reveals a digital environment in response to their involvement in it, albeit without grasping at representational equivalencies. "I will be your ears and hands," announces the narrator in 1976's text-based *Colossal Cave Adventure*. At least fictionally, *Disco Elysium*'s bumbling investigator must be, from one moment to the next, however he is said to be. His actions may be withheld from the player—like their own activity is frequently invisible to the story as diegetically trivial, or noncanonical—but we would be remiss to claim that the player should be ignorant therefore as to what happens in the game. It is less that interactive fictions save us the trouble of squaring the interpretive circle of the mimetic as the concretization of the diegesis, of imaginatively filling a gap (Van de Mosselaer and Gualeni, 2022; Verran, 2024; Nader, forthcoming), than that a videogame without a substantive representational half avoids aiming beyond its reach. When the mimetic and diegetic are kept apart, consequently it becomes unnecessary, even paradoxical, that they should then achieve parity in acting out, through set pieces, characters, and backdrops, a unique action or slice of the plot. Granting one side of that equation interpretive authority over

the whole, as opposed to what film historian Tom Gunning (2014) refers to as "a flow, a guided course of reading in which images and language propel each other" (p. 37), should thus require that the dependent side cancel out: telling through showing, and showing without also telling. Through a reconsideration of diegesis as informationally authoritative and the mimetic as that which one might describe as representationally complete, being at once visually informative and, storywise, always already narrational, the preoccupation of this article is finally an experiential inequivalence inherent to the act of reading, both in literary and visual media, and the degree to which fictive changes of state may be said to occur at all in a player's imagination.

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Author's Statement

Erick Verran is the author of the collection of critical art writing *Obiter Dicta* (Punctum Books, 2021). Currently, he is a PhD candidate at the University of Utah where he works primarily on narratology and aesthetics in digital games. Earlier this year an in-progress paper, "Simulating Other-Awareness and the Limits of the Carnivalesque," was presented at Video Game Cultures 2024 ("The Other Conference") and his research has appeared in *Game Studies*, *Press Start*, the *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*, *Postmodern Culture*, the *Journal of Sound and Music in Games*, the *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, and *Contemporary Aesthetics*. He has also published widely as a poet and literary critic.