



Dreams to Digital Realities: An Exploration of Narratives in Gaming

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A popular question that continues to be debated within the realm of media is: are video games an art form? A painted canvas, a render, a novel, or a film all succeed in being considered true masterpieces of art if they can tell a story that resonates with their audience. While games do a fantastic job showcasing art, innovation and mechanics, their most exceptional and controversial aspect lies within narratives and storytelling. Unique narratives have given birth to iconic and infamous characters that have resonated with players for years. Linear, non-linear, and experimental narratives have led gamers to engage in fantastical and guttural scenarios and explore unreal worlds. Developers that have focused on telling and expanding upon exceptional narratives are often praised by their audiences. On the other side of the spectrum, there are publishers that take advantage of their audiences through means of short-lived wins, and money driven tactics to expand stories. The evolution of narratives within the game industry has been a contentious one, but not without a good story.

My introduction to games in the early 90s included very basic linear scenarios: win the international fighting tournament (**[Street Fighter](#)**), save the environment from Robotnik (**[Sonic The Hedgehog](#)**), your princess is in another castle go rescue her (**[Mario](#)**). All of these games were very simplistic in narrative and design, providing a very fun and lighthearted entertainment experience. The only wager was on your multiple lives to complete the story. When I was nine years old, I played my first role-playing game (RPG), **[Final Fantasy 7](#)**. This was my first exposure to a linear game that also featured nonlinear mechanics. If I made an executive choice, or gambled on my stats the outcome of the game would be different. If I didn't explore certain areas or indulge in secret side quests, I would miss out on meeting special characters and finding unique treasure. Combine the complexity of this gameplay with a story that included themes of existentialism, bio terrorism, armageddon, and you truly have a game that changes your perspective. While linear



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and nonlinear narratives are the most popular among AAA publishers (major publishers that typically have higher production budgets), experimental narratives have become more prominent in the industry. Creating a game with an experimental narrative is not always a safe bet. However, plenty of Indie and AAA developers have taken the risk to create games that are unique among the main competition. Competitive AAA publishers have the advantage with substantial budgets, often enticing players to unlock, upgrade, and advance the game's narrative via downloadable content (DLC) and microtransactions. Exclusive skins, decals, and special editions are usually offered at launch when a highly anticipated game drops. Indie developers may not have the financial budget, and bells and whistles compared with their AAA counterparts, but they may make more in the long term from microtransactions, and fan demand for sequels. Like art house films, experimental games do not always succeed in the gaming market, as with a new product there is some skepticism around its quality. The promise of an unparalleled-one-of-a-kind narrative within a game does not always come to fruition, often forcing the developers to work hard to regain their audiences' trust. Most players who ordered [No Man's Sky](#)¹ felt cheated and deceived at what the developers delivered, leading to a serious discussion on the ethics of developers swindling people out of their money while knowing they were delivering a subpar product. While [No Man's Sky](#) has since redeemed itself through the developers delivering on everything that was promised at launch, it was a bare bones and insulting game when it first premiered in 2016. Some games are deemed too deep, too weird or too emotional for players to tolerate, however there is also demand for these unique games as new stories are being told.

Perhaps what is even more exciting about experimental games is the advances in innovation and technology virtually reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and the endless potential for fresh and rare narratives in the future. Well executed narratives set up games for critical praise, while groundbreaking narratives create immersive experiences where players can identify themselves within the said world. Will you be moral, immoral, or neutral in your actions and choices? Will you stick to conventional norms or choose a more diverse or taboo character experience? Will the original narrative of the game be satisfactory enough or will you pay for additional downloadable content to see more of the story? Some of the most renowned franchises which offer players gameplay experiences such as these include the [Fallout](#), [Mass Effect](#), and [The Witcher](#) franchises. Due to the massive scale of these games the developers have frequently engaged with the player communities to create more content and encourage mod creation. Engagement with player communities is often viewed as positive as there is full support, transparency, and communication on behalf of the publishers. Players will often hold publishers accountable for shady practices, and pay-to-win mechanics, as was seen when Bethesda dropped the ball with [Fallout 76](#).² Bethesda deliberately put out a broken game, while overhauling the gameplay system. Typically to advance

¹ Williams, Isaac (2020, Oct 12) Narrative. <https://medium.com/narrative-from-linear-media-to-interactive-media/controversies-in-the-world-of-video-gaming-are-nothing-new-d57e0f759b7a>

² Hurley, Leon (2022, August 18) Fallout 76 microtransactions and Fallout 1st explained. Gameradar <https://www.gamesradar.com/fallout-76-microtransactions/>

in [Fallout](#) you would fight enemies and explore to find better gear, with [Fallout 76](#). However, the gameplay system relied on pay-to-win. Meaning you could spend hundreds of hours grinding levels to advance your character and you could be outmatched by someone else who has only played for an hour but had maxed out their stats by spending copious amounts of money. While publishers are often keen on creating new or continuing narratives to attract players to get hyped up for their games, sometimes their intentions are not always genuine. In 2018 Blizzard faced an uproarious backlash when they revealed [Diablo Immortal](#)³ at Blizzcon. One fan in the audience asked the presenters if the game itself would ever see the light of day on PC, and the presenters replied that it would strictly be a mobile release. The crowd, not happy with this answer, booed and jeered to which the presenters yelled "DO YOU GUYS NOT HAVE PHONES?!". Fast forward to 2022 to the game's launch date, and shock of shocks [Diablo Immortal](#) is a game chock full of microtransactions, costing as much as \$500,000 to fully max out one's player.

Audiences have every right to boycott and react negatively to nefarious practices by publishers, especially when the narrative of a game has been retconned or become a joke of itself. And yet what is interesting is seeing audiences become divided as the publishers attempt to tell new stories and become more inclusive, diverse and without a hidden price. Naughty Dog faced extreme backlash to the point of death threats when parts of [The Last of Us 2](#) was leaked by an employee. Fans of the series were furious to see that a certain main character was killed off, but also that the main protagonist was an openly gay woman. The studio defended and stood by their creative choices. They deemed it was important to be brave and daring with a new narrative as it would add to the already amazing story. They also banked on their ability to tell a unique story, while acknowledging the difficulty of making a linear game with non-linear elements.⁴ Providing narratives that are unique, diverse and inclusive is a bold move by publishers as they risk alienating loyal fans to entice new ones. And, while sometimes they hit the mark, there are times when their reach for inclusivity falls short. EA's [Battlefield V](#)⁵ was met with much controversy by players due to the portrayal of women and various historical inaccuracies within the game. This example is very unfortunate as women did indeed have vital roles within WWI, but fabricating where and when women served for the sake of entertainment is not always met with acceptance. On the other hand, titles like Rockstar's [Red Dead Redemption 2](#) and Ubisoft's [Assassin's Creed 3](#) did a stellar job of telling stories from multicultural perspectives which includes the black and indigenous experience, and their contributions to history.

One of my favorite narratives that is exemplified in games are the ones that provide social commentary and a satirical take on various topics. Games like [Postal](#) and [Job Simulator](#) exemplify

³ Yin-Poole, Wesley (2018, Nov 3) Blizzard faces hellish backlash after BlizzCon Diablo mobile reveal. Eurogamer. <https://www.eurogamer.net/blizzard-faces-backlash-after-blizzcon-diablo-mobile-announcement>

⁴ Bellingham, Hope (2022, March 3) The Last of Us co-director says linear games are "easier to make". Gameradar <https://www.gamesradar.com/the-last-of-us-co-director-says-linear-games-are-easier-to-make/>

⁵ Kan, Michael (2018, May 25) Battlefield V faces controversy over including women soldiers. PC Mag. <https://www.pcmag.com/news/battlefield-v-faces-controversy-over-including-women-soldiers>

the banalities of work life, which can lead people to existential dread and unhinged behavior. Despite the flaws and controversy regarding [Cyberpunk 2077](#) many fans fell in love with the story, characters and scarily accurate depiction of a dystopian future that is slowly creeping towards us. It should also be noted that some game narratives are essentially geared towards the individual player themselves. Games like [Just Dance](#), [Wii Fit](#), and [Skate](#) encourage exercise, and promote fitness, prompting the player to take accountability for their health and seek self-improvement.

Returning to experimental games, some of the most interesting narratives are not told a human's or animal's perspective, but rather from the perspective of inanimate objects or other worldly forces. The game [Flower](#) has the player exploring a vast level from the perspective of a single petal. There is no dialogue, no direction, no urgency really, just to simply float with ease around the levels. [Layers of Fear](#) is an atmospheric horror game, in which the player explores a gothic mansion, encountering horrifying memories of the homeowner's past. What makes [Layers of Fear](#) unique is the realization that the failures of the past, and the horrid human which once occupied the house has now manifested itself inside the walls: the house itself is a monstrous character wreaking havoc upon the player's psyche. [Flower](#) and [Layer of Fear](#) are just two examples of how narratives can be used to resonate with people on a psychological level. It is exciting to consider how games with experimental narratives like this could be used for healing, education, and rehabilitation in the future.

Other forms of entertainment do indeed share vast and diverse narratives in the same vein that games do, and for that they should be lauded. The only difference with a game is that *you* are the one who is in control, it is *you* who feels truly immersed in the experience. And perhaps what is truly remarkable is that anyone today, even with a lack of education or experience, can create their own game. I think that games truly are an artform because the evolution of the industry itself has encouraged creativity and inclusion for newcomers. Now more than ever is a time where others are encouraged to tell their own stories. If these stories happen to be in the medium of video games, I look forward to experiencing the wonder of them all.