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INTERACTIVE NARRATIVE IN VIDEO GAMES
INTERAKTIVNÍ VYPRÁVĚNÍ PŘÚBEHŮ VE VIDEOHRÁCH

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Abstract

Video games, as an emerging storytelling medium, are important to properly analyse alongside their narrative impact on their audience. A comprehensive analysis of video games requires an approach that accounts for the inherent interactivity of the medium. Traditional literary theory while effective in analysing other forms of media, falls short in this regard. Therefore, it is essential to adopt a more suitable approach to understand the unique interactive nature of video games. This bachelor's thesis examines the narrative elements that build up a story, such as linearity or spatio-temporal settings, and story structures, such as characters and plot. These elements are then used to analyse four video games that share certain similarities in some of their elements.

Keywords

video games, storytelling, narratology, interactivity, immersion, spatial narrative, temporal narrative, linear narrative, non-linear narrative

Abstrakt

Z důvodu narůstající popularity videoher jako média pro vyprávění příběhů, je důležitá jejich analýza a posouzení vlivu jejich příběhů. Komplexní analýza vyžaduje přístup, který zohledňuje inherentní interaktivitu média. Tradiční literární teorie, přestože je účinná při analýze jiných forem médií, v tomto ohledu zaostává, proto je nezbytné přijmout vhodnější přístup k pochopení jedinečné interaktivní povahy videoher. Tato bakalářská práce zkoumá strukturu příběhu, například linearitu nebo časově-prostorové prvky, a jeho prvky, například jeho strukturu a postavy. Následně byly tyto prvky použity na analýzu čtyř videoher, které sdílejí podobnosti v některých jejich prvcích.

Klíčová slova

videohry, vyprávění příběhů, naratologie, interaktivita, imerze, prostorový narativ, časový narativ, lineární narativ, nelineární narativ

Rozšířený abstrakt

Vzhledem k rostoucí popularitě videoher, zejména jako nástroje pro vyprávění příběhů, roste potřeba vhodného formátu analýzy. Protože tradiční analýza literatury nebo filmu nezahrnuje elementy interaktivity, které jsou ve videohrách inherentně přítomny, je nutno tuto teorii rozšířit a adaptovat.

Tato bakalářská práce se zaměřuje na tradiční literární analýzu s rozšířením o interaktivní a imerzní prvky tak, aby pokryly potřeby vyprávění příběhů ve videohrách. V práci jsou analyzovány prvky čistě narativní, zejména linearita a nelinearita, časově-prostorové zasazení a perspektiva, imerzní prvky a interaktivita. Součástí analyzovaných příběhových prvků jsou postavy, obsah samotného příběhu a vliv hráče na děj.

Teoretická část práce sestává z rešerše doporučené literatury, která umožnila sjednocení pohledů různých autorů na teorii literatury a videoher. V kapitolách je také diskutována existující teorie analýzy videoher jako literárního média pro vyprávění příběhů. Teoretický rámec představuje seznam alternativ pro dané téma, např. možnosti perspektivy při pohledu hráče nebo kategorie příběhů na základě možností hráče ovlivnit děj.

Praktická část vychází z teorie a prvků analyzovaných v teoretické části a zaměřuje se na analýzu specifických her. Tyto hry byly vybrány na základě sdíleného prvku malých zvířat jako centrálního bodu v každém příběhu. Na základě toho pak bylo možné pozorovat rozdíly dosažené změnami v narativních prvcích.

V každé vybrané hře jsou prvky analyzovány postupně podle pořadí, ve kterém byly představeny v teoretické části. Tento postup umožnil rozdělení analýzy každé hry na menší části tak, aby analýza byla lépe strukturovaná a podrobnější. To také umožnilo zvýraznit rozdíl mezi analyzovanými hrami, protože u každé hry je uveden popis jejích vlastností (např. perspektiva), které je tak možné snadno porovnat.

Vybrané hry konkrétně zahrnovaly *Bug Fables: The Everlasting Sapling* (2019), *Bugsnax* (2020), *Hollow Knight* (2017) a *Small Saga* (2023). Tyto hry obsahují různé žánry z pohledu hraní videohry a z pohledu příběhu v nich. Postavy jsou také rozmanité: obsahují realistické brouky nebo hlodavce, stylizované brouky nebo jen pro inspiraci zcela fiktivní zvířata s brouky. Děj byl také různorodý, protože zahrnoval tragické i šťastné konce.

Mezi vybranými hrami se objevily nejen rozdílné, ale i stejné nebo minimálně podobné prvky. Většina her analyzovaných v této práci neumožnila hráči radikálně ovlivnit děj. V jednom případě měla hra různé ukončení závisející na základě rozhodnutí hráče, ale ani i v tomto případě nedocházelo k významně odlišným dějovým liniím.

Analýza těchto videoher umožnila hlubší vhled do zakomponování interaktivních elementů. Vzhledem k tomu, že analýza videoher zatím není stoprocentně standardizovaná, bylo cílem této bakalářské práce sjednocení literární teorie a interaktivních elementů ve videohrách pro budoucí analýzy další aspektů videoher.

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Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že bakalářskou práci na téma *Interaktivní vyprávění příběhů ve videohrách* jsem vypracovala samostatně pod vedením vedoucí bakalářské práce a s použitím odborné literatury a dalších informačních zdrojů, které jsou všechny citovány v práci a uvedeny v seznamu literatury na konci práce.

Jako autorka uvedené bakalářské práce dále prohlašuji, že v souvislosti s vytvořením této práce jsem neporušila autorská práva třetích osob, zejména jsem nezasáhla nedovoleným způsobem do cizích autorských práv osobnostních a/nebo majetkových a jsem si plně vědoma následků porušení ustanovení § 11 a následujících zákona č. 121/2000 Sb., o právu autorském, o právech souvisejících s právem autorským a o změně některých zákonů (autorský zákon), ve znění pozdějších předpisů, včetně možných trestněprávních důsledků vyplývajících z ustanovení části druhé, hlavy VI. díl 4 Trestního zákoníku č. 40/2009 Sb.

V Brně dne ....

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Introduction

Video games are growing in popularity both as an entertainment and storytelling medium. While literary analyses of video games do exist, they tend to be focused more on an overall view and general structure of narratives present in video games (Zeman, 2017; Lebowitz and Klug, 2011; Solarski, 2017). Additionally, the traditional literary approach does not consider the interactive elements that are a part of video games by the nature of the medium. While analyses consider the narrative implementation of these interactive elements (Brewis, 2022), these tend to fall outside of traditional academic review.

The popularity of video games highlights the importance of examining their effectiveness in affecting the audience. It is crucial to analyse narrative structures that effectively entertain or convey a meaningful message to the audience. In addition, with the rise of independent video game developers (so-called indie developers), the repertoire of video games available to players is rising. Smaller publishers, unburdened by corporate funding constraints, often prioritize a creator's vision over mass-market appeal, which allows them to focus more on storytelling or gameplay aspects in their video games.

Video games offer a unique blend of storytelling and gameplay, and it is crucial to consider how these two factors can influence each other. Since the interactive elements tend to be primarily encompassed in the gameplay, their integration into the narrative part of a video game should be examined properly. Genres like visual novels, where gameplay directly impacts the narrative, demonstrate this interplay, but they are just one example of how video games can engage and influence players.

This bachelor's thesis aims to analyse literary tools used to examine video games from both narrative and gameplay perspectives. These tools can then be used to create a framework for analysing a selected video game.

On a more specific scale, the first chapter of this thesis analyses narrative elements in video games, including interactive elements branched into the gameplay part of video games. In the second chapter, the thesis analyses story structures specifically. These directly include player choices in the sense that choices can directly influence the story present in the video game. Given the technical limitations of many video games and gaming systems, these choices cannot be infinite. However, they are still present, even though on a smaller scale, in most video games.

After establishing the framework for analysing video games, the practical part of this thesis will focus on an analysis of four video games. All video games differ in terms of both story and gameplay, belonging to different genres. Due to the scope of this thesis, the selected video games will only be analysed within this framework. No chapter is dedicated to a comparative analysis of the selected video games.

1 Narrative

Creating a narrative involves a particular sequence of events that, combined with characters and spatial settings, constitute indispensable components of telling a story. According to Zeman (2017), the narrative is "the engine through which the story derives its locomotion" (p. 33). He further points out that a story contains transformative events, and to tell a story, something needs to change, e.g. the space or the character's state of mind.

Another part of the narrative as a concept can be characterised by the emotional response inflicted by the story. Stories naturally work with our emotional systems as people create or consume them (Hogan, 2011). You can find a similar concept in Aristotle's *Poetics* (1895), often considered as one of the first and most influential texts in the field of narratology (Cavazza & Pizzi, 2006). Aristotle (1895) explains that narratives and stories as such are guided by the concept of catharsis. This means that in reaction to the story, the audience experiences negative emotions (particularly fear and pity) to release them by the end and feel happier.

To a certain extent, all these concepts can be applied to video games. Even if not all of them feature a plot or a story, a narrative can be discovered in them. For example, *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1977) features practically no story. However, there is still the narrative of defending your home from a seemingly ceaseless army from space, which already allows for an emotional response (Juul, 2001). It is a part of human psychology to want to defend oneself from attack (Kinnaird, 2021). Combined with the in-game threat coming from space (meaning the incoming threat is not familiar in nearly any manner), it helps create an "us versus them" response. Concerning this particular narrative trope in video games, *Space Invaders* is not the only example. A more modern example of a similar narrative yet a minimal story is *Plants vs. Zombies* (PopCap Games, 2009), where an almost identical concept is utilised (i.e. defending their home from a seemingly infinite horde that is in some way foreign or off-putting to players).

Video games do not necessarily require stories to present the players with a specific narrative. *Iron Lung* (Szymanski, 2022) possesses a minimal story but a strong narrative. However, most narrative video games provide narratives more complex than that. Even in the case of *Iron Lung*, the video game narrative is determined by various factors, such as the atmosphere, environment, gameplay mechanics, and even the story provided.

Narrative as a whole is a concept too complex to discuss in a single chapter. The goal of the subsequent chapters will be to examine several aspects of the narrative.

1.1 Linear and Non-Linear Narrative

Aristotle's *Poetics* (1895) characterises a plot as an "arrangement of incidents," meaning that a story is formed by events happening in sequence. Chatman (1978) expands on this, saying that the sequence of these events does not need to be the same as the story logic. This is different to real life, where events all happen in a linear format. He argues that this non-linear sequence can be used to emphasize certain events and their impact.

The narrative in a story can be separated into linear and non-linear (Lau & Chen, 2010). In the first case, much like real life, scenes and events all progress in the same order that they happen. For non-linear narratives, scenes and events can happen (or rather, be revealed to the audience), out of order. This includes the usage of flashbacks or memory sequences. Zeman (2017) argues in favour of non-linear storytelling, saying that "telling stories out of sequence is a natural thing for humans to do" (p. 40). Changing the order in which the audience learns some events can change how they see the story as a whole. This can help create a dramatic, comedic, or any other effect. The sequence in which a story unfolds is important, according to Zeman (2017), as it affects the audience's ability to remember it.

In video games, the linear sequences are most often present through gameplay: Event A occurs, the player takes control until they reach a specific place, and Event B occurs. However, regarding the story itself (told through or outside of gameplay), video games often use non-linear tales. An example of this can be seen in the *Assassin's Creed* series (Ubisoft, 2007–2023), which ostensibly takes place in present times, even though most of its gameplay takes place in the past. It tells the story in a non-linear format; however, both sequences of events remain relatively linear. A similar storytelling style appears in *Dragon Age II* (BioWare, 2011). The story events progress linearly, and the framing device explains them retrospectively, leading to a specific plot twist.

Yet non-linear storytelling in video games can also take other forms. In video games that present the player with a tightly structured sequence of events (like the ones mentioned above), the story naturally lends itself to a more linear format. However, in video games set in an open world, the order of information given to the player does not necessarily create a

linear story. You can find an example in 'metroidvanias'[1] such as *Hollow Knight* (Team Cherry, 2017), where the player may encounter important parts of the world's lore in a different order.

Another example of non-linear storytelling is video games of the open-world survival genre, such as *Subnautica* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2018, early access 2014). The story added into the game features minimal cutscenes to convey it. The game relies, instead, on the player discovering its parts by exploring different biomes. Thus, the player discovers the clues and information in a non-linear order.

Both linear and non-linear storytelling methods rely on a particular sequence of events. According to Chatman (1978), an event refers to an action or a happening that somehow changes fate. While naturally providing a place for a more action-reliant sequence of a linear format, video games do not necessarily work in that way. The natural non-linearity of stories or the way particular genres of video games can contribute to creating compelling narratives while working with the natural form of the medium.

1.2 Spatial and Temporal Narrative

The spatio-temporal location is part of the setting provided to the audience. Bakhtin (1981) introduced the concept of the chronotope, naming the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (p. 84). He argues that chronotope is precisely the factor that defines genres.

Within video games, the concept appears to be applicable in the form of tropes occurring in genres (in terms of storytelling). For example, audiences expect any given fantasy video game to adhere to the temporal setting at least similar to the Euro-centric Middle Ages. Similarly, the audience expects to see a Lovecraftian story lean heavily into the aesthetic of the 19th century and feature grotesque creatures. You can find all these examples in the From Software video game repertoire. The fantasy *Dark Souls* (From Software, 2011–2016) trilogy is visibly based on the setting of space and time appropriate to its genre. On the other

[1] *Metroidvania* refers primarily to platformers, usually 2D, which utilise an interconnected world accessible at all times with sections blocked off via acquiring special items. The term stems from combining two early pioneers of the genre: the *Metroid* series (Nintendo, first release 1986) and the *Castlevania* series (Konami, first release 1986).

hand, *Bloodborne* (From Software, 2015) uses cramped, dark streets with a Victorian gothic aesthetic contrasting the nightmarish creatures present everywhere.

Bloodborne is of particular note when it comes to setting. Its location and spatial setting consist of tight, narrow streets, dark places, and imposing architecture, enhancing its horror genre. The game, however, leans heavily on the temporal setting, taking place throughout one night. The horror intensifies as the player advances further in the game (and through the night) and helps increase the dread while leaving the player with such questions as, "Will I survive until the morning? Will anyone else? And what will be left of this world after that?"

Both space and time, examined together or not, seem to enhance the story narrative as a whole. Therefore, spatial and temporal narratives can be used to analyse video games as a concept in terms of the story and overall narrative.

1.2.1 Spatial Narrative

Chatman (1978) characterizes space as an "existent" of a story; the space itself does not directly act within the story while still being a key part of the narrative. He argues for the separation of space in a story into two separate categories: story-space and discourse-space. Story-space, here, represents the space inherent to the narrative. In visual media, it represents the space that would be seen by the characters in it. The discourse-space category, on the other hand, is concerned with discourse, which Chatman (1978) identifies as the "how" of telling a story.

In video games, a largely visual medium, story-space is very similar to a film. Chatman (1978) defines it as a mix of the explicit and the implied; explicit if the audience can see it on the screen, and implicit if it involves what is visible only to the characters "living" in that world. The concept is well demonstrated in 2D video games, e.g. *Hollow Knight* (Team Cherry, 2017). Players only see the world in two dimensions, height and width. The third dimension is only implied in the form of background and the background objects, some of which the player can interact with instead of merely passing by them.

Chatman's (1978) 'discourse-space' is defined as the "focus of spatial attention" (p. 102), i.e. how the story is enhanced or influenced in the eyes of the audience. In video games, this extends past the concepts of framing and scale. User interface (UI), the timing and method of cutscenes, and the decisions made regarding the presentation of the story elements can all

influence how the video game is received by the players. Fixed camera angles, for example, evoke early horror titles such as *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996) and *Silent Hill* (Konami, 1999) in the player's memories. This results in the presentation of the space within the game already giving the players expectations on what the game will be like. Conversely, the UI subtly influences the game's impact on the audience. Genre-appropriate UI elements help enhance the experience, whereas large and obtrusive elements can make any manner of the story and narrative present feel lessened.

1.2.1.1 Perspective

Video games, like all visual media, have to contend with what the people consuming them see and, more importantly, how they see it. Part of this is also concerned with discourse-space, as defined by Chatman (1978). However, within video games, framing possesses unique constraints. In gameplay, it has to focus on how to connect the player to the character they control.

Solarski (2017) points out that positioning the camera up close to the character helps create a more intimate connection for the player. He proposes several categories to divide its placement during the gameplay. In "first-person," where the player sees through the character's eyes, it makes them feel like the action in the game is aimed directly at them. A similar principle is utilised in "close-up" camera shots, where the character controlled by the player is usually positioned in the corner, making only the back of their head and a part of their shoulders visible. A "mid-shot" and a "long-shot" camera angle both draw focus on the playable character. That way, animation of the character's movements is more visible, showing the player their entire body or only their torso. The "extreme long-shot" angle focuses on the entire field the characters are currently in rather than on a single character the player currently controls. They distance the player from the character literally and metaphorically, making the action feel detached from the player. This is very common in the strategy genre of video games, such as *Stellaris* (Paradox Development Studio, 2016) or *Civilisation* series (Sid Meier, 1991–2016), where the bird's-eye view allows the player a better look at the entire playing field including their resources, the enemy forces, and the places they need to explore or defend.

Perspective, regarding the gameplay, is often associated with specific genres, as is the case with first-person shooters. The genre name already tells the player which perspective will be utilised. On the other hand, strategy games, roguelikes and rogue-lites rely on an extreme

long shot to allow for a proper view of the entire field or dungeon. Unlike in cinema, this perspective tends to remain static for gameplay sections due to the complexity of systems that make up a video game. Using the player's perspective can immerse them in the story and genre, leading to a more engaging experience.

1.2.2 Temporal Narrative

Keen (2015) says that "time plays a fundamental role in narrative fiction" (p. 91). From the time that the work is written, affecting the worldview present within, to the time needed to create and consume a story, it is intrinsically linked to how we consume stories. Keen (2015) relates temporal narrative to "timing" or the pacing of a story and explains that timing depends on the writer's craft, determining where it speeds up or outright skips parts and where it slows down for a description or a detail that will be relevant later.

Within video games, skipping forward can be shown directly in various gameplay mechanics. For example, fast travel mechanics, usually utilised in video games with a more open world, help direct focus on the action rather than the environment. Usually, this manifests in the form of "teleporting" across the map to another place, skipping the travel time (Solarski, 2017).

Of course, not all video games have such a system. Games like *Subnautica* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2018, early access 2014), set in the open-world survival genre, make transportation to every place on the map deliberate and slow. This choice fits the tone of these games better since the player has to choose to travel long distances. They need to prepare their supplies and spend minutes feeling anxious about threats that can come from the environment. Relatedly, if the player puts in the time to obtain faster transport methods, it feels rewarding to know their subsequent journeys could have taken a lot more time.

Another aspect of time relevant in video games is the so-called "time flow" (Zeman, 2017, p. 323). Zeman (2017) explains that, in video games, the time flow needs to be considered, i.e. how and when a day changes from a night and vice-versa. This also includes whether time moves in-game when the player is not playing actively or if in-game time pauses along with the game. He argues in favour of time for video games to move faster than time in the real world for two reasons. Firstly, similar to the perception of time flying when in the company of friends, the acceleration of in-game time creates a sense that players have

experienced greater enjoyment during their gameplay. Secondly, video games are rarely a significant part of the player's day. If the game takes too long to transition from day to night, especially with different events occurring at various times, the players may get the impression that the story is taking too long to progress (Zeman, 2017).

All these aspects emphasize the significance of time when determining the timing of a story, which is especially important in the case of video games, where it is crucial whether time should be static for specific scenes or how it should run throughout the game. The story's timing and the time flow in the work are critical for impactful video game storytelling.

1.3 Engagement and Immersion

One role of the story is to relay information. Zeman (2017) explains that our mind works by looking at different things and finding associations between them, with their strength changing based on personal experience. Video games function as a modern narrative medium, allowing writers and developers to turn their objectives into a mission that the players find significant.

The concept of "immersion" and "embodiment" is something Zeman (2017) considers as two parts of how video games work with the player's mind. They help to make the players care about the story, their objectives and, subsequently, the game itself. Immersion is presented as a "mental state of perceiving yourself to be an active part of the story in progress, and not just a passive or nonessential observer" (Zeman, 2017, p. 285). A video game that allows the player to make meaningful choices about the narrative can enhance the overall experience and make it more engaging. Through this, immersion enhances gameplay by making the player feel like they are having a real-life experience, even if such an experience is not possible in reality.

The concept of embodiment is similar to immersion, specifically applied to the relationship between the player and the player's character (Zeman, 2017). If the player perceives the character they control as the embodiment of their presence and will, they become more emotionally engaged in the experience and the narrative.

Combining these two aspects in video games can work in various ways, producing different results. One manifestation of immersion is in role-playing video games, such as the *Dragon Age II* (BioWare, 2011). The player can create their own character and choose dialogue

options based on their preferences or beliefs. They can choose how particular missions end or decide on the video game ending unique to their choices and player experience. Another illustrative example is *Pyre* (Supergiant Games, 2017), where the player can decide how their character behaves and influence the ending for each character they meet. Arguably, *Pyre* allows for better immersion, especially concerning embodiment (see Zeman, 2017). Since the game lacks a traditional "Game Over" screen, the player has to face the consequences of both success and failure. This creates more pressure since the player does not have unlimited attempts to achieve one true "successful" ending.

Another way to focus on immersion can be observed in video games of the open-world survival genre like *The Long Dark* (Hinterland Studio, 2017) (considering only the survival mode) or *Subnautica* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2018, early access 2014). The characters are minimal, seemingly in opposition to the concept of embodiment present in the role-playing games. Customization is likewise minimal if present at all, but the games focus more on Zeman's (2017) concept of immersion, allowing significant player influence. This genre is incredibly immersive even without including a story per se. The player has complete control of the character, including a selection of their bodily needs, including thirst, hunger, and a general health meter, with variations based on the game and environment specifically. These character requirements give the player a sense of control over the game and make them more invested in their character. If the player fails to meet these requirements, it can lead to the character's death and the end of the playthrough. By meeting these requirements, the player forms a stronger emotional connection with their character and feels more invested in keeping them alive and safe. The player also has some control over the game environment. They can set traps, prepare supplies for long trips, or gain faster and safer methods of travel. All these factors combined give the game a much less rigid structure than games with one fixed story traditionally have.

These concepts, as presented by Zeman (2017), merge into how games engage with the players and make them feel after they finish playing. When video games include an active story, they need to balance embodiment and immersion to work well with the genre. In an open-world survival game, placing too many important story events together will make them feel rushed and discourage exploration. On the other hand, taking too long to explore the story and characters in an action video game in favour of repetitive quests makes the game suffer from player boredom. Regardless of how good it can be as a whole story; the individual parts still matter. For example, the twists at the end of *Magna Carta: Tears of*

Blood (Softmax, 2004) are only satisfying to those who can reach the end. Unless the players manage to struggle through a section where the story slows down dramatically, they will not reach the part where the pieces fall into place (Lebowitz and Klug, 2011).

On the other hand, if a game works well and manages to balance the story parts and the gameplay, it can create an immersive experience that can greatly affect the player. Sometimes, the stories within video games can even become deeply meaningful to people. Certainly, there are examples of games that might make such a statement appear illogical, but it would be disingenuous to assume that video games as a whole are incapable of engaging players with more than just surface-level entertainment. They can serve as a medium for self-introspection, facilitate open discussions about the characters in the game, and even raise important philosophical questions. This achievement is largely due to the incorporation of immersive elements and captivating gameplay, making the players care about the characters, their journeys, the world they are playing in, and the plot presented to the players.

1.4 Interactivity

Interactivity, by pure etymological structure, means "we must be *doing* something in order for it to be interactive" (Zeman, 2017, p.230), which applies to media in various ways. However, as Zeman (2017) notes, interactive media not only involve choices but also demonstrate how these choices can alter the world the audience is currently involved in.

Video games, in particular, are often considered interactive media by their very nature. Even in their simplest form, they require outside action, i.e. the player choosing when and how to move. In first-person shooter games, the player controls their movements, attacks, defences, and destinations (Zeman, 2017). The player cannot control certain elements, such as non-playable characters or accessing specific parts of the environment.

Video games are more interactive than traditional literary or visual media, but their interactive elements remain incomplete. Lebowitz and Klug (2011) argue that complete interactivity is not always essential. They claim that regardless of whether players significantly affect the story interacting with the game, merely providing the player with a way to interact with the story is enough. In other words, players can interact with the world and characters in various ways without altering the story significantly.

Zeman (2017) and Lebowitz and Klug (2011) agree that interactivity presented in video games can be further divided in its scope. Zeman (2017) provides a scale slider, with most games falling in the middle part, i.e. neither having interactivity nor complete control in the hands of the player. Lebowitz and Klug (2017) provide a similar scale, elaborating on it further and drawing certain lines on it, thus separating the scale into several categories.

First, Lebowitz and Klug (2017) name fully traditional stories. These remain the same no matter how many times the audience witnesses them. This usually falls outside the scope of video games, as inherently, they possess an interactive element to them. Secondly, interactive traditional stories have a strict plot that cannot be changed but allows the player to control many aspects of the game. Next, they name the multiple-ending stories. Here, the player has a certain degree of control over how the game ends, even if the entire story might not be entirely different up to that point. From these, the scale turns to branching path stories. These have several points at which the story can take different turns, however slightly that may be. Lastly, open-ended stories (or highly complex branching path stories) feature many decision points, which are usually less obvious than choices in branching path stories. These decision points often manifest as the player's actions instead of specific prompts that offer a decision. According to Lebowitz and Klug (2011), these classifications are not strict, and many games can easily fall under multiple categories.

Zeman (2017) also delineates the concept of synchronicity, defining it as "the measure of the amount of time which elapses between the user input and the game reaction" (p. 235). He presents a similar scale to interactivity, indicating that the ideal value of synchronicity depends on the genre. Within a fast-paced shooter, the player's actions in the game should be (or at least feel) instantaneous. Turn-based strategy, on the other hand, operates with the players already aware that synchronicity would not have similar values to that of a shooter. The game relies on the player choosing an action and then waiting before said action takes place.

Interactivity is an intrinsic part of video games. The growing presence of stories in video games raises the question about the acceptable or desirable level of interactivity, which can change by the genre. Role-playing games such as *Fallout: New Vegas* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2010) leave players satisfied with their open-ended character, while puzzle games like *Portal* (Valve, 2007) can keep them engaged by providing challenges for their

minds. When designing a game, it is crucial to consider the interactive levels of different genres.

2 Story Structures

Lebowitz and Klug (2011) say that one of the signs of a good story is how it makes the person consuming it feel. The impact of the story components on an individual should not be underestimated. There is a difference between drama and melodrama, specifically when referring to extremes that story elements can be taken to (Lebowitz & Klug, 2011). Its usage can be just as beneficial to particular stories as detrimental to others.

Video games are a still-developing medium in terms of storytelling. Investigating the elements that make a story and how they are affected by the medium of video games is vital to understanding their impact. The following chapter will explore certain parts of the story that can contribute to its impact.

2.1 Characters

As Zeman (2017) observes, "a character is simply a participant in a story" (p. 24). Characters as a concept are present in the story that progresses through them, affected by or affecting the narrative. Video game characters can be separated into two large categories: playable (or player) characters and non-playable characters (NPCs).

NPCs are important parts of the narrative within video games (Zeman, 2017). They can deliver plot details to the player that they would not see solely through the character's perspective. Their purpose is varied, e.g. to set an objective for the player, be the final boss, or be there to comment on the happenings in the story. Regardless of their role in the story, if the NPCs are written engagingly, they will persist with the player even outside of the game.

The creation of player characters can have a significant impact on how attached players become to them. There are several cases of video game protagonists garnering fans beyond the game in which they were initially present (Zeman, 2017). However, player characters, unlike NPCs, usually fall into a specific archetype related to the player. According to Heussner et al. (2015), player characters can be divided into several categories: the cipher (or "blank slates" due to their lack of own personality and backstory), the fixed character, the customizable character, and the fixed background/customizable character.

As discussed in Chapter 1.3, the player's feeling that the character they control embodies their will contributes to immersion into the narrative, but it is not the only factor affecting how characters can stay with the players after finishing the game (Zeman, 2017). If the immersion into the story makes the player feel a specific affinity for the characters, it makes them (and, by extension, the story) stay with the player longer.

This is not necessarily only the case for human (or human-looking) characters, which would appear more relatable to players. Through anthropomorphism, the process of humanizing characters or objects can make relatable characters out of almost anything. You can see an example in video games such as *Small Saga* (Noghani, 2023), where all the characters are everyday animals in London. They become closer to the player than regular animals by turning their posture into a human-like bipedal one, adding emotions, making them communicate through a specific human language, and giving them human attributes and names. Even if the players are not rats, mice, or squirrels, they can sympathise with the characters, care about their struggles, and mourn their losses.

Part of the process of anthropomorphism described above can be encompassed by the "Voodoo principle," used to describe the process of giving characters a name and human-like characteristics (Zeman, 2017). Thus, the players can feel a semblance of life. In an inverse concept to the Voodoo principle, video games utilise dehumanization as well. Individuality and humanity are stripped away to turn the enemies into a mass to be indiscriminately killed off, such as demons or aliens.

Another aspect of the characters is their backstory and their development. Backstories can add nuance to the character and their decision, explain their personality or make them more relatable to the player. However, the backstory should work most to enhance the main story (Lebowitz & Klug, 2011). While some players care about the details of the world aside from the plot of the game, distracting away from the central plot can work against the game itself.

Characters, especially in story-based games, are an essential element. Their role in the story, impact on the player and relatability are crucial factors that should be considered. Creating believable and relatable characters can serve to immerse the player in the video game.

2.2 Plot

As Lebowitz and Klug (2011) point out, stories present in video games have evolved and become more complex since the first introduction of video games. Another point they bring up is how the interactivity inherent to video games makes the stories different from those present in more traditional media. The synthesis between gameplay and story provides a unique challenge to what stories can be conveyed and how. Lebowitz and Klug (2011) further state that since video games can span in length anywhere from under an hour to over one hundred hours, the stories present can vary wildly. Even if only a small portion of the total playtime is occupied by a story, it provides the opportunity for more complex plots, side plots, and character development.

The interactive element within video games provides another opportunity for stories, namely in the form of interactivity. Providing players with a world where they interact with the gameplay portion of the game as well as the plot present throughout is not a feature unique to video games. However, video games can provide a more intimate experience than interactive theatrical plays and they are more visually interesting than books with an interactive story element. Zeman (2017) lists the following models for balancing interaction and the story in video games:

1) *Parallel stories* belong among the oldest types of stories in video games, where story and gameplay happen independently of each other. In such stories, players have no real input on the narrative, merely witnessing what happens after sections of gameplay.

2) *Branching stories*, with a sub-category of "merging," change with every decision. Theoretically, they can span into an infinite amount of different story branches. However, an infinitely expanding story structure would be impractical, if not outright impossible to create (Zeman, 2017). Therefore, the preferred alternative is to provide some merging points in the narrative that stay the same (or similar) regardless of previous choices.

3) An *open narrative* can be seen in the game genres of sandbox or Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG). The player has a theoretically infinite number of choices presented to them. Even in the presence of a story told in a

particular order, an open narrative does not need to show any manner of control from the side of the developer.

4) A *threaded story* structure has a primary storyline accompanied by several side storylines, ranging from being tied into the main story in their own way to being optional and supplemental. These threads offer only linear storylines that return to the central plot but can still provide variety in the game.

5) A *converging plot* is less popular, but fairly common in tournament games. It provides the playable characters with a backstory explaining why they are participating in the tournament. This type of story provides very little in terms of interaction to the players but provides them with characters they can empathise with and relate to, as explained in Chapter 2.2.

6) A *scattered story* structure has elements interspersed into the world for the player to discover as they play, for example, in the form of written journals or audio recordings. They give the player the freedom to choose whether they want to search for these story details or not. The writer may lose some control over when the player will discover what story elements. However, this can serve to deepen the player's immersion into the world. In many instances, a scattered storytelling structure can merge well with other storytelling methods presented in this list.

The method of including a plot in the video game is an important part of adding a narrative structure to the medium. As the video game medium and its storytelling methods evolve, examining how they work and connect to the players is an important part of analysing them.

2.3 Role of the Player and Their Choices

Unlike most traditional media, video games require the player's active participation. Chapter 1.4 examined this interactive element mostly in isolation. However, in conjunction with the story present within the game, the player role manifests as a more specific element to examine.

Including a narrative for the player to interact with necessitates differences in how the story will play out. As discussed in Chapter 1.4, this usually manifests in the form of multiple-

ending or branching path stories. This chapter will aim to discuss the actual presentation and inclusion of interactivity in video games.

One part of interactivity can be seen in the "immersive sim" video game genre. As Blasonato et al. (2022) explain, "players have no specified outcome, and they are presented with a variety of options to choose from" (p. 24). They can either choose the most straightforward solution or look for an alternative. An example can be seen in *Dishonored* (Arkane Studios, 2012) and its chaos system. The environment and characters' responses change depending on the number of killed NPCs by the player and other optional actions present throughout each level. A different amount of chaos affects the ending and the protagonist's character development.

Another part of integrating player influence over the story is through cutscene prompts. These are sometimes also called "quick-time events" (QTEs). The player is given a certain time window to react and press a specific button. This feature is heavily utilised in games such as *Until Dawn* (Supermassive Games, 2015), where the game branches in both minor and major ways depending on whether the player reacted in time. Nevertheless, any form of presenting a story-important decision needs to be recognisable by the players (Solarski, 2017), which is most easily done through cutscenes. This makes them a popular method of presenting players with meaningful choices.

Lastly, interactive dialogue is a popular method of giving players choices that influence the game. Multiple-choice dialogue is not present in all game genres, but it is commonly used in video games with role-playing elements. Heussner et al. (2015) explain that interactive dialogue tends to pause the game action to present the player with a choice. In many cases, this pause can last as long as the player desires, freezing the world before they pick a dialogue option. Providing the player with dialogue choices can enhance the immersion between the player and their character without a considerable impact on the story.

Outside of immersive qualities, interactive dialogue tends to offer the players an active role to play in the narrative, ranging from small details (such as the relationship with a minor character) to influencing the overall story and its ending.

These elements are necessary for analysing video games. Presenting players with choices should feel meaningful; otherwise, they would feel disappointment or outright boredom. Many video games (or even whole genres) are popular without providing the player with

many active choices that would affect the narrative. However, once choices are provided, they should be managed appropriately and not leave the players feeling as if their presence in the game is wholly unnecessary.

3 Analysis of Selected Video Games

This chapter aims to analyse selected video games using the theory discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. These video games were primarily selected based on pre-existing availability. Besides, they all focus on small animals. Given the variety of the finished video games, this thesis will ultimately aim to analyse how the differences manifest with a seemingly significant element connecting them. This shared element will finally serve to compare the selected games in terms of the narrative elements discussed in this thesis.

3.1 Bug Fables: The Everlasting Sapling

Bug Fables: The Everlasting Sapling (Moonsprout Games, 2019) (referred to as *Bug Fables* for this analysis) is a roleplaying game focused on an explorer team of three bugs and their search for the titular everlasting sapling. Gipp (2020), among other reviewers (Anthony, 2020; Carrillo, 2020), refers to the game as a spiritual successor to *Paper Mario* (2000, Intelligent Systems) and its immediate sequel, *Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door* (2004, Intelligent Systems).

3.1.1 Analysis of Narrative in *Bug Fables: The Everlasting Sapling*

Bug Fables is a video game that tells its story and presents its narrative in a rather straightforward manner. Therefore, this chapter will aim to analyse the narrative elements as presented in Chapter 1, meaning the focus will be on the manner of presenting the story to the players.

3.1.1.1 Linear and Non-Linear Narrative of *Bug Fables: The Everlasting Sapling*

In terms of the narrative presented in the video game, *Bug Fables* follows a linear format. The story follows a linear format with no flashbacks. The backstory of the main characters, for example, is revealed when they explain it to their team, like in the case of Leif.

Leif is a moth who has been in stasis for a long time without knowing how or why. His backstory (see Figure 1) is a mystery that involves him explaining what he remembers and realises. Additionally, the characters find an old lab recording after exploring a specific area, which sheds light on Leif's past.

Figure 1. Cutscene revealing Leif's backstory. Reprinted from Hawlo (2021).

3.1.1.2 Spatial and Temporal Narrative in *Bug Fables: The Everlasting Sapling*

The story of *Bug Fables* takes place over an unspecified amount of time at an unspecified time of the year. One of the only few hints to when the story takes place is during a side quest where a character explicitly states that it is not autumn. The temporal setting is not necessarily relevant since the relationship a human player can have with the lifespan of insects is not the focus.

However, that does not imply that the game's temporal narrative elements should be entirely disregarded. Noteworthy is the fast-travel system present in the game, which concerns the concept of timing discussed in Chapter 1.2.2. If the player wishes not to travel through the areas they previously explored, *Bug Fables* provides them with two options: "and tunnels," connecting each area of the game to a central hub or a character, escorting the player characters somewhere specific in a larger area. Both these systems are present in the game as a game mechanic and an actual element in the world. The players do not have to escort their characters through these, letting them enjoy the parts they wish faster.

In terms of spatial narrative, *Bug Fables* provides a rather engrossing setting. The game takes place in several neighbouring bug kingdoms, all of which are revealed to be in the backyard of a human house. While this topic will be discussed in upcoming chapters, it also serves as a framework for analysing the setting in terms of spatial narrative.

Firstly, when looking at story-space, as discussed in Chapter 1.2.1, there is the 2D approach to showing character models. Bug Fables presents its characters as flat sprites, akin to two-dimensional paper dolls in a three-dimensional set, despite existing in a world with a third dimension, reflecting the story's perspective. If we examine the distinctions made in Chapter 1.2.1.1, this would probably be classified as a long shot (Solarski, 2017); the attention is drawn to the full-body appearance of the player characters. An interesting part arises from the angle of this perspective being almost fully frontal. Compounded with the video game audibly and visibly "rolling down" walls of buildings the characters can enter, it reminds the players of the paper doll inspiration and adds an air of almost childlike whimsy to the game.

Upon analysing how the larger setting influences the narrative, the first step is to examine the scale of discourse-space. The inclusion of items of human origin (e.g. a rubber tyre, school rulers, or sandbox toys) provides a clear picture of the size of the characters and their world relative to a human player. It also provides an active reminder that these are regular small bugs, even if the story includes fantastical elements and technology. In *Bug Fables*, the discourse-space is used to enhance the whimsical nature of the story-space. The game provides the player with all the necessary information for combat through the UI (see Figure 2) presented in a cartoony style with vibrant colours. These elements come together to create an environment that evokes the feeling of playing with paper dolls during childhood.

Figure 2. User interface, as seen in combat. Reprinted from *Bug Fables* (2019).

3.1.1.3 Engagement and Immersion in *Bug Fables: The Everlasting Sapling*

As discussed in Chapter 1.3, immersion and engagement refer to how a video game can make the player feel, especially through the use of choices the player can make. *Bug Fables,* in terms of its quests, does not possess any decision points that would allow the player to influence their outcome, but that does not mean that these elements are absent from the game. Due to the numerous side-quests that unlock as the main story progresses, the player has freedom over the order in which they explore these. Given the optional nature of these side-quests, it becomes a choice on the side of the player to engage further with the world of *Bug Fables* and its characters past the main storyline.

3.1.1.4 Interactivity in *Bug Fables: The Everlasting Sapling*

On the scale of interactivity explained in Chapter 1.4, *Bug Fables* would be classified as interactive traditional stories. The story of the game and all its quests are written and unchanging. Failing to meet the requirements set by the game by losing in combat, results in a "Game Over" screen (Figure 3), including the text "And their tale was never finished…". The phrasing evokes the feeling of a fairy tale for children with a predetermined happy ending and a perilous journey towards it.

Figure 3. Game Over screen in *Bug Fables.* Reprinted from *Bug Fables* (2019).

However, it does not mean the game lacks any form of interaction. As discussed in the previous chapter, the player can choose to interact with any side-quests that interest them.

Moreover, a mechanic introduced early in the game provides additional commentary from the main characters in any room, something the players can choose to do at any time. While the story of *Bug Fables* remains unchanging, the world contains many ways to interact with it.

Regarding the concept of synchronicity, as mentioned in Chapter 1.4, *Bug Fables* poses an interesting setup in its combat. Fights themselves take the form of turn-based combat, where players need to plan their actions while also performing the correct inputs on time to attack. In the overworld (i.e. outside of combat), *Bug Fables* takes on a highly synchronous approach to its exploration; platforming, puzzles, attacking and avoiding enemies all allow and require quick thinking and actions from the player.

3.1.2 Analysis of Story Structures in *Bug Fables: The Everlasting Sapling*

Bug Fables, like many role-playing video games, possesses a central plot with side stories alongside a wide range of characters. Carried by the narrative elements discussed in Chapter 3.1.1, these structures help create the story that the game carries within it. Therefore, this chapter will aim to analyse them to help present a complete picture of how and why *Bug Fables* works as a complete story and a video game.

3.1.2.1 Characters in *Bug Fables: The Everlasting Sapling*

Due to the setting of *Bug Fables*, the characters tend to be primarily anthropomorphic insects and arachnids. This follows the "voodoo principle" (Zeman, 2017) discussed in Chapter 2.1, where characters resemble humans despite being insects. They have human-like eyes, use a pair of limbs as arms, and walk upright on two legs, all distinctly human-like despite being insects (Figure 4). These characters experience human emotions that players can easily relate to. Additionally, the game includes character-specific side-quests for each protagonist. These side-quests help make the characters more relatable, as can be seen in the case of the character Vi.

Vi is a young bee that wishes to be an explorer, even though in the world of *Bug Fables* bees traditionally work in the honey factory or do art. As such, Vi's quest includes arguing with her fellows and her sister, Jaune. Although the backstories in *Bug Fables* may involve magic, players can still relate to the common experience of arguing with siblings or loved ones. The story also depicts Vi as someone who is not entirely in the right. It acknowledges that making

mistakes and striving to do better is not an effortless journey. This is true to life and reflects the complicated conflicts that people encounter in their daily lives.

Figure 4. Protagonists of *Bug Fables*. From left to right: Leif (moth), Kabbu (beetle), and Vi (honeybee). Reprinted from *Bug Fables: The Everlasting Sapling* (2019).

Aside from presenting the characters in a relatable manner, the game takes care to make its characters visually unique. It draws inspiration from many distinct real-life species, allowing players of non-entomologist backgrounds to tell the leading characters apart. Even if they belong to the same species (e.g. bees in the beehive), characters are given unique designs and personalities for quick recognition.

With its antagonists, *Bug Fables* presents varied enemies. Most common fights are against beings shown to have lesser sentience than the player characters, e.g. sentient acorns or feral weevils. In this sense, the game utilises dehumanisation to make the players feel better about fighting the opponents presented. On the other hand, sentient enemies (always in the role of bosses or mini-bosses, given the story relevance of these fights) follow the same principle as playable characters. They are visually distinct and possess personalities and backstories that make them interesting; best exemplified by the Wasp King, the final boss of *Bug Fables*[2].

The Wasp King represents a direct parallel to Queen Elizant II, a crucial character in the main quest. He is the king of Wasp Kingdom searching for the Everlasting Sapling, similar

[2] While additional comics are expanding upon the Wasp King's backstory, for this thesis, only material present within the game will be considered.

to Queen Elizant II in Bugaria. His explicit goal is to gain more power and tyrannically rule over all bug kingdoms in the game. On the other hand, Elizant II seeks the Everlasting Sapling to heal her mother, a gentle ruler beloved by everyone. Already, this makes the Wasp King an interesting and engaging foe. In addition, the build-up towards the game's finale is highly dramatic, setting important stakes and creating tension. The final battle against the Wasp King (in the form of "Everlasting King") creates drama through the multiple phases, overt taunting, and musical leitmotif from earlier parts of the game repeated as a hopeful counterpoint to the difficult combat.

Overall, *Bug Fables* provides characters with unique and captivating appearances and personalities, regardless of their role in the game. Although not all characters receive the same level of development as the playable characters or the story-important NPCs like Elizant II, they are still engaging during their time on-screen.

3.1.2.2 Plot of *Bug Fables: The Everlasting Sapling*

As mentioned in Chapter 3.1.1.4, *Bug Fables* has an unchanging plot without branching storylines while possessing numerous side-quests of a similar rigid structure. Therefore, from the types of plots presented in Chapter 2.2, the game belongs to the category of threaded stories, as delineated by Zeman (2017).

When examining the central plot as a simply written story, it fits well in the fantasy adventure genre; the protagonists search for ancient artefacts, encounter and use magic, and befriend a plant goddess. Despite its static character and a single ending, the story of *Bug Fables* is a charming, wholesome tale where goodness and friendship are rewarded while evil is punished. It provides a form of escapism beyond letting the player pretend they are a bug for a few hours. It lets them pretend that all evil can be defeated, and that conflict can be solved.

3.1.2.3 Role of the Player and Choices in *Bug Fables: The Everlasting Sapling*

Bug Fables, as discussed in previous chapters, does not possess many active choices per se. While some places have dialogue choices (e.g. the team's first encounter with Queen Elizant II), they do not affect anything beyond the dialogue in the immediate scene. However, as discussed previously, there are numerous side-quests to undertake and explore, some of which consist of long chains that require deeper exploration of the game's world.

Another interaction that makes player engagement with *Bug Fables* meaningful is combat and overworld interaction related to combat. During a battle, the player must select which

character will be the party leader to deal extra damage. They also need to select a combination of medals that provide bonuses and decide which action each character will take. In the overworld, players must pay attention to the enemy's movements. If they attack the enemy first, they gain an extra turn. However, if the enemy attacks first, the player's characters will be attacked first.

Overall, *Bug Fables* gradually reveals a large world for the player to explore and interact with. The lack of choices actively present in the core story does not detract from the message the game is trying to send, nor does it take away the enjoyment that players can find in the game.

3.2 Bugsnax

Bugsnax (Young Horses, 2020) is an adventure video game with a focus on discovering and capturing creatures called bugsnax (singular form bugsnak); half-bug and half-snack. Part of the creature-collection genre of video games, *Bugsnax* gameplay mainly consists of figuring out how to capture the fictional bugsnax and interacting with characters.

3.2.1 Analysis of Narrative in *Bugsnax*

The central storyline in *Bugsnax* consists of a mystery; a journalist is trying to find and interview a disgraced explorer about her discovery of bugsnax. The additional stories of the other characters involved can be approached rather freely from the player's perspective. These elements will be analysed in this chapter.

3.2.1.1 Linear and Non-Linear Narrative of *Bugsnax*

As mentioned above, the main component of non-linearity in *Bugsnax* comes in the form of several quests being available at once (see Figure 5), which can be progressed in whatever order the player wants. In fact, some of the quests require a non-linear approach. As Figure 5 illustrates, the quest "Cromdo Cashes In" (a quest to convince the character Cromdo to come back to town) requires catching (and feeding him) a bugsnak called Bopsicle. When this quest becomes available, the area where bopsicles are present (and the tools required to catch them) is not available to the players yet. As a result, unless the player leaves this quest for the very end, they will have to pause their progress on the quest before they can continue.

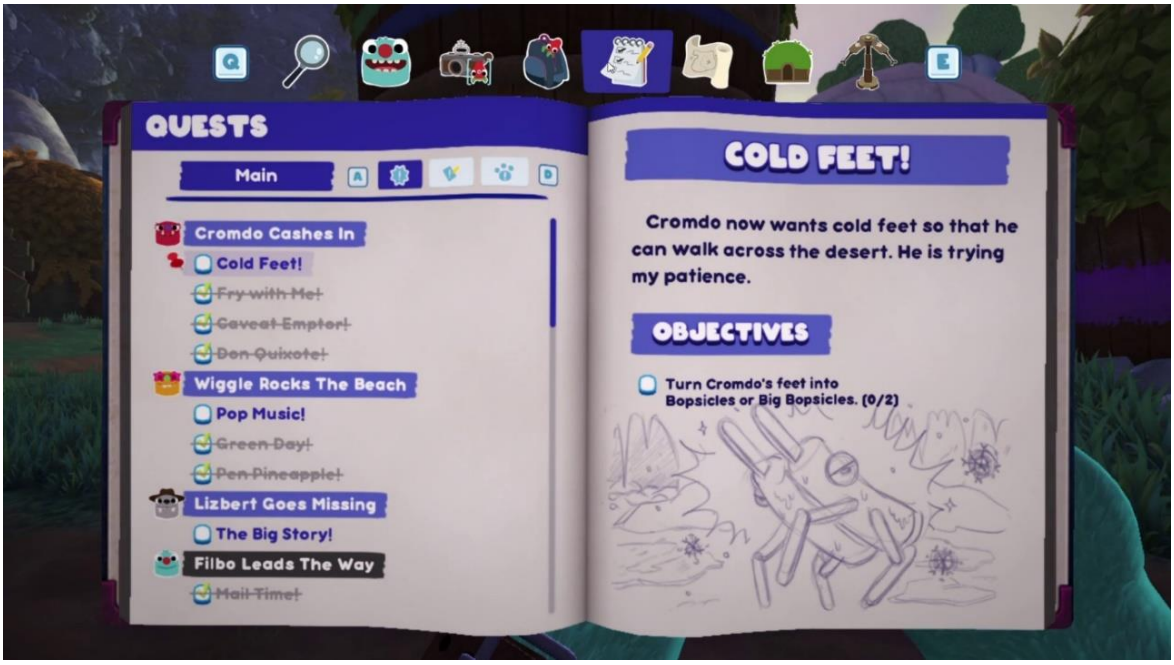

Figure 5. Quest log with several quests in *Bugsnax*. Reprinted from *Bugsnax* (2020).

The game relies on non-linearity in its central story as well outside of the gameplay aspect. Since the main quest consists of a mystery that the protagonist (the Journalist, who remains unnamed) needs to solve, they are presented with clues and explanations of what happened in retrospect. The most obvious example is the tapes that the Journalist receives, each containing a short clip of how the relationship between Lizbert and Eggabel (the explorer the Journalist is after and her partner) developed. Given that both these characters have disappeared suddenly during an earthquake, getting these clues can help with figuring out their whereabouts.

However, the game is not entirely non-linear. In some cases, like character-centric side-quests, the characters are told what happened linearly rather than get shown it in retrospect. For instance, learning that Lizbert and Eggabel went missing comes from the Journalist being told so by the character of Filbo, the first character they meet. There is only one real sequence of story told out of order – the flashback at the beginning of the game. After the Journalist crashes their airship, they flash back to a conversation with their boss about their mission. While being a memory shown in a dream, this also serves as a storytelling tool and helps explain why the Journalist went to Snaktooth Island.

These facts combined mean that the story of Bugsnax, while static at its core, is presented to the player in a way that leaves enough freedom.

3.2.1.2 Spatial and Temporal Narrative in *Bugsnax*

Bugsnax takes place on Snaktooth Island, with an additional side-story (added via a free game update after release) taking place on a neighbouring Broken Tooth Island. These islands are not given any specific geographical location. This setting is contained, allowing for rather open exploration without the map feeling too large.

Moreover, Snaktooth Island is broken up into several smaller areas (Broken Tooth Island will be considered as one of these areas given its presence in the game is treated as such). These areas (separated by a loading screen) each offer a different setting; a desert, a cold mountain, a tropical beach, and a forest can exist simultaneously. This lets the game theme its bugsnax to their location, (e.g. placing a chilli pepper in the desert or a tropical daiquiri on the beach).

The story-space (see Chapter 1.2.1) in *Bugsnax* is represented by 3D models and viewed from a first-person perspective, providing a sense of scale for the bugsnax. The models also have a cartoonish appearance, allowing for easier animation and to add onto the game's whimsical atmosphere.

A similar character is present in the discourse-space of *Bugsnax.* The journal that the player can use to look at, for example, the map, contains simple icons and a bubbly font that carries a lighthearted feel. The map of Snaktooth Island that the player can use to fast-travel through the above-mentioned areas is drawn in an almost childish, cartoonish manner (see Figure 6).

Tying into the map is the temporal narrative. Its primary function is to fast-travel around the map, instantly teleporting the player to the area they want to travel to, utilising the concept of timing from Chapter 1.2.2. This element remains entirely as game mechanics for the player; the protagonist in the story has to walk to each place themselves.

Figure 6. The game map in the player's journal. Reprinted from *Bugsnax* (2020).

Bugsnax does not specify a timeframe during which the game takes place, but the game does utilise a day and night cycle with time visible to the player. Certain bugsnax are only present at night or during specific weather, meaning the game has to give the player a tangible way of tracking these things and simulating them. However, in the end, it does not matter how long exactly the player takes to finish the game. They can advance time and skip through entire days by sleeping with the game never punishing the player or changing the season. This is relevant to what Zeman (2017) calls "time-flow" (explained in Chapter 1.2.2). In the game, one minute of in-game time is equivalent to about one second in real time. Therefore, a full in-game day lasts less than half an hour. This feature, along with the ability to skip to a specific time or weather, makes waiting for a particular time or weather condition easier.

3.2.1.3 Engagement and Immersion in *Bugsnax*

Engagement and immersion in *Bugsnax* are mainly presented through the first-person perspective. Through the concept of embodiment (Zeman, 2017), the player feels as though the conversations and movements are directed at them and their own. Since the character of the Journalist is intentionally designed to be voiceless and without any gendered terms or specific names, it allows players to easily identify with the character and project their own identity onto them. Moreover, the non-linear structure of the game's quests enhances its immersive quality, as previously discussed.

The map itself is also explored in a rather immersive manner; certain areas, such as Scorched Gorge or Frosted Peak, are inaccessible to the player until certain NPCs are shown to have cleared the way from environmental barriers. These elements combined work to help make the game more engaging to the player, engrossing them in the mystery and catching the bugsnax they are sent to catch.

3.2.1.4 Interactivity in *Bugsnax*

As discussed earlier, the central tale in *Bugsnax* remains the same through every replay while also providing many choices in when or which side-quests they approach. As such, it would fall under the category of interactive traditional stories.

The game also allows for additional interaction in the form of decoration quests. These are introduced to the player through a mailbox and an unfinished house in Snaxburg, the game's residential area. The player can receive optional smaller-scale quests from the characters, (e.g. catch all bugsnax in a given area) and be rewarded with an item with which they can decorate their house. While being entirely optional, it provides a new way of interacting with the game.

On top of that, there is also a concept introduced early on in the game – snakification. When an NPC consumes a bugsnak, a part of its body transforms to resemble the bugsnak in question. At the beginning of the game, the player is equipped with a tool called Snaktivator. This tool allows the player to direct the snakification process, turning the characters into a combination of traits of their choice.

All these elements come together to create the world of *Bugsnax* that can be interacted with, while also encouraging the player to do so willingly and have fun.

3.2.2 Analysis of Story Structures in *Bugsnax*

As mentioned previously, *Bugsnax* contains a mystery story combined with character-specific side-quests. All of this is set in a cartoonish version of our world, populated by fuzzy bean-shaped characters called "grumpuses" rather than humans, where creatures such as the eponymous bugsnax can and do exist. This game starts silly but transforms into a serious exploration of loneliness, purpose, and sadness. It also contains elements of body horror that may be missed at first. This chapter will analyse how the story elements (as present in

Chapter 2) help carry these parts of the story.

3.2.2.1 Characters in *Bugsnax*

As already explained, the characters in *Bugsnax* are near-human creatures called grumpuses. They have paws, fur, and exaggerated facial features (see Figure 7). They look like cartoon puppets and are named similarly, for example, Gramble Gigglefunny (Figure 7, in the middle) or Snorpington Fizzlebean (Figure 7, on the right). The characters also possess a seemingly one-dimensional characterisation; Gramble focuses on bugsnax as potential companions and harshly condemns everyone for eating them, while Snorpy is a conspiracy theorist convinced that Grumpinati (a grumpus version of illuminati conspiracies in real life) use bugsnax to control people and target him specifically.

Figure 7. Examples of characters in *Bugnsax*, from left to right: Filbo, Gramble, and Snorpy (partially snakified). Reprinted from *Bugnsax* (2020).

However, the cartoonish feel of the characters seemingly distracts from the stories that end up told with them. For example, the character Chandlo Funkbun is presented as a stereotypical jock archetype: he wears a sports jersey, loves basketball, and his quests revolve around which bugsnax can help him get stronger and more muscular. Right away, his story is presented with a direct contrast: the aforementioned Snorpy, a stereotypical nerd character who detests even going outside, is Chandlo's lifelong partner. As the player progresses through both their stories, it is revealed that Chandlo wishes to get stronger solely

to protect Snorpy, whom he does not believe to be able to do so himself. Snorpy, on the other hand, believes Chandlo cannot handle the truth of his conspiracies. Their character arcs end with them learning how to trust each other. Chandlo has to accept that there are problems he cannot solve with pure strength, while Snorpy has to learn that trusting Chandlo with his secrets is less of a risk to their relationship than pushing him away.

All the characters, in one way or another, exist to communicate a different type of loneliness to the player. A character seeks companionship with bugsnax because he has been habitually abandoned by people in his life, or a drama-hungry influencer prone to snooping keeps pushing people away from her in the name of publishing the truth. If the player chooses to engage with the character-specific side-quests, they end up discovering very vulnerable parts of them. Even if their personal stories can verge into being overdramatic and rely on the characters voicing their feelings out loud, they are still focused on emotions that can (in a moderate manner) feel very real to certain players.

While the grumpuses are quite engaging, they are ultimately in the story as a complement to the bugsnax themselves. They are not exactly characters in their own right; they are simply cartoony creatures mixing a bug and a food design (see Figure 8). It adds to the feeling of whimsicality, especially with their characteristic of repeating their name in a cartoony voice.

Figure 8. Examples of bugnsak design combining insects and food.
Reprinted from *Bugsnax* (2020).

3.1.2.2 Plot of *Bugsnax*

The plot of *Bugnsax*, as mentioned earlier, is mainly centred on mystery. The player is given various clues at a different time. The story includes a central plot with additional optional side-quests, which means it falls under the threaded story category based on the classification in Chapter 2.2.

Character-specific side-stories, on the other hand, tend to involve introspection of the characters. In a way, that is also presented as a mystery; characters present their shallow façade, and it is up to the player to choose whether they will investigate it deeper.

3.1.2.3 Role of the Player and Choices in *Bugsnax*

As mentioned previously, in *Bugnsax*, the player is given choices primarily in the form of whether they will engage with side quests. There are some dialogue choices, but these mostly allow the player to determine how their character will react, rather than influence the story itself.

The role of the player is mostly centred on exploring the maps and discovering how to capture each bugsnak through observation. Given the variety of environments and bugsnax, it helps to keep the player focused and think actively about how they would approach catching each bugsnak effectively.

Bugsnax provides the player with a three-dimensional world that they are free to explore progressively and allows them to choose whether they will try to catch all the creatures present within. The focus of the story itself is not to present choices, but more so to allow and explain the circumstances of why the player can capture the creatures populating Snaktooth Island.

3.3 Hollow Knight

Hollow Knight (Team Cherry, 2017) is a 2D platformer in the metroidvania genre. It focuses on an unnamed mute knight exploring a fallen underground kingdom called Hallownest. Hollow Knight is among the selected games unique in that it does not overtly include any references to humans or the human world.

3.3.1 Analysis of Narrative in *Hollow Knight*

Hollow Knight presents its story and narrative elements often through environmental methods. While some characters explain what is happening (usually when it concerns the central story), a larger focus is on the atmosphere and the player finding additional information in the world around them.

3.3.1.1 Linear and Non-Linear Narrative of *Hollow Knight*

The genre of metroidvanias is often characterised by non-linear exploration. This is echoed in *Hollow Knight* and its narrative. While there are certain intended exploration paths (e.g. requiring the ability to wall-jump to progress in a certain area), there is technically no set way on what the player will encounter first.

That being said, that does not mean the story is told entirely in a non-linear manner. Certain parts, as mentioned above, have some linearity enforced into them. An example can be seen in how the player encounters Hornet, a boss and a plot-important NPC. The first battle the player fights against Hornet deliberately sets up questions of why she is fighting against us and what is the player knight's role. Her second battle, while optional to completing the game, requires the dash ability to access (for casual players at least), which itself is unlocked after fighting her for the first time.

3.3.1.2 Spatial and Temporal Narrative in *Hollow Knight*

As discussed previously, *Hollow Knight* is presented in two dimensions. A third dimension is only implied in the form of movement in the background (see Figure 9), or in certain background objects the player passes in front of or can choose to interact with by breaking them. The story-space also additionally includes things like floating platforms for the player to jump onto for ease of platforming.

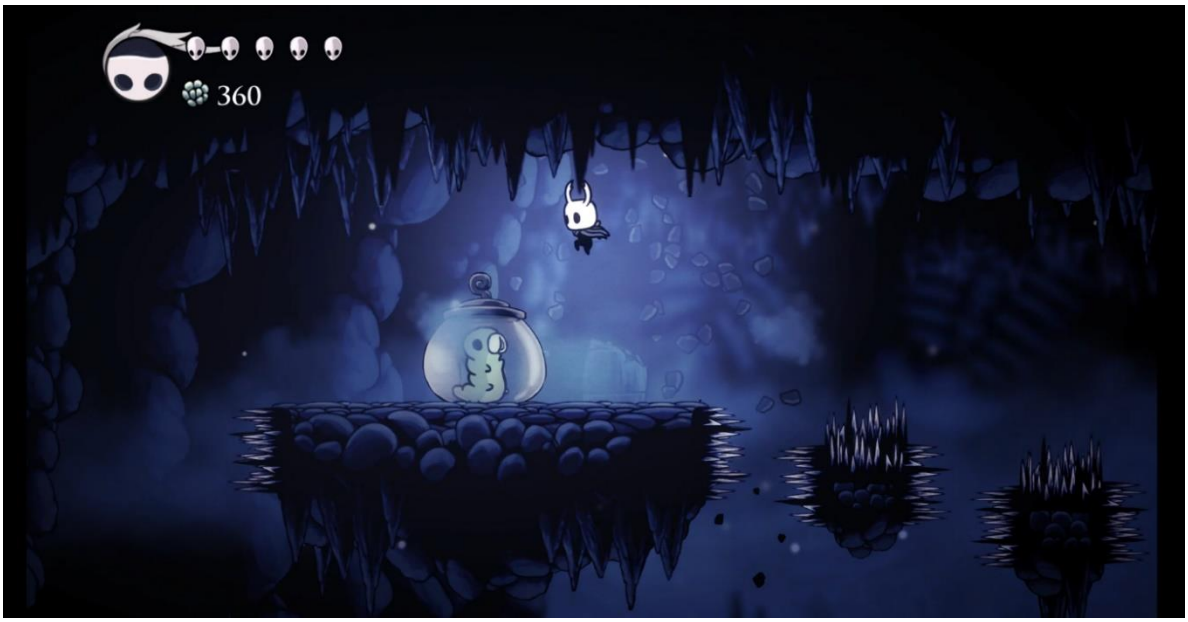

Figure 9. Two dimensions present in *Hollow Knight*. Featuring a background object being broken into parts. Reprinted from *Hollow Knight* (2017)

In terms of temporal narrative, *Hollow Knight* possesses almost no indication of how long its story takes. The only indication that time is passing is the presentation of the in-game infection spreading, triggered by player progress. The game also makes use of timing in the sense of letting the player skip some travel time through the usage of various fast-travel mechanics. In fact, there are three separate fast-travel methods; two are location-bound on both ends (i.e. the place to get on or off is set in the game map), while one only has a fixed exit, meaning the player can utilise it to travel to a specific place they want to return to often.

3.3.1.3 Engagement and Immersion in *Hollow Knight*

Hollow Knight, unlike the games discussed previously, does not limit exploration through a fixed storyline or advance the story primarily through cutscenes and character interaction. By the nature of its genre, it allows players to explore rather freely.

Moreover, *Hollow Knight* features significantly different endings based on the player's actions. Although their thematic implications will be discussed further, the fact that players are given the option of deciding whether or not to complete certain challenges to unlock endings or to instead focus on acquiring upgrades that could aid them is a noteworthy aspect of the game.

3.3.1.4 Interactivity in *Hollow Knight*

If analysed through the scale provided in Chapter 1.4, *Hollow Knight* would likely fall under the category of multiple-ending stories, given the story itself is not particularly different for the player until the end to count for the branching-path stories.

Hollow Knight also relies heavily on having high synchronicity. The player must react quickly to enemies and their attacks while navigating precise platforming sections. The high degree to which the game demands the player's attention helps keep them focused on the game.

3.3.2 Analysis of Story Structures in *Hollow Knight*

As stated previously, Hollow Knight's story is not linear. The narrative is not explicit throughout the entirety of the game. However, the story elements primarily serve to underline the central tragedy presented.

3.3.2.1 Characters in *Hollow Knight*

While technically set in a destroyed world, *Hollow Knight* has many characters the player can interact with. Many NPCs serve to help deepen the player's understanding of the world. An interesting case is presented with the protagonist as an unnamed mute knight whose identity and motives are left purposefully blank. However, as the player explores further, the answers to these mysteries are all presented with a final reveal at the end: the player character is not the titular Hollow Knight.

The character of Hollow Knight is referenced several times during the game in minor ways (e.g. a fountain memorial). Their history is presented as a tragedy which is echoed through their boss fight, separated into four specific phases. With each phase, the infection supposed to be contained in their body progressively leaks out. In the two final phases, the soundtrack drastically changes along with the Hollow Knight's attacks, some of which they even aim at themselves (see Figure 10). Without giving the Hollow Knight any lines to speak, the player can figure out who they are and feel sympathy for them.

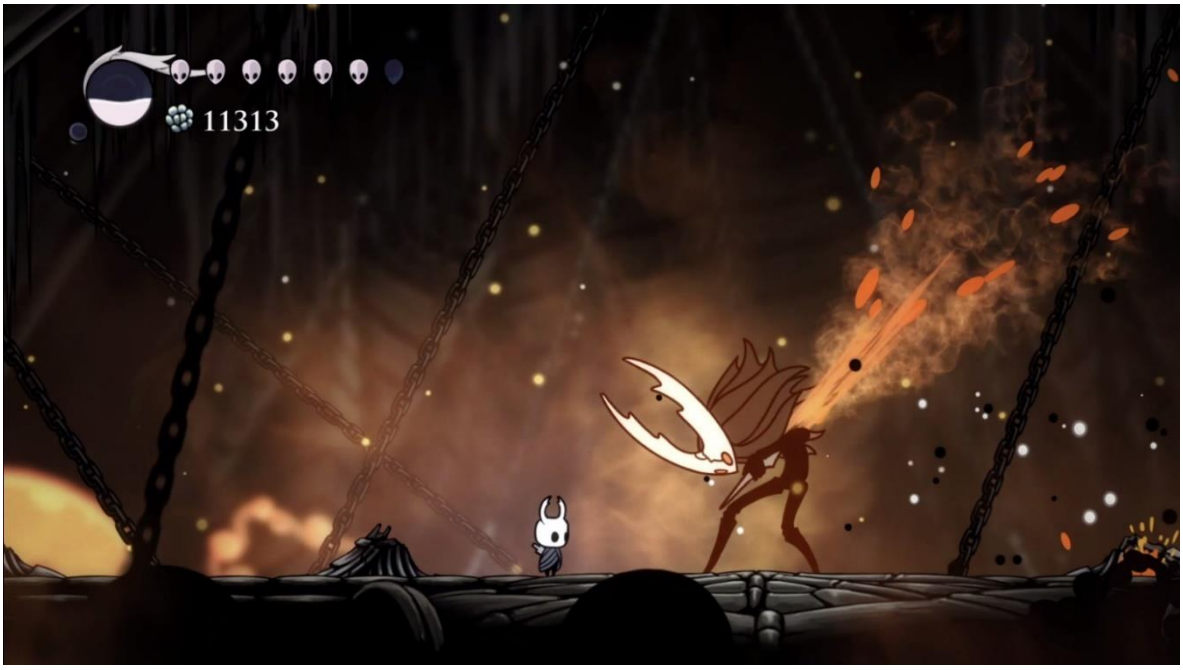

Figure 10. The fight against the Hollow Knight. Featuring their attack towards themselves. Reprinted from *Hollow Knight* (2017)

With many boss fights, their stories are similarly told through several mediums. While some bosses may speak and elaborate on who they are, the player is always presented with the boss's name, a unique music theme, and an entry in the journal that lists all the enemies. This method is often effective in conveying important information to the player and helps them understand the bosses' characters as a whole, without relying heavily on spoken lines.

3.3.2.2 Plot of *Hollow Knight*

The story of *Hollow Knight* is a tragedy with multiple endings. The way of relaying this story to the player is mostly by discovering lore tablets, defeating enemies and talking to NPCs, making the method of storytelling fall mostly under the scattered story structure discussed in Chapter 2.2.

A part of the tragedy in the story is examined in the endings specifically. The most straightforward ending that hinges on defeating the Hollow Knight ends with the player character absorbing the infection into their own body, replacing the Hollow Knight in the same role. It continues the cycle without solving the root issue. In contrast, the other endings require much effort on the player's part, asking them to go through some of the most difficult platforming sections or boss fights. It is a challenge ending in self-sacrifice but helps give the world a chance to recover.

3.3.2.3 Role of the Player and Choices in *Hollow Knight*

Given the mute character of the protagonist, *Hollow Knight* does not include dialogue choices unlike the other games discussed. That being said, the player is not entirely lacking in choice. Similar to *Bug Fables*, the player has an assortment of power-ups (in-game referred to as charms) that can be equipped at will.

Another choice the player has, as mentioned previously, comes from the multiple endings featured in the game. On top of that, many areas are technically optional to explore; choosing to do so may lead to new challenges for the player, but ones that might award them with something that makes their subsequent experience easier. This ties into the metroidvania genre that *Hollow Knight* falls into. The game does not lead the player overtly, instead letting them choose which way they would explore on their own.

All of this serves to let the player feel free in how they go about playing the game and that their choices matter not just to the story, but to their experience playing as well.

3.4 Small Saga

Small Saga (Noghani, 2023) is a turn-based role-playing game that focuses on the story of an angry mouse on its quest for vengeance against the Yellow God. In reflecting on the process and results of creating this game, Nogahani states that "finding creative solutions for limitations is a point where games, but indie games especially, have an opportunity to shine." (D. Noghani, personal communication, February 23rd, 2024).

3.4.1 Analysis of Narrative in *Small Saga*

Small Saga presents its story in a rather straightforward manner, much like the majority of games analysed in this thesis. The subsequent chapters will focus on how the final impression of the game is created through the aspects of this approach.

3.4.1.1 Linear and Non-Linear Narrative of *Small Saga*

Small Saga employs a mostly linear approach to its gameplay. The only notable exceptions are present when the main characters split up, for example at the beginning of the Autumn section of the game. Here, the player first takes control of Gwen and Siobhan to observe

their part of the story. After that, they take control of Bruce so they can observe what happened to him during that same time. These stories always meet back at the same point.

When the game needs to depict a context from a period further in the past than the immediate period, it is described rather than shown in the cutscene. For example, the character of Lamia the Peerless is not shown slowly abandoned by her family, friends, and all other stoats until she is the only one left. Instead, she explains this to the player, using it to underline her character in the immediate fight.

3.4.1.2 Spatial and Temporal Narrative in *Small Saga*

The time and place of *Small Saga* are told pretty explicitly; it takes place in London over the course of one year. Certain elements work to deepen even that simple setting.

First is the setting of time. *Small Saga* always shows only a small snapshot of a season rather than the entire passage of time; the climactic events of summer, for instance, take place over two days and one night. The temporal setting can further be narrowed down into the closely contemporary era; references to the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, can be found in the in-game Vinnium being an out-of-business toy store with facemasks used as set dressing.

The spatial setting is enhanced by the several places the player can visit on their adventure, each of which has a separate, quite distinct society. Sky Garden is an overt dictatorship, Murida is a parallel to London and the British monarchy, and Vinnium is based on ancient Roman society.

Players can visit different parts of the map using fast-travel pigeon taxis. This relates to the concept of "timing," which helps players save time and revisit previously explored areas. Like most of the fast-travel systems discussed in the analysed games, *Small Saga* ties its own directly into the world-building this way.

The last is the concept of perspective. *Small Saga* utilises a top-down long shot for world exploration, as seen in Figure 11. In contrast, the combat uses a mid-shot from behind, keeping the focus on the entire body while being significantly closer to the characters. It helps to underline that these are creatures much smaller than the player. In combat, on the other hand, it helps bring the player physically and emotionally closer to the characters and make them feel smaller, especially in battles against creatures significantly larger than the protagonists.

Figure 11. Long-shot perspective of the characters during exploration.
Reprinted from *Small Saga* (2023).

3.4.1.3 Engagement and Immersion in *Small Saga*

Chapter 3.4.1.2 mentions that *Small Saga* helps create an emotional connection with its characters by making the player feel small and bringing them down to the characters' level. Although the game's protagonists are well-developed characters, the game does not rely heavily on embodiment, and this approach helps the game to work around that.

3.4.1.4 Interactivity in *Small Saga*

Small Saga, given its static story, can be classified as an interactive traditional story. There are very few elements of the story that the player can actively change once interacting with them, with one very notable exception: the battle against Blademaster Leo near the end of the game, which ties directly into the themes of the game.

During the course of the playthrough, battles against bosses rarely results in death (the only explicit exception being the first boss fight against Chief Sava). Leo's character arc concludes with him murdering the King of Rodentia and, potentially, more members of the court. Protagonist Verm can follow suit and kill Leo through the player's most straightforward choice. However, through careful combat, they can instead choose to break all of Leo's needles and spare him. This particular decision holds immense significance in

the game due to its placement and build-up in the storyline, despite being the only notable example.

In terms of synchronicity, *Small Saga* uses turn-based combat similar to *Bug Fables. Small Saga*, however, does not use any blocking system.

3.4.2 Analysis of Story Structures in *Small Saga*

Small Saga possesses a central plot rather intertwined with character-specific storyline of its main characters. More so than games with more exploration elements, the story elements of *Small Saga* work closely together to deliver the final complete narrative to the player.

3.4.2.1 Characters in *Small Saga*

Small Saga features characters that are primarily rodents, making it unique among the selected video games. Unique is also its inclusion of humans. Since the story takes place explicitly in our human world, the game actively includes how humans view animals they find undesirable, like the mice and rats present in the game.

The final boss fight of the game is against the Yellow God – a human exterminator sent to deal with the mice infestation under the Palace of Westminster, where the rodent capital Murida is located. The build-up to the fight is tense, with the actual hall the fight takes place in referred to as Hell. Combined with the immersive combat perspective discussed in Chapter 3.4.1.2, the small mice are contrasted with the massive human, represented in the fight only via their hands (Figure 12). These hands are designed differently from conventional pixel art used on the characters: they are more detailed, appear to move similar to stop-motion animation, and seem almost blurry and unfocused as if it was difficult for the protagonists to even look directly at a god. These effects are deliberately added to a 3D model of a hand (Figure 13) (D. Noghani, personal communication, February 23rd, 2024) and help make the player feel very small.

Figure 12. The final model of the Yellow God's hands as seen in the final battle. In contrast with protagonists Siobhan (left) and Verm (right). Reprinted from *Small Saga* (2023).

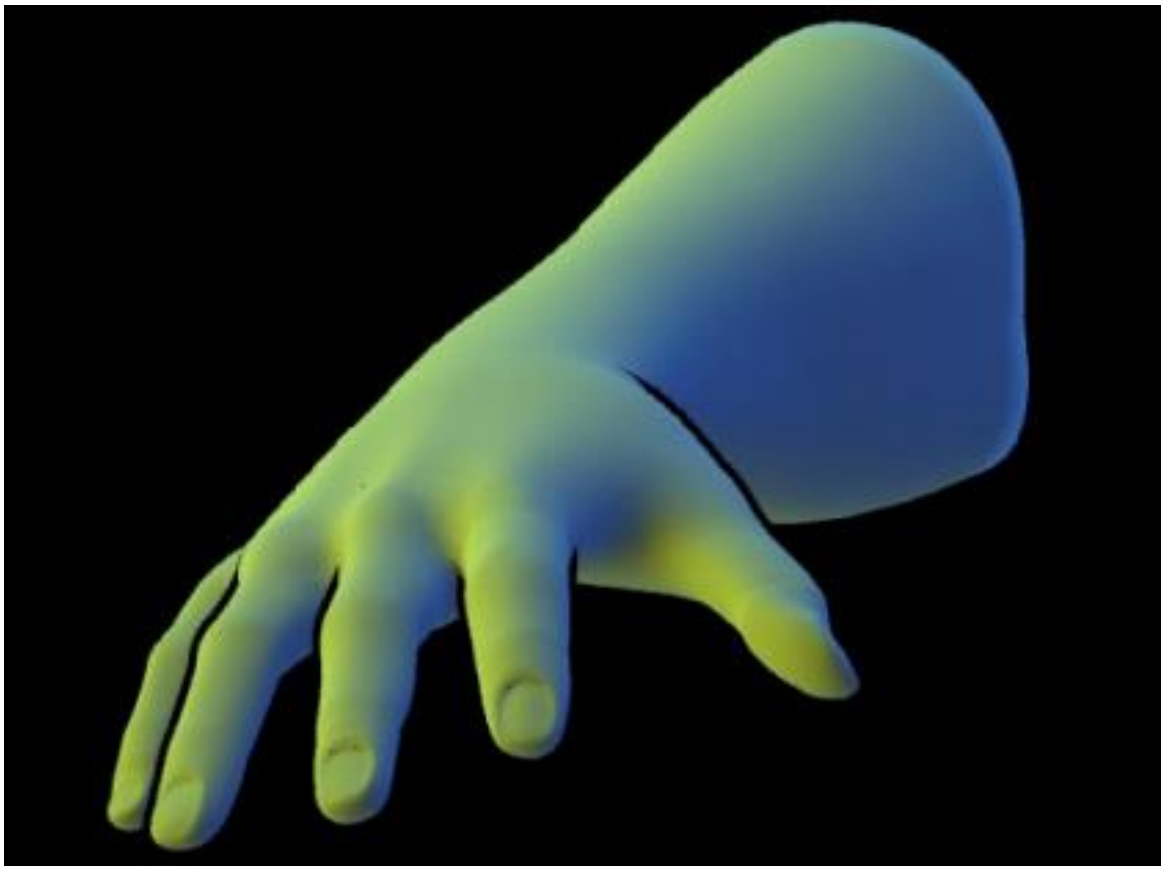

Figure 13. 3D model of a human hand used as an enemy sprite in *Small Saga*, pre-adjustment. Reprinted from D. Noghani (personal communication, February 23rd, 2024).

Aside from the boss fight against gods, the characters in *Small Saga* are all rodents of some kind, usually following where they are from. For example, the protagonists: Verm is a common mouse whose hometown scours for food in a human store, Siobhan is a mole whose town is in a human garden, Gwen is a white rat from a human lab, and Bruce is a red squirrel native to Scotland.

The character of Bruce, in particular, is overtly used to discuss colonialism through his rodent species. Red squirrels are native to Britain but are being pushed out by the invasive grey squirrels (Wauters et al., 2023), similar to how Scottish culture has been suppressed by the English. The grey squirrels in Small Saga have taken over Sky Garden, the ancestral home of Clan Red. Bruce's story includes learning to be proud of himself and when to fight for what is right even if he believes in pacifism.

3.4.2.2 Plot of *Small Saga*

The story of *Small Saga* mostly revolves around vengeance that the main character, Verm, is trying to get for his brother. It also discusses grief, identity and purpose, as well as healing and moving on. Verm's story starts with his loss (introducing his leitmotif when he sees his brother get killed by the Yellow God) and ends with finding peace, leaving behind the pocket knife he has carried during his entire quest.

The structure of this story mostly falls under the threaded story category, with this central plotline supplemented by a few side quests, most of which are tightly woven into the main story. Nonetheless, they are still optional; for example, character stories involving the other main characters; Siobhan, Gwen, and Bruce. All three of them have a character arc culminating in returning home and fighting for themselves.

3.4.2.3 Role of the Player and Choices in *Small Saga*

As mentioned before, player choices are mostly limited in terms of altering the flow of the story. Player control can instead be seen in optional elements, such as character-specific side-quests. The player can proceed to the endgame sequence without completing them, but finishing all of them makes the final push through Murida easier.

Small Saga also includes dialogue choices though these, much like other games analysed in this thesis, do not influence the greater story aside from immediate reactions of the characters. They can lead to humorous or dramatic moments that let the player feel invested in what is happening beyond merely reading dialogue.

Conclusion

This bachelor's thesis aimed to create a framework for analysing video games through narrative and interactive means. Afterwards, these aspects were analysed in four video games selected according to their availability and a shared theme.

The thesis discussed the structure of the narrative, its various elements, and how they can work to affect someone playing a video game while providing illustrative examples through existing video games. The second chapter analysed story structures and their use to create a story that a video game carries.

The literature review revealed that video games do not necessarily require a story to create a narrative message imparted to the player. It also showed that the player can be provided with choices either through meta-levels of managing their gameplay or through direct story choices, such as dialogue choices in a cutscene.

This analytical framework has been used to examine four video games. All the selected video games focused on small animals ("critters"). Out of all of these, *Small Saga* (2023) was the only one that did not focus directly on bugs, while *Bugnsax* (2020) and *Hollow Knight* (2017) included a somewhat realistic depiction of the animals.

In terms of gameplay, the genres ranged from turn-based combat, free exploration and creature collection to a 2D metroidvania. In terms of stories, these contained an uplifting story almost resembling a fairy tale, a mystery story verging into existential, all the way to a politically charged revenge story and a tragedy discussing cycles of hurt.

This vast difference in the broadest looks at these video games shows that, despite their shared central element, their narrative and interactive elements can differ greatly. However, this does not mean they were entirely different. For example, the analysis revealed that while most games utilise a long-shot perspective frame to show a larger field and emphasise the small size of its protagonists, the opposite effect (i.e. emphasizing small creature size compared to the protagonist) was created through a first-person perspective. Additionally, most of these games possessed only one major story ending. However, they all allowed for additional exploration and side-quests that allowed the players to gain bonus upgrades and make the game easier.

Due to the variety of video games in terms of stories, themes, gameplay and interactive elements, this thesis cannot analyse every aspect of interaction in video games. Furthermore, the scope of this thesis requires that some aspects of the selected video games cannot be examined. A comprehensive analysis of any game would demand more time and range than what is available in this thesis.

As such, future research can aim at a deeper analysis of a smaller number of video games, expanding upon the ideas presented in this thesis to provide an in-depth analysis of one of the selected games. Alternatively, a comparative analysis of different characteristics of additional video games might supplement this thesis. For example, accessing multiple games of the same genre could offer interesting insights into their stories and player interactions.

Given the vast popularity of video games from established studios and independent developers, it is important to consider the assessment of their unique characteristics.

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