Consecutive Endings and the Aesthetic Potential of Cognitive Dissonance

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Keywords
ontology, closure, inaction, structure

ABSTRACT
This presentation deals with games in which what initially is assumed to be the ending turns out to be only an interruption of the game's structure. I will extend Riccardo Fassone's (2017) observations about endings of games by outlining consecutive endings as a specific phenotype of game endings. The presentation will situate them within the logic of game endings in general, identify their specific cognitive challenge through a theoretical argument, and will discuss three aesthetic effects they contribute to the expressive language of digital games.

Consecutive endings exist in many media and are challenging there, as well. One of the better-known examples is the double ending of *Basic Instinct* (Verhoeven 1992), which was opposed by its star Michael Douglas and the studio (Eszterhas 2013, 169) and disqualified by critic Roger Ebert as "so arbitrary that it hardly matters" (Ebert 1992), while director and writer repeatedly stressed that the ending was intentionally "ambiguous" (Simkin 2012, 20-21).

Endings of digital games have generally a different ontological status and aesthetic effect than those of novel or films. In his recent book, Fassone gives a thorough, highly systematic overview of both the most common and most uncommon ways in which games 'end.' Building on studies on endings in e.g. poetry (Smith 1968), fables (Richter 1974), and film (Neupert 1995), Fassone shows digital games' strong indebtedness to the handling of endings in those media, as well as the more general cognitive problems connected with endings which are also found in other media (Ferris 1983). Based on these similarities, Fassone identifies a number of factors that are specific to digital games, among them two coexisting teleologies (finishing and completing), customary interruptions often conceived of as endings (e.g. game over), and two kinds of non-teleological structures (unwinnable and endless games) (Fassone 2017, 41-80).

The only example of a game with consecutive endings that features prominently in Fassone's book is *The Binding of Isaac*, which, as Fassone explains, "is not a game that

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ends, but is rather a game about the multiplication of possible endings, their dispersion and, eventually, their suppression" (Fassone 2017, 167). The numerous endings of the game, combined with the procedurally generated near-infinite number of ways and means to reach them, result in a structure that approximates the parallel endings encountered quite frequently in games at the end of branching decision paths. Still, *The Binding of Isaac* feigns and then withholds closure when beating a seemingly final boss only unlocks another, again only seemingly final boss.

It is this specific structure of digital games this presentation focuses on: structures that indicate to the player that an ending has been reached, only to enable continued play afterward, while coding the post-end portion of the game not as something extraneous, repeated, or additional, but an actual part of the game. While present in numerous digital games of the past decade (see bibliography), the phenomenon is maybe most pronounced in *NiER: Automata* (Platinum Games 2017), where in addition to more than 20 optional (premature) endings, four points of closure are embedded in the game's structure. All of them are called into question by the offer of extending play (Jaćević 2017), turning them from a present signifier of an ending into an absent signifier, or suture (Miller 1977, 39), of something that remains withheld.

Unlike voluntarily replaying a game – where "the telos, thus, is not lost: it merely changes, turning into beginnings and different repetitions" (Mukherjee 2015, 145), where the ending is not being negated, but merely renegotiated as a medium-specific pause (Fassone 2017, 48-54) – a consecutive ending results in cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), a state produced "if one cognition follows from the obverse (opposite) of the other" (Cooper 2007, 6). A game that continues after communicating to the player that an ending has been reached presents her with the decision whether or not to continue playing, and forces her to (re-)interpret the structure and nature of the game. This decision is by no means trivial, as players face the dilemma of anticipating the negative consequences of indecision or inaction well-known in both psychology (Tykocinski and Pittman 1998; Zeelenberg and Pieters 2004) and philosophy (Quinn 1989). Especially in *NiER: Automata* and *Prince of Persia* (Ubisoft Montreal 2008), continuing to play worsens the state of affairs in the gameworld, inducing a strong case of cognitive dissonance "that occurs when a person acts responsibly to bring about an unwanted consequence" (Cooper 2007, 182).

There are at least three aesthetic potentials that games derive from consecutive endings.

First, they construct a formal, structural, or procedural resonance between a game's themes and its successive ending structure. *The Binding of Isaac*'s 'nesting doll' organization of non-ending after non-ending resonates with the game's overall topic of inescapability and its spatial logic of a constant descent into increasingly more hostile depths.

Second, they make topical the tension between diegetic vs. extradiegetic teleology, i.e. the different incongruent organizational principles we encounter in play. Most importantly, they challenge assumptions about formal principles. The explicit, ostentatious gesture of an ending followed by more gameplay forcefully calls assumptions about the linearity of digital games into question.

Third, they set in scene a clash between (designer) authority and (player) agency, amplifying strategies also found in withheld agency in cut-scenes or quick-time events.

The opposite effect is, however, also possible: When *Prince of Persia* withholds the final ending unless the player reverses the salvation of the world she had been playing towards, the player has the power to play transgressively by stopping play. This decision of choosing the life of a loved one over the well-being of a whole world reinterprets the game as a whole as either working towards love or redemption.

The presentation will illustrate these aesthetic principles in greater detail by discussing additional examples, highlighting that this superficially maybe unobtrusive structural organization of a game is a powerful expressive device for game designers.

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