

“Is This Really Happening?": Game Mechanics as Unreliable Narrator

Curie Roe and Alex Mitchell

Department of Communications and New Media

National University of Singapore

roe.curie@u.nus.edu, alexm@nus.edu.sg

ABSTRACT

The unreliable narrator is a popular narrative technique employed by game designers, as seen in games such as *Dear Esther* and *The Stanley Parable*. However, much of the academic discussion of unreliable narration in video games has focused on games with an omniscient, personified narrator. Through close readings of *Tales from the Borderlands Episode 1* and *Doki Doki Literature Club*, we examine how video games without an omniscient, personified narrator create unreliable narration. Our findings suggest that in these games the auditory, visual and interactive (gameplay) narrative modes work together to create unreliability by setting up players to doubt the meaning of their in-game actions. This draws attention to the presence of an implied player to whom the unreliable narration is directed, and heightens awareness of the “Game Narrator” through metalepsis. We propose this Game Narrator as the set of rules that govern how the three narrative modes (auditory, visual and interactive) are dependent on each other, and how they support meaning-making and the formation of the cognitive construct of the storyworld in the player’s mind.

Keywords

unreliable narration, game mechanics, close readings, metalepsis, game narrator

INTRODUCTION

Games are increasingly accepted as a medium for storytelling, with research no longer focusing on *whether* games can tell stories, but instead exploring *how* games tell stories, and how these techniques are similar to or different from traditional forms of narrative such as literature and film. Among these discussions, the presence of an unreliable narrator in games has started to command attention among researchers as an increasingly popular narrative technique. The representation of the story in video games is often audiovisual, and is arguably closer to film (Thon 2009), and possibly comics, than literature. Using unreliable narration in film and comics as a bridge to connect traditional notions of unreliable narration to video games, this paper will discuss unreliable narratives in video games, focusing in particular on the role of game mechanics as a non-personified, potentially unreliable narrator.

We begin by providing some background on the notion of the narrator as applied across media. We then summarize work that has focused on the non-personified unreliable narrator in various forms of storytelling, before discussing how video games without a central personified narrator create a sense of unreliable narration. We describe our close readings of two games that involve unreliable narration, *Tales from the Borderlands Episode 1* (Telltale Games 2014) and *Doki Doki Literature Club* (Team Salvato 2017), followed by a discussion of the techniques used in these games to create unreliable narration. We conclude with implications and suggestions for future work.

THE NARRATOR ACROSS MEDIA

We will begin by discussing the concept of the narrator. The term “narrator” refers to the role that “designates the inner-textual (textually encoded) speech position from which the current narrative discourse originates and from which references to the entities, actions and events that this discourse is about are being made” (Margolin 2014). This definition becomes problematic when extended beyond traditional literary forms, as it is not clear whether it is “constitutive of all narratives, limited to media with a language track, or even optional within these media” (Ryan and Thon 2014). For example, in film there is discourse but not necessarily a personified narrator. Rather, film narration is a multiplicity of a complex set of cues that the viewer perceives in order to construct the narrative (Lothe 2000). This “multiplexity of the cinematic narrator” (Chatman 1990) involves cues from both the auditory and visual channel. Similarly, in comics Groensteen (2013) differentiates between the *reciter* as the verbal enunciator or personified narrator, and the *monstrator* as the graphic enunciator or non-personified narrator that is “responsible for the rendering into drawn form of the story”.

This act of deciding what can be shown is arguably similar to the role of game mechanics, the “methods invoked by agents, designed for interaction with the game state” (Sicart 2008). Game mechanics control what any agent, especially the player, can or cannot do with the game world, thereby determining what the player will experience. Thus, video games add another dimension of complexity to the concept of the “narrator”. Computer games’ representation of space and narrative is audiovisual instead of textual, which makes it arguably more similar to narratives in film than in literature (Thon 2009). However, games also incorporate the element of interactivity between the player and the game system. To understand the role of interactivity, Aarseth (2011) introduces the idea of the Game Object, an “information object” that consists of a semiotic layer and a mechanical layer. The semiotic layer “informs the player about the game world and the game state” through audiovisual, textual and haptic feedback, while the mechanical layer facilitates game action through the game mechanics. It is in engaging with the Game Object on both the mechanical and semiotic layers that gameplay is realised.

This makes analysing game narratives from a classical narratological standpoint somewhat problematic, as traditional narratology understands narratives as an act of recounting while games involve direct participation in the events as they take place. Instead, scholars have turned to the field of cognitive narratology (Herman 2002; Bordwell 2013) to explain how game mechanics can be used as powerful narrative tools to help the player construct the story mentally as they are engaging with the game in real-time (Dubbelman 2016). According to Larsen and Schoenau-Fog (2016), a game’s mechanics and context, roughly equivalent to Aarseth’s mechanical and semiotic layers, “begin to relate and inform each other, as the player interacts with and perceives both”. They see the narrative in a game as emerging from the player’s “understanding [of] the ways a mechanical interaction works within the context”. From this perspective, the player is an interpreter, building a mental construct of the narrative in response to the gameplay experience.

Similarly, Chew and Mitchell (2019) argue that interactivity can be counted as a semiotic mode that contributes to meaning-making as it works together with other modes, including auditory and visual modes. In games, interaction usually occurs with a quicker paced “rhythmic cybernetic feedback loop” than other forms of digital narratives; Chew and Mitchell therefore note the importance of contextualised interactivity that is aided by other modes for the effective use of interactivity as a narrative mode in video games.

These perspectives all suggest that the game “narrator” consists of not only the auditory and visual but also the interactive mode. We propose the term “Game Narrator”, borrowing from the concept of the multiplexity of the Film Narrator (Lothe 2000), to refer to the non-personified entity responsible for the visual, auditory and interactive (gameplay) modes of a game that take part in the act of narration. It is worth considering how the various aspects of the Game Narrator relate to conceptualizations of the “narrator” in other media. It could be argued that the audiovisual modes in games are similar to the monstrator and reciter in comics, which take responsibility for what is shown, heard or said visually and textually. This would suggest the existence of an additional component within the Game Narrator, that of the game mechanics, that is responsible for the interactive (gameplay) mode.

THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR

Having summarized the various ways that the notion of the narrator is conceptualized across media, it is worth considering what it means for narration to be “unreliable”. Booth (2010) defines unreliable narration as the internal inconsistencies in the text between the personified narrator and implied author, placing the focus of unreliability on the intended inconsistencies between the actual author and existing moral standards. Similarly, in film, narrative unreliability is defined as the discrepancy between the determining intentions of the implied author and the reporting intentions of the narrator (Currie 1995). In contrast, contemporary narratologists such as Nünning (1999) propose that unreliable narration is a reader-dependent issue and thus affected by reader preferences. The existence of unreliability in the narration hinges on whether the actual reader detects and naturalises (Culler 1975) the text in relation to her existing conceptual framework. It follows that if the reader shares the same worldview as the narrator, the narration is considered to be reliable regardless of the author’s intentions.

Hansen (2007) offers a taxonomy of unreliable narration in literature, having considered various definitions brought forth by multiple theorists ranging from the original (Booth) to the contemporary (Nünning): intranarrational, internarrational, intertextual and extratextual unreliability. *Intranarrational* unreliability is established in a text through frequent “discursive markers” - hints that point to the narrator’s uncertainty or contradictions in the relating of events. *Internarrational* unreliability occurs when more than one narrator, or the same narrator in different instances, contradict each other. *Intertextual* unreliability is established based on the nature of the narrator’s character type that makes the narrator fundamentally unreliable. Lastly, *extratextual* unreliability - the most ambiguous of all - is created based on the reader’s application of her own knowledge of the textual world to the narration. Hansen argues that more than one type of unreliability will often function together to achieve the effect of unreliable narration in a text.

These definitions tend to, at least implicitly, assume a personified narrator. However, a personified narrator may not be necessary in order for a storytelling medium to have unreliable narration. Instead, a narration can be mimetically unreliable as long as the work enables the reader to perceive that the represented events are not entirely authentic (Köppe and Kindt 2011). Hence, unreliable narration is possible both with or without a personified narrator, widening the possibilities for techniques for unreliability not just in literature, but in other mediums as well. For example, a sequence in a film allows viewers to count it as an unreliable narrative even with no personified narrator because unreliable discrepancy can exist between the auditory and visual film narrator and the implied author. To explain this, Currie (1995) introduces the idea of the implied film author’s “complex intentions”, to which viewers can attribute the source of unreliability. However, he insists on the element of an intentional ambiguity in the unreliability, justifying that an unreliability that is not

easy to detect is of more theoretical interest as it requires “delicately balanced inferential strategies” from the viewer. The elements in a narrative that point to unreliability represent the intention of the implied author and the role of the narrator in deciding what to show, how to show it and what to keep hidden. In a medium like film, the implied author has a wide range of auditory and visual variables to exploit to achieve ambiguous unreliability.

Thon (2009) proposes that players perceive unreliable narration from a computer game through an ideological perspective structure. This involves evaluations of the game’s events from multiple angles and evaluations of the characters’ reactions to game situations, ultimately allowing the player to try to guess the intentions of the implied designer. Ensslin (2015) highlights *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe 2013) as a striking example of unreliable narration in games. The game’s narrator is described as a “shape-shifting, intrusive narrator whose would-be omniscience is deconstructed by the player’s subversive behaviour”. He oscillates between addressing the playable character as “Stanley” and directly to the player as “you”, giving directive instructions to the player in the past tense while the player has not yet performed that particular action. The second-person narrative in an interactive medium such as a game thus hints at the narrator’s unreliability or untrustworthiness.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Previous studies have explored the definition of the narrator and different types of unreliability across various media. In media such as film and comics, this includes the notion of the unreliable non-personified narrator. Commentators have noted the rising popularity of unreliable narration in games such as *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room 2012) and *The Stanley Parable*. Some speculate that the growth of unreliable narratives was facilitated by the realisation that players are aware of their “dynamic” relationship with the game world, while others also feel that the technique is particularly effective in games because the player is able to dictate the narrative; hence the “twists” in the narrative have a powerful effect as it “[exploits] the “gap” between the player and their character” (Gerardi 2016). However, little academic research has been conducted to explore the role of the non-personified narrator in games, unlike a clearly personified narrator as in Ensslin’s (2015) analysis of *The Stanley Parable*.

The Stanley Parable is comparable to traditional literary concepts of unreliable narration because there is a clear, explicit narrator present in the game. Considering the additional mode of interactivity in video games and its independence from the need for a personified narrator, we postulate that the interactive (gameplay) mode would provide the game designer with an even larger number of techniques to achieve unreliability. This can, in fact, be seen in *The Stanley Parable*. The player is technically able to disobey the instructions that are given in past tense, but the narrator gets increasingly upset the more the player attempts to diverge from these directions. The game becomes an exploration of choice, except there is actually no choice. Agency, “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices” (Murray 1998), is thus ultimately an illusion. This suggests that the game mechanics present conflicting notions of what can and cannot be done in the game, working together with the personified narrator to create the unreliability of the narration.

Building on this observation, this paper seeks to explore the role of gameplay and game mechanics as part of the creation of a complex, unreliable non-personified Game Narrator. Specifically, we address the following research questions:

1. How is the presence of unreliable narration signalled to the player?

2. How do the narrative game mechanics and the interactive mode of video games contribute to the creation of unreliable narration?

The first question explores what the player is presented with while playing the game that indicates or demonstrates unreliable narration on a preliminary level, regardless of which mode (visual, auditory or interactive) it occurs in. It investigates how discursive markers of unreliability can be portrayed to the player. The second question explores the specific role of the game mechanics in the process of creating this unreliability.

METHODOLOGY

Through close readings of *Tales from the Borderlands Episode 1* and *Doki Doki Literature Club*, each game's use of game mechanics as an unreliable narrator will be explored. A close reading is "a detailed examination, deconstruction, and analysis of a media text" (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2011), such as a video games. The method involves repeated playthroughs of each game, with each playthrough seeking to deepen existing or uncover new findings about the game system.

The games chosen have no personified, omniscient third-person narrator such as in *The Stanley Parable* so that the interactive mode can be better analysed as an important element of the possibly unreliable Game Narrator. Although at certain moments the characters in these games do take on the role of a personified narrator, the focus of this study is on how the aspects of interactivity in the games work as narrative game mechanics to convey unreliability. Both games are roughly the same length, ranging from about two to five hours, and suggest some degree of unreliability after a preliminary playthrough.

Tales from the Borderlands is an episodic science fiction adventure game set in the *Borderlands* (Gearbox Software 2009) universe. The gameplay consists of a mixture of dialogue and action choices. In the first episode, the game recounts the story told by two characters, Fiona (a Pandora citizen) and Rhys (an employee of Hyperion), who distrust each other from the start and are presented as biased storytellers. They take turns describing past events in chronological order, with the player alternating between playing from Fiona's and Rhys' perspectives.

Doki Doki Literature Club is an interactive visual novel that follows the protagonist as he meets four girls who are the pioneers of a new school club: the literature club. At first the game looks like a typical Japanese dating or romance simulator. However, both audiovisual markers and aspects of the gameplay soon suggest that what is being presented to the player is not completely reliable, and that there are additional layers to the narrative that are not initially apparent, leading the player to distrust the various metaleptic layers and ultimately, the purpose and meaning of the game mechanics.

According to Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, "the construction of analytical lenses is a crucial component of a rigorous close reading methodology", allowing the researcher to isolate particular facets of the readings for a more constrained and relevant analysis. In this study, we focus on instances of non-personified narration, observing how the game mechanics relate to unreliability. Here, we are looking to see if there are dissonances or inconsistencies between player action and the resulting feedback.

FINDINGS

Overall, unreliable narration seems to be closely tied to the difficulties I¹ faced trying to reconcile the dissonances between my expectations for my in-game actions and the conflicting information that the games presented to me. This made the cognitive act of constructing a story a challenging, iterative process that occurred throughout my gameplay. For each game, I highlight specific examples from my playthroughs that contributed to my experience of constantly reconstructing the narratives as I re-evaluated my understanding of the stories.

Tales from the Borderlands Episode 1

Tales from the Borderlands Episode 1 uses flashbacks, narrated by the two protagonists, as the basis for its overall narrative structure. Rhys and Fiona's character types and markers for their unreliability were important factors in making me question the accuracy of their recounts. Furthermore, I made dialogue choices and performed actions on behalf of the characters based on past events that had already occurred at that point in the narration but that I was not aware of, leading me to question the reliability of my choices. As the game jumped between various diegetic layers, I also had to evaluate the plausibility of each narrative fragment before incorporating it into the narrative that I was constructing mentally, leading me to distrust all of the layers of the narration.



Figure 1: The framing narrative in *Tales from the Borderlands*.

The game starts with a framing narrative told by an unnamed personified narrator, introducing the setting and background information about the game world. This short introductory sequence has a different visual style from the rest of the game (see Figure 1) and, interestingly, is not referred to again for the rest of the episode. This effectively makes the entire episode a flashback.

Thereafter, the second layer of the narrative starts in medias res, with Rhys and Fiona having been captured by a mysterious character to whom they must recount the events leading to their capture. Through the use of another layer of flashbacks, Rhys and Fiona take turns narrating past events in chronological order, each picking up from where the other leaves off. The player controls both characters as each one takes over telling the story. This in itself is an unusual structure if one considers the combination of several factors.

First, Rhys and Fiona are specifically introduced, by means of an on-screen caption that addresses the player directly (see Figure 2, left), as con artists who are working against each other. They constantly accuse each other of and admit to lying,

¹ References to specific gameplay experiences are described from a first-person point of view to acknowledge the fact that the findings are based on the first author's own play experiences, and therefore do not necessarily represent all players' experiences.

exaggerating or “embellishing” the truth (see Figure 2, right). Here I was making choices on behalf of Rhys and Fiona, whose motives and reliability I began to distrust because of their explicitly indicated character types.



Figure 2: Left: Fiona introduced as a con artist. Right: Rhys admitting to "embellishing" the truth.

Second, the game is a choice-based adventure game that does not present the story in the standard chronological order. Rather, the player is thrown into a kidnapping situation without any context as to why either Rhys or Fiona were captured, while Rhys and Fiona continue to narrate the story from the beginning of the timeline. It felt disorientating, as a player coming into the game with no prior knowledge about the narrative, to make choices on behalf of two characters regarding events that had already occurred for them.

Being required to make choices through Rhys and Fiona, who had been introduced as unreliable characters, about events that had technically already unfolded at that point in the story and without any previous knowledge about those past events, made me doubt the narrative truthfulness of the results of my own choices. For example, I had to make a choice for Fiona right after being introduced to her as a con artist. The kidnapper brought Rhys to where he had tied up Fiona and she called Rhys a “fraud”, saying he “left out the most important part”. At that moment, as Fiona took over the narration, I had to decide what event Rhys had left out, with no information whatsoever on which to base this choice (see Figure 3). In addition, the sequence that Fiona was accusing Rhys of lying about was the result of my own actions immediately prior to this, further causing me to doubt the veracity of my actions.

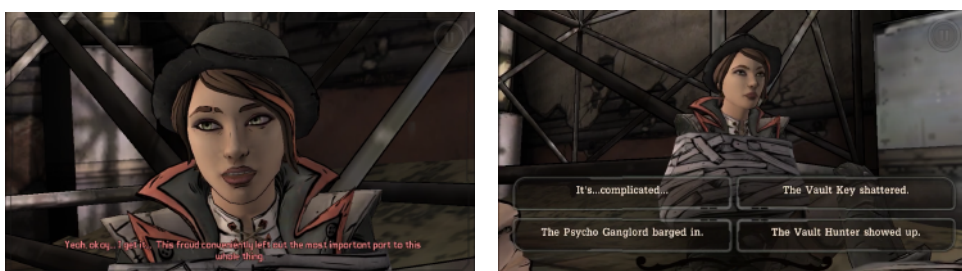


Figure 3: The player chooses what Fiona says regarding events that have already taken place, about which the player has no knowledge.

Forcing the player to make choices without enough information was a common technique seen throughout *Tales from the Borderlands*. At these points I was unsure whether my choices were the correct ones. As the game progressed I questioned if these choices were even significant to the narrative since, from the characters’ perspective, the story events had already taken place. In the above example, multiple playthroughs revealed that the choice ultimately did not matter, as *all* the choices presented were, in fact, true.

To achieve a coherent storyline that flowed from one character's narration to the next without logical pitfalls or contradictions, I had to construct the narrative from a higher layer of narration, considering how plausible each of the story fragments were and how the two characters were presenting the stories. The tension between the need for me to decide on the actions of Rhys and Fiona as the story's personified narrators, and how the structure of the game was presenting the story to me as *past* events of which I had no knowledge, highlights the range of techniques available to the Game Narrator for creating unreliable narration. Here, the deliberate presentation of the story as a flashback, and the use of two unreliable personified narrators who are narrating the story chronologically and under my control as the player by means of the game mechanics, were in conflict with each other, making me uncertain both of the personified narrators' trustworthiness and of my own reliability as an uninformed player.

In addition to dialogue choices, *Tales from the Borderlands* also requires players to make simple gestures, such as swiping motions, so as to interact with the game world. Interaction is a common characteristic of video games, helping players experience more involvement in the game world "on a first-person level" (Grodal 2000), and enabling players to control their own perception of the game world. *Tales from the Borderlands* exploits this fluidity of perception by creating a tension between what I thought happened in the story and what the game later presents to me.

For example, in one scene the group has reached an abandoned facility overtaken by bandits where their lost briefcase containing ten million dollars is hidden. They try to find a way to break into the facility while avoiding the bandits, with Rhys directing the team to a discreet entrance. At this point I was controlling Rhys and performed a series of actions, guiding Rhys and the others down a rocky cliff and past the bandits to reach the entrance. I followed the game's prompts, thinking that I was indeed controlling Rhys in his maneuvers to lead the group. However, abruptly it was revealed that the others had already reached the entrance while Rhys was still at the clifftop, bragging about his strategy (see Figure 4). This meant that whatever interactions I just performed to control Rhys were not what "actually" happened in the story. The tension comes in when, as the player, I made inputs to the game through my interactions and in turn, the game world responded and showed me the effects of those actions; but when it was revealed that none of those actions actually took place in the story because it was just a figment of Rhys' arrogant imagination, it made me doubt the legitimacy of my actions as the player, not just in this specific sequence, but throughout the game.



Figure 4: The player's actions are revealed to have simply been a figment of Rhys' arrogant imagination.

This doubt as to the reliability of the game mechanics is reinforced by what happens when Fiona or Rhys "dies". Of course, logically Rhys and Fiona *cannot* die in the third layer of the narrative, because they are alive in the second layer of the narrative and recounting what happened to them. However, Pandora is an extremely violent

place, and the penalty for making a mistake in a fight is usually a gruesome death. There needs to be a reconciliation between the excitement and risk of failing in the game's action sequences, and the fact that Fiona and Rhys must still be alive to tell the story. *Tales from the Borderlands* does this by allowing the player an infinite number of attempts to replay the action scenes to succeed. For example, when Rhys dies, the voice of the captor who kidnapped Rhys and Fiona at the beginning of the game asks Rhys if he really wants to "go with" the story of him dying (see Figure 5, left). Rhys then responds by admitting that he did not actually die, "but [he] could have" (see Figure 5, right). The game then allows the player to replay the scene.



Figure 5: "Game Over" sequence when Rhys "dies", and the captor and Rhys discussing the veracity of this event.

Here I was made aware of the game's use of metalepsis (Bell 2016) as it moved back and forth between different layers of narrative framing, ascending or descending the diegetic hierarchy. *Tales from the Borderlands* is structured as stories within stories, starting from the external framing narrative told by the unidentified personified narrator (layer 1), then moving progressively inwards to the story of Rhys and Fiona's capture (layer 2), their recounts to the kidnapper (layer 3), and stories within their recounts (layer 4). When Rhys or Fiona "died", this foregrounded these metaleptic layers. Being mostly immersed in the story and action of the game during either character's narration, I tended to forget about the outermost layer of narration with the unknown personified narrator from the beginning sequence, and even the layer of storytelling by Rhys and Fiona who were kidnapped and must now recount what happened to their captor. When the kidnapper declares that I could not have died as Rhys or Fiona and then allows me to retry the scene, this metaleptic breach calls into question the reliability of my gameplay actions. I, as the player, am the one who caused Rhys' death and therefore it is "true" that Rhys died. But when I was pulled back to the second layer of narration, where it is impossible that Rhys could have died because he is telling the story that I am playing, I questioned whether what I did as Rhys was what "really" happened. When coupled with the fact that Rhys and Fiona distrust each other and are constantly lying or exaggerating, I was encouraged to distrust *all* of the layers of metaleptic narration.

Doki Doki Literature Club

Doki Doki Literature Club (DDLC) uses a number of markers of unreliability, combined with the breaking of the fourth wall and reframing of the player as a playable character, to render the meaning of the game mechanics unreliable. From the start, the narration became unreliable as I began to question my initial understanding of the boundaries of the game world. The eventual emergence of a player-as-character between myself (the actual player) and the protagonist (the playable character) suggested the presence of several narrative layers that the game exploited to create unreliable narration.

The game consists of four acts, with a pseudo-restart between each act. In the first act the four female non-player characters, Monika, Yuri, Natsuki and Sayori, clamour for

the protagonist's attention and affection. The game mechanics involve making dialogue choices to indicate who I want to spend time with, and playing a "poetry composition" mini-game to determine who my poems would appeal to. At this point, I was focused on deciding which character the protagonist should become close to.



Figure 6: Monika's "Writing Tip of the Day" breaches metaleptic boundaries and suggests additional narrative layers.

However, even within the first act the game quickly cast doubts on my assumptions about the nature of both the story and the gameplay. The clearest markers of unreliability were those that hinted at Monika's difference from the rest of the characters in terms of her unnatural awareness of the game medium. For example, early in the game Monika gives a particularly uncharacteristic "Writing Tip of the Day," saying, "Sometimes you'll find yourself facing a difficult decision...When that happens, don't forget to save your game! You never know when you might change your mind...or when something unexpected might happen! Wait...is this tip even about writing?" (see Figure 6). This was the first suggestion that Monika was aware that she was a character in a game. Out of all the characters, Monika is the only one who consistently breaches metaleptic boundaries, bypassing the playable character and addressing me (the actual player) directly, although Sayori does take on an omniscient Monika-like persona in one of the game's possible endings. Additionally, there were visual indications that Monika is not like the rest of the characters. For example, Monika is also the only character whose in-game sprite sometimes overlays the dialogue text box (see Figure 7). From these markers it became clear that Monika was neither the character I first thought, nor was she operating at the diegetic level that I had initially assumed.



Figure 7: Monika's sprite overlays the user interface.

The markers that indicated Monika's awareness of and ability to manipulate the game eventually made me feel that my role as the player had shifted from one of controlling the original playable character in order to get close to one of the girls in the literature club, to that of playing an in-game *player-as-character* in order to try to thwart

Monika's attempts to manipulate the game. Rather than a single layer of narrative (the story about a boy joining a literature club), there now seemed to be at least 2 layers: the story about an unnamed player who is playing a game (layer 1) about a boy joining a literature club (layer 2), with Monika disturbingly straddling the boundary between these two layers.

The introduction of this additional layer of narrative happened gradually, and was the result of changes in both the audiovisual and gameplay modes. After Sayori's suicide at the end of the first act, I began to experience a loss of player control. I first became aware of my lack of control due to the increasing occurrences of visual glitches in the second act, such as stylised text, gibberish text and distorted images, because there was nothing I could do to prevent them from happening. This sense of a loss of control made me feel increasingly distanced from the protagonist, creating a growing awareness of the additional layer of the player-as-character between me (the actual player) and the playable character that I was controlling.



Figure 8: Glitches after Yuri's death with changes in lighting to signify time passing, and the player unable to take any actions.

The longest instance of these visual glitches and loss of control occurred in the third act when Yuri stabbed herself to death, triggering a seemingly endless stream of glitched text (see Figure 8). The background lighting changed progressively, symbolising that I was stuck next to Yuri's corpse over the weekend. At this point of the game I could do nothing except let the text run and wait until act three ends with Monika deleting both Natsuki and Yuri, triggering another restart of the game. In this situation, I felt that the game was taking control away from both me, the actual player, and from the player-as-character (layer 1), but not from the playable character (layer 2), because the loss of control was situated in a higher level of narrative framing. There was a shift in focus from the original story of the five students in a Japanese school (layer 2) to the more abstract level of narration which included the original story as an embedded narrative within the larger story world of the game (layer 1).

There were also instances where the game controlled my input directly, rather than simply removing control. For example, in act two my cursor was automatically directed to choose Monika over Yuri or Natsuki when the protagonist had to decide who to help for the festival. When control over my cursor was taken away, it undermined my expectations of the core mechanic of making choices in the game. Of course, rationally I was aware that the game cannot directly control me, the actual player. Rather, it was disrupting the reliability of the interaction between myself and the game through which I was controlling the player-as-character (in layer 1). It was doing this by having the player-as-character direct the protagonist to choose Monika over the rest (in layer 2). This disruption of the game mechanics heightened my awareness of the existence of the separation between myself as the actual player, the player-as-character, and the protagonist. Preventing me from being able to make a choice and controlling my cursor was a metaleptic breach, the purpose of which was directly related to the creation of unreliable narration. It became increasingly unclear to me which layer of narrative framing the game mechanics were influencing at

different points in the game, and on which layer the control was being taken away. Here, the game mechanics were playing a central role in creating a sense of unreliable narration.

DISCUSSION

From the close readings of *Tales from the Borderlands* and *DDLC*, we can see that there were similarities in how the auditory, visual and interactive modes worked together in each game to create unreliable narration. First, audiovisual markers were used as preliminary and reinforcing evidence to signal unreliability in the games. Second, both games made use of multiple narrative levels to achieve the effect of unreliable narration, particularly through the use of metalepsis. Finally, the games undermined the meaningful choices that I assumed I was making through my game actions. We now discuss these points in more detail.

Audiovisual markers of unreliability were common across both games. These markers' function was mainly to act as preliminary indicators of unreliability in the narrative and the game interactions. In *Tales from the Borderlands*, audiovisual markers illustrated the nature of the characters, especially Rhys and Fiona, with the game using direct visual cues such as labels to introduce them as con artists. In *DDLC*, other direct visual cues such as glitches and stylised texts suggested that something strange was happening, and that this was focused around Monika.

Metalepsis has also emerged as a crucial factor for creating unreliability in these games. Genette (1980) defines metalepsis as “any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe” or the inverse. Speaking specifically about digital media and video games, Bell (2016) expands on Kukkonen and Klimek's (2011) definition of “interactional metalepsis” to argue that it occurs “when the ontological boundary between the reader (in the actual world) and the storyworld is crossed”. In both of the games that we analyzed, the narration moves between various layers of the diegetic hierarchy, resulting in a heightened awareness of the role of the Game Narrator and an increased distance between the playable character and myself as the player.

In *Tales from the Borderlands*, the narration moves between the boundaries of its stories within stories. Because of multiple markers that prevented me from believing what I am doing and what I was shown to be an accurate recount of the past, it was unclear whether I could trust all, or any, of the layers of narration. As such, it was necessary for me to construct the narrative in a higher level of narration so as to evaluate the events that were taking place in each level of the diegetic hierarchy.

DDLC illustrates metalepsis in a more extreme way. The traditional concept of the implied reader is helpful here to demonstrate how *DDLC* distances the implied player from the protagonist through metalepsis. According to Booth (2010), the implied reader is an image of a person that the author creates, representing the identity of a “reader” that a particular reader takes on as he reads, distinct from other aspects of that actual reader's self. In games, the implied player can be seen as a parallel to the implied reader. In the case of *Tales from the Borderlands*, the distancing between the playable characters and the player foregrounds the role of the implied player, making me aware of the differences between the two. *DDLC* problematizes this categorisation of the implied and actual player by bringing the implied player into the game world through the use of metaleptic jumps and breaking of the fourth wall. This creates an additional layer of the player-as-character between the actual player and the playable character. As a result, when *DDLC* makes references to me, it does not address me as the actual or implied player but addresses “me” as a character in the game, who is a player playing the game about a boy in a Japanese high school. This emergent layer

of the player-as-character became an additional layer in the diegetic hierarchy that I was not initially aware of.

Interestingly, *DDLC*'s extreme use of metalepsis shifted the focus from the story of the original protagonist and the four girls to that of the player-as-character's struggles with Monika, in the process trivialising the original narrative. By the end of the game, I felt no connection to the original characters. This effect is also seen in other metaleptic games that cross ontological boundaries to the extent that the fourth wall is broken, including *Save the Date* (Paper Dino Software 2013) as discussed by Mitchell (2018) and *The Stanley Parable* as discussed by Ensslin (2015).

Gameplay was also manipulated to create a sense of unreliability. In *DDLC* I frequently lost control of my cursor when making dialogue choices, revealing Monika's ability to manipulate the game-within-a-game. The game used this gradual breaking of the illusion of control to blur the boundaries between the game world and the real world, leading me to doubt the reliability of any of the layers of the narrative. On the other hand, *Tales from the Borderlands* made me doubt the meaning of my actions by using interactive flashbacks and contradictions between the layers of the narrative to make me wonder whether what I did in the game actually happened within the storyworld, even though I had just witnessed it in my gameplay. As a result, the game made me oscillate between what I thought happened in the story as a result of my actions compared to what the later story sequences presented to me. Both games set me up to ascribe a particular meaning to my game actions, which turned out to be an incomplete truth and the vehicle through which I experienced the unreliability.

Here we see a complex interdependent relationship between the audiovisual elements in the game and the game mechanics. The audiovisual cues of unreliability contributed significantly in marking the characters as unreliable and in undermining the player's initial expectations of the significance of their game actions. The game mechanics also contributed to the unreliable narration, as I found myself questioning the meanings that I attributed to my game actions according to my perceived level of control.

We initially proposed that the Game Narrator consists of three components: the audio, visual, and interactive modes. However, our close readings indicate that the game mechanics do not actually form a separate, independent narrative mode, since the meanings that emerge from the player's game actions are inextricably linked to what is portrayed by the auditory and visual modes. Rather, following Chew and Mitchell's (2019) concept of contextualised interactivity and Aarseth's (2011) semiotic and mechanical layers, the unreliability emerging from the game mechanics relies on both the auditory and visual modes of the game to remain effective within the context of the game's narrative. This suggests an interdependence between the various aspects of the Game Narrator. As Larsen and Schoenau-Fog (2016) argue, game mechanics set in motion through play combine with the context as presented through the audio and visual modes to create meaning. The player derives meaning from what she is doing (the mechanics) based on the context (the audio and visual modes) as she is doing it, in an iterative process of feedback and a continuous construction of the mental model representing the game's storyworld. This suggests that the Game Narrator isn't an entity consisting of the various modes working together, but rather the Game Narrator is situated between the modes, where the meaning-making is taking place.

Thus, we argue that the Game Narrator is the set of rules that govern how the modes are dependent on each other, and how the modes support meaning-making and the

formation of the cognitive construct that represents the storyworld in the player's mind. To use Aarseth's terminology, the Game Narrator is situated at the moment of engagement with the Game Object, determining whether, and how, the game as process (the gameplay) supports a coherent story experience. This relates to Larsen and Schoenau-Fog's notion of Quality, the degree to which the mechanics and context work together to support each other in the creation of the narrative. In the case of an unreliable Game Narrator, there are a number of issues that make it challenging for the player to reconcile the mechanics and the context, such as the contradictions between the player's actions and the various layers of narrative in *Tales from the Borderlands*. However, rather than representing a failure to form a coherent narrative, or a lack of Quality, the various markers of unreliability suggest to the player that this is, instead, a deliberate strategy that itself contributes to meaning-making and the formation of the (unreliable) narrative.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored how unreliable narration can occur without relying exclusively on the presence of a personified narrator. Close readings of *Tales from the Borderlands Episode 1* and *Doki Doki Literature Club* suggest that, in these games, the audiovisual and interactive modes work together in unique ways to create a sense of unreliable narration in the player. We identified three possible ways that the non-personified Game Narrator could create unreliable narration, though the list of techniques for unreliable narration presented here is not exhaustive. These games achieved unreliable narration through the use of audiovisual markers to signal unreliability, through the use of metalepsis to distance the player from the playable character, and by encouraging the player to doubt the meaning and significance of player actions through contradictions and removal of player control.

Future work can explore other games with unreliable narration but without a personified narrator, to clarify the role of game mechanics in game narration and uncover more techniques for creating unreliable narration in games. In addition, since the individual player experiences reported here may not reflect that of all players, running empirical studies such as in-depth interviews or experiments would help to validate our results.

Our observations suggest that there are limitations to existing terminology and frameworks for defining the Game Narrator, and uncertainty as to where to place the mode of interactivity and gameplay in relation to the auditory and visual modes in a game's narration. This paper has broadened the set of unknowns in theories related to game narration, suggesting a need to look more broadly into the role of game mechanics in game narration. One way to do this would be to probe more deeply into the particular case of unreliable narration, where the role of the Game Narrator tends to be foregrounded.

Finally, it is worth considering whether the growing popularity of unreliable narration in games could render this narrative technique ineffective by becoming conventionalised, as Bell (2016) suggests may happen for certain forms of metalepsis. However, we suggest that although the technique of using unreliable narration in games could become conventionalised, the effects of unreliable narration will not be diminished, as this depends on a player's cognitive need to construct a coherent narrative rather than on undermining expectations. It would be interesting to explore this further.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aarseth, Espen. 2011. "Define real, moron!" *DIGRAEC Ser. 6*. Universität Potsdam: 50–69.

- Bell, Alice. 2016. "Interactional Metalepsis and Unnatural Narratology." *Narrative* 24 (3). The Ohio State University Press: 294–310.
- Bizzocchi, Jim, and Joshua Tanenbaum. 2011. "Well Read: Applying Close Reading Techniques to Gameplay Experiences." In *Well Played 3.0*, edited by Drew Davidson, 262–90. ETC Press.
- Booth, Wayne C. 2010. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. University of Chicago Press.
- Bordwell, David. 2013. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Routledge.
- Chatman, Seymour Benjamin. 1990. *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*. Cornell University Press.
- Chew, Evelyn, and Alex Mitchell. 2019. "Multimodality and Interactivity in 'Natively' Digital Life Stories." *Poetics Today* 40 (3).
- Culler, Jonathan. 1975. *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*. Routledge.
- Currie, Gregory. 1995. "Unreliability Refigured: Narrative in Literature and Film." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53 (1). Wiley-Blackwell: 19–29.
- Dubbelman, Teun. 2016. "Narrative Game Mechanics." In *International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling*, 39–50.
- Ensslin, Astrid. 2015. "Video Games as Unnatural Narratives." *Diversity of Play*. Meson Press, 41–72.
- Galactic Cafe. 2013. "The Stanley Parable" [Computer Game].
- Gearbox Software. 2009. "Borderlands" [Computer Game]. 2K Games.
- Genette, Gerard. 1980. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Cornell University Press.
- Gerardi, Matt. 2016. "Why Do so Many Video Games Have Unreliable Narrators?" *The A.V. Club*. <https://games.avclub.com/why-do-so-many-video-games-have-unreliable-narrators-1798243396>.
- Grodal, Torben. 2000. "Video Games and the Pleasures of Control." *Media Entertainment: The Psychology of Its Appeal*, 197–213.
- Groensteen, Thierry. 2013. *Comics and Narration*. Univ. Press of Mississippi.
- Hansen, Per Krogh. 2007. "Reconsidering the Unreliable Narrator." *Semiotica* 2007 (165). Walter de Gruyter: 227–46.
- Herman, David. 2002. *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Köppe, Tilmann, and Tom Kindt. 2011. "Unreliable Narration With a Narrator and Without." *Journal of Literary Theory* 5 (1). Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co.: 81–93.
- Kukkonen, Karin, and S Klimek. 2011. "Metalepsis in Popular Culture: An Introduction." *Metalepsis in Popular Culture* 28. Walter de Gruyter Berlin: 1.
- Lothe, Jacob. 2000. *Narrative in Fiction and Film: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Margolin, Uri. 2014. "Narrator." Edited by Peter Huhn, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier, and Wolf Schmid. *The Living Handbook of Narratology*. Hamburg: Hamburg University. <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/narrator>.
- Mitchell, Alex. 2018. "Antimimetic Rereading and Defamiliarization in Save the

- Date.” In *DiGRA '18 - Proceedings of the 2018 DiGRA International Conference*.
- Murray, Janet H. 1998. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. The MIT Press.
- Nunning, Ansgar. 1999. “Unreliable, Compared to What? Towards a Cognitive Theory of ‘Unreliable Narration’: Prolegomena and Hypotheses.” In *Grenzüberschreitungen: Narratologien Im Kontext/ Transcending Boundaries: Narratology in Context*, 53–73.
- Paper Dino Software. 2013. “Save the Date” [PC Computer Game].
- Ryan, Marie-Laure, and Jan-Noël Thon, eds. 2014. *Storyworlds Across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*. U of Nebraska Press.
- Sicart, Miguel. 2008. “Defining Game Mechanics.” *Game Studies* 8 (2): 1–14.
- Team Salvato. 2017. “Doki Doki Literature Club!” [Computer Game].
- Telltale Games. 2014. “Tales from the Borderlands” [Computer Game].
- The Chinese Room. 2012. “Dear Esther” [Computer Game].
- Thon, Jan-Noël. 2009. “Perspective in Contemporary Computer Games.” *Point of View, Perspective, and Focalization: Modeling Mediation in Narrative*, 279–99.