Narratives in First Person Games

by André Blyth

Narratives are an integral part of video games, and there are many ways in which narratives can be presented, implied, and enhanced through various means of game design. This paper will look at a couple of ways narrative is presented in games that utilize the first person perspective. I believe that by examining the different ways narrative is traditionally conveyed in games, it is possible to see why games that break the mold can be highly successful and interesting forms on interactive art. Finally, I'd like to address whether or not these games that abandon traditional gameplay are affecting the greater game industry.

First, a couple things should be made clear. By first person perspective games, I mean games that:

1. The player controls an anthropomorphic character and sees from that character's perspective.
2. The player is in control of their own movement

These restrictions allow me to focus on a very select yet bountiful genre of video games.

Second, I'd like to list a couple of terms that I will be using in this paper that may not be familiar to someone who is not familiar with this style of video game:

FPS. First Person Shooter. The most common type of first person perspective game, this genre usually focuses on shooting enemies and traversing levels as its main gameplay.

NPC. Non player character. This describes any character in a game that the player does not
control, but inhabit the same environment.

WASD Movement. The keyboard keys in which most first person games use for navigation. Think of the arrow keys and their directions, now transplant them onto the W, A, S, and D keys. This allows for better keyboard access while using a computer mouse in the other hand.

Finally, this paper will be presented in a few parts. The first part will be a short history of game mechanics in first person perspective games that allow me to elaborate on how games present narrative. The second part of this paper focuses on some traditional (some not) ways that games present narrative. The third part deals with how some games break traditional gameplay and how it worked well for them. The final part of this paper will quickly ask if the trend of abandoning traditional gameplay is catching on to the greater games industry.

Part One: History of FPS Mechanics

The narrative in a video game is revealed primarily during gameplay, and thus, it is important to understand how contemporary games arrived at the systems they utilize to present their narrative. The following is a short history of first person perspective video games. This will not be a chronological presentation of games, but rather an exposition on how the mechanics of the genre were defined over time. This allows us to see the reasons game narratives are presented the way they are. A proper term for this section would be a history of first person game mechanics.

It is important to note that this history will only cover what is necessary for me to be able to delve into the ways narrative is presented in games. These are chiefly, in the order they will be presented in this paper: Direct Narrative (dialogue and the use of a narrator), Environmental
Storytelling (how the level design enhances or implies narrative), and Gameplay (how the game is played affects how the narratives are portrayed).

**Wolfenstein 3D**

In 1992, a game company called ID Software released Wolfenstein 3D, which is now considered the first First Person Shooter (henceforth referred to simply as FPS) game (ID Software). There were a few game released in the 1980's that utilized a first person perspective, but Wolfenstein 3D allowed real time, albeit limited, movement using a computer keyboard. The premise of the game was to shoot and kill soldiers and prominent members of the Nazi party (including Adolf Hitler), with firearms. There were a couple different firearms to use, that increased in power as the game progressed, giving a sense of increased skill and ability to the player character. The important takeaways from this game, in regards to game mechanics, are the real time movement system, and the sense of character progression through more powerful weaponry being found in later levels. The former mechanic was improved upon over the years, while the later, generally, has become a common element in almost all FPS games.

**Myst**

One year following Wolfenstein 3D, Cyan released a game using Macintosh's Hypercard software (Lasar). Like Wolfenstein 3D, it utilized first person perspective but did not use real time
movement (and by real time movement I mean that when a movement key is pressed, the player moves in real time while that key is pressed), instead, the player clicked onscreen and would move towards that point. The game's levels are comprised of hand drawn images that when seen sequentially creates the illusion of a concrete, three-dimensional world. Myst is a puzzle game, and the puzzles are not necessarily in order, nor are the solutions and actual puzzles intrinsically connected. To complete the puzzles and thus progress the game, exploration and investigation are paramount.

It is only through exploration and investigation that the narrative plot is revealed to the player. In fact, it may be possible through luck to complete the game without knowing the narratives behind the game's puzzles. Through the use of books and notes the game reveals an expansive lore and immediate backstory to the spaces the player explores, increasing the player's immersion and the urgency in which the player feels he must complete the game.

As a game, and cultural object, Myst was a leap forward for computer games in terms of depth and aesthetics, even making the front page of the The New York Times Arts section, where it was said to "move beyond cinema" (Rothstein) At the time, it seemed to be a forerunner influence on first person games to come, but as a widespread genre, the game industry went along the lines of Wolfenstein 3D. Myst did have its legacy because of the elements of storytelling and exploration, but it took the game industry a while to return to this style of narrative gameplay.

**Doom**

The same year that Myst came out, another FPS in the vein of Wolfenstein 3D was released as shareware that soon spread from computer to computer, before high speed internet made this an easy task (ID Software). The game was called Doom, and it set in stone the direction that FPS and first
person perspective games in general (unfortunately for Myst) were to go. As a game, it played extremely similar to Wolfenstein 3D, but it added one truly innovated element that set it apart. Though Wolfenstein was a 3D environment, movement was restricted to two horizontal planes - Doom introduced truly three dimensional levels. Players could move up and down through the use of stairs and ramps. Doom was the first game to allow players to explore three dimensionally, and though later games improved the ways the movement was controlled, it was a giant leap forward in terms of game mechanics.

**System Shock**

System Shock, developed by Looking Glass Studios was the next step in the evolution of FPS mechanics (Looking Glass Studios). Released in 1994, it greatly expanded upon something a few FPS game begun to develop - mouse look (Cifaldi). Mouse look is defined as using a computer mouse to control the perspective at which the player's avatar faces. Before System Shock was released, a few FPS had started to use mouse look in a very limited sense. The mouse allowed the viewer to adjust their viewpoint a small angle upwards and downwards, allowing for a slight shift in perspective which in turn allowed a greater sense of exploration. With mouse look, ceilings and floors became an important factor in level design, and the more level design developers can add to a game, the greater narrative experience and immersion the developer can create.

System Shock changed the scene to allow full 360 degrees of movement and the ability to look fully up and down using the mouse. With this, levels became fully explorable, with every nook and cranny of the game subject to view from the player character. It set the stage for level designers to treat game levels akin to architecture, as fully explorable three dimensional spaces.
In addition to three dimensional movement, System Shock also added many features into the game that the FPS genre previously lacked, most notably character customization. Players were allowed to progress through the game in their own unique ways, and thus the game had many different paths to completion. Gamasura writer Frank Cifaldi noted "System Shock wove in enough elements borrowed from adventure/RPG to elevate its design beyond the basic shooter tropes." Many of these elements stuck, making System Shock a defining game in the genre. Cifaldi wrote, "The fact that so many of these features are now virtually de rigour in modern sci-fi shooters is a testament to the influence exerted by this one game."

**Half Life**

Fast forward a few years to 1998, a then relatively unknown developer called Valve released the game Half Life (Valve). The appropriate cliche here would be "then everything changed." Half Life did not invent a new system of combat, the game engine, while great for the time, was nothing new, and used standard weaponry found in most FPS games. Yet it prompted Jason Bates, writing for IGN, to call it "a tour de force in game design, the definitive single player game in a first person shooter. Don't cheat yourself; play this game." (Bates). Half Life's greatest achievement in game design was getting everything right, and thus setting the standard for game design to come. The architecture of the environment were well designed, the enemies smart and challenging. The most important part of this game, in terms of the scope of this paper, is the level design. Half Life does away with the traditional notion of levels and presents the game as one single, seamless narrative which never breaks perspective from the first person. Gamespot writer Jeff Green wrote "No cut-scenes, no level "briefing" screens, no frag-count screens, no map. As in a real movie, the intention is to immerse you in the story." (Green).
Later in this paper, I will be expanding upon Half Life and how its style of gameplay enhances narrative.

This concludes the section on the history of FPS game mechanics, as with the release of Half Life games in the genre have not changed in terms of how they are played. The controls and mechanics of FPS games released today are nearly identical to Half Life therefore it is not necessary for me to expand upon this history. There have been many interesting advancements, but in terms of how the games are played, and thus how narrative can be presented in games, this history is all that is needed.
Part Two: Presenting Narratives in the FPS

The section of the paper is meant to illustrate a number of ways narratives are presented in first person games. As mentioned in the introduction, the three main ways that narratives are presented are: Direct Narrative - the use of dialogue and narration, Environmental Storytelling - how the environment informs or implies narrative, and finally Gameplay - how the mechanics of the game reflect the narrative or enhance it. For this paper I will be presented two examples of each subject, from different games, to shed some light on how each functions. Before we there though, I believe I should introduce an important concept that ties in to all three elements: Ludodiegesis.

Ludodiegesis was coined by Thechineseroom head, Dan Pinchbeck, in his PhD thesis "Story as a function of Gameplay in First-Person Shooters and an analysis of FPS diegetic content 1997-2008." (Pinchbeck, Story). The terms combines two parts: "ludo" referring to play, and "diegesis" referring to "reality of the game world to be experienced by the player." (Pinchbeck, Story). Looking at the two then, Ludodiegesis would refer to how play reinforces the reality of the game world. Game elements that reinforce the game world are ludodiegetic, while elements that detract from the reality of the game world are not ludodiegetic. A close synonym would be verisimilitude, or the appearance of being true or real.

First, some game elements that are not ludodiegetic: Loading screens, menu screens, floating text over the game screen (such as "Press X to change weapons), or cutscenes. Any game element that breaks the fourth wall in reminding the player that they are playing a game are not ludodiegetic. In addition, things that simply do not make sense within a game world are also not ludodiegetic, such as: fantastic (as in fantasy) weaponry in historical time settings, superhuman abilities that are not possible within the physics of a game world, or things like findings ammunition caches in gymnasium locker rooms.
Now, game elements that are ludodiegetic: Health packs (items that heal player's health) found in first aid kits, keys that are needed to unlock doors, notes left by other characters that reveal plot (in place of the game telling you what to do). Again, anything that reinforces the game world reality and increases the player's view that what is happening is plausible are ludodiegetic.

What does this concept have to do with the following chapters? Simply put, ludodiegesis increases player immersion through means of verisimilitude, solidifies the narratives presented in games as real stories, and is generally a more effective form of gameplay. In conjunction with examining how Direct Narrative, Environmental Storytelling, and Gameplay reveal narrative, the ludodiegetic devices that either enhance or enable narratives to be perceived will be considered.

**Narration and Dialogue**

Direct Narrative is the simplest and most obvious form in which narratives are presented in games. Usually coming in the form of a narrator or through dialogue, it explicitly details the story line and tells the player what is going on. The narration and dialogue in many games are similar, due to the similar stories and characteristics of the player character, but this section is dedicated to only two forms of Direct Narrative: that of books as well as notes, and dialogue between non player characters (NPCs). One interesting aspect of dialogue that I'd like to mention here is that games don't have a good way to detect whether a player is listening or not, and therefore, for whatever reason, it is entirely possible for a player character to miss out on these dialogues. While the player may miss some things, it adds an interesting meta-narrative that includes the actions of the person playing the player character.
Myst, Doom 3, and the Use of Notes

As mentioned in the history part of this paper, the game Myst had a deep and complex narrative that was only revealed if the player took the read the various books and notes spread throughout the game. This was antithetical (and still is, in someways) to the popular method of storytelling in games in which games would give a player all the information (story, objectives, etc) directly through loading screens or objective screens. What is perhaps most interesting is that this hidden narrative reinforces the puzzles found in the game. The actions performed by the player to solve puzzles are directly references in these books. It gives the player reason to complete the puzzles and to resolve the conflict in the plot line. It is a highly effective marriage of narrative and gameplay.

Though the player will only come across this information if it is found, it still represents a form of direct narrative because the books openly give their narratives to the player without having the player having to infer or piece together information.

Increased technology in processing power and graphics rendering allowed games to present narrative similarly, yet it allowed the ways a player character could collect and use information to become a seamless part of the gameplay. While many FPS game do not utilize a ludodiegetic system for this process, a couple do to good effect.

Id Software's Doom 3 (second sequel to the massively influential Doom) implemented a very innovative way of collecting information that mirrors the idea of using books but as a futuristic evolution (ID Software). First of all, the player character has in his (you play as a Marine stationed on a Martian base) possession a PDA that contained all his personal information, security clearances, and emails from co-workers and other staff. You could transfer information from other characters PDA and computers to yours to collect information that helped the player progress through the game (such as gaining greater security clearance), or revealing subplots that dealt with minor characters in game
(creating a deeper game universe and implying a world that existed before player character arrived). In the game, the PDA was almost the equivalent of the modern day iPhone - computer, phone, ID, and audio recorder all in one. As a device, it made perfect sense within the game world, and is a good example of a ludodiegetic device.

**Dialogue and the Narrator: Portal 2 and The Stanley Parable**

Another form of Direct Narrative comes in the way of dialogue between characters. The majority of dialogue in FPS games occurs either between NPC's or between one NPC and the player character, however in the majority of FPS games the player character is a silent protagonist, and therefore dialogue between an NPC character and the player's avatar can be a little awkward and generally comes off as narration because of it. Some games are able to get around this through good writing or simple lines such as "You don't talk much do you?" In this section, the dialogue between two major characters in Portal 2 and the narration in The Stanley Parable will be looked at as good examples of Direct Narrative. Because of the explicit nature of dialogue, it should be assumed that what follows will contain spoilers to the games.

Portal 2, released in 2011 by Valve, continues the story of the first game an unspecified amount of time in the future (Valve). In the first game, you controlled the character Chell, a test subject for Aperture Science Laboratories, an in game science and research company. The only other character in the first game is the narrator and later NPC GLADOS (voiced by singer-songwriter Ellen Mclain), an artificial intelligence who has been left in control of the Aperture Science facility (it is hinted that the facility has been abandoned). The plot of the first Portal game was to complete a series of test chambers using a portal gun. The portal gun is able to place two 'portals' on various surfaces, one acts and an entrance and the other an exit. Using this device is central to solving the test chambers, which generally are a series of physics puzzles. I realize this may be difficult to imagine, so I've included an image below to illustrate. The end of the game has Chell destroying the computer that GLADOS
In Portal 2, GLADOS returns, and as you might imagine is none too pleased with seeing Chell again. In addition, a third character is introduced - Wheatley, another artificial intelligence voiced by actor Stephen Merchant. Wheatley is the first character encountered in Portal 2 - he has an extremely quick wit but also comes off as slightly unstable, which is of course an interesting anthropomorphic twist to a computer. His dialogue helps Chell progress through the early levels of Portal, until you once again encounter GLADOS. The subsequent dialogue and interaction between Wheatley and GLADOS really makes the game. Through them, the player character learns of the history of Aperture Science, listens in on philosophical discussions about artificial intelligence, and witnesses Wheatley and GLADOS throw comic potshots at each other for the rest of the game, as well as torment Chell (Wheatley spends the second half of the game manipulating the test chambers to try and kill GLADOS and Chell). The following represents everyone's relationship fairly accurately:

Wheatley: I'll bet you're both dying to know what your big surprise is. Only two more chambers!
GLaDOS: We're running out of time. I think I can break us out of here in the next chamber. Just play along.

[Chell runs into an Aerial Faith Plate—and is unexpectedly launched sideways onto another Plate and finally into a Excursion Funnel]

Wheatley: Surprise! We're doing it now!

GLaDOS: Okay, credit where it's due: for a little idiot built specifically to come up with stupid, unworkable plans - that was a pretty well laid trap.

Wheatley: You've probably figured it out by now, but I don't need you anymore. I found two little robots back here! Built specifically for testing!

GLaDOS: [now a little panicked] Oh, no. He found the Co-operative Testing Initiative. It's...something I came up with to phase out human testing just before you escaped. It wasn't anything personal. Just...you know, you did kill me. Fair's fair.

[A plate launches Chell onto a platform surrounded by spike plates]

GLaDOS: Ah! Well, this is the part where he kills us.

Wheatley: Hello! This is the part where I kill you!

(Valve, Portal 2)

Portal 2's use of dialogue as direct explicit information is effective because of the quality of writing, the quality of the voice actors used, and timeliness of it. The writers of Portal 2 were able to increase the player immersion and urgency because the player feels as if they are interacting with real characters that have depth, not shallow entities developed simply to forward a plot or objective.

The second game in this section is a small mod that used the Source engine (the Source engine is what Valve uses to create their games). The mod is called The Stanley Parable, and it was released in July of 2011 (Wreden). The Stanley Parable's premise is that games normally give you many choices, but ultimately they do not matter. This is the precise design point of The Stanley Parable, its creator Davey Wreden, in an interview with Wired contributor Jason Schreier wrote, "The design document
for [The Stanley Parable] was, 'Mess with the player’s head in every way possible....throwing them off-guard, or pretending there’s an answer and then kinda whisking it away from in front of them.' (Schreier). The game has a narrator that explains what the player character is doing, almost in real time. In doing so, the game breaks the fourth wall, but does it intentionally to highlight the limits of gameplay and the "perception and limitations of freedom in games" (Mattas). This concept really shines when the player intentionally acts in opposition to what the narrator is telling the player to do. When this happens the narrator starts to berate the player for disobeying him and tries to get the player to return to the proper path. If the player character refuses to go back to the narrator's path, the game always ends with the player dying and the narrator telling you "I told you so." This highlights the issues of player choice in games, which Schreier writes, "presents hypothetical questions about the nature of choice, posits a debate about reality and contradicts its own rules constantly."

The Stanley Parable is different than Portal 2 in how it uses narratives, Portal 2 uses dialogue to enhance the immersion and plot, while The Stanley Parable uses it to completely break the immersion in the game, but by doing so addresses the the question of player choice in games, creating a meta-narrative about games. Both are effective uses of narration in their separate ways.

Environmental Storytelling

The environment in which we inhabit, whether it is a real space or a virtual one, contains an astounding amount of information about the world. One thing games do particularly well is require a player to take a direct role in the interpretation of his surroundings. In a talk at the 2010 Game Developers Conference (GDC for short), Matthias Worch and Harvey Smith outlined four basic principles of a 'game environment.' An environment, they say: 1. Constrains and guides the player movement through physical properties and environments. 2. Uses player reference to communicate simulation boundaries and affordance. 3. Reinforces and shapes player identity. 4. Provides narrative context. (Worch & Smith). For the purposes of the section of the paper, I will be focusing mostly on the
last two parts of their definition (luckily, so did they). Reinforcing player identity and providing narrative context enrich both the story and the immersion of a player in the first person genre. A banal, arbitrary puzzle makes the player feel like a test subject, whereas a deep, rich landscape places the player in a much different context. Discarded bullet cartridges on the ground, blood splattered across the wall, and a body slumped in the corner of a room paint a very distinct picture that resonates with the question "What happened here?" (incidentally, the name Worch and Smith applied to their talk) - the basic principle of environmental storytelling.

Worch and Smith offer their working definition of environmental storytelling: "Staging player-space with environmental properties that can be interpreted as a meaningful whole, furthering the narrative of the game." They add, "Environmental storytelling relies on the player to associate disparate elements, interpreting them as a meaningful whole." A similar technique is used in film to embed narrative into the background of scenes, however, in games, these elements become enhanced due to a lack of directed gaze. In the FPS genre, anything can become the focus of the player, potentially making environments extremely rich. A couple properties in a scene can provide a narrative event that happened long before the player experiences the scene.

Why is this so important to games? Chiefly, it implies that there is time. It gives the illusion that an environment was not built simply for the player outside of time, for the environment existed in the
'past,' what used by past people, and likely will be experienced after the player has left. The environment can also provide various layers of practical information about a place, for example take the image above. On screen, the player can see a contraption made out of cans, and it looks pretty similar to a set of wind chimes. From this the player can, and should interpret a few things. One, someone was crafty enough to place this object here. Two, cans make a distinct metallic sound which leads to three. Three, this contraption is probably an alarm system, and it is probable that anyone is around to hear it go off. So as a player, you probably should avoid it. This is an example of what Worch and Smith call 'telegraphing.'

Environmental storytelling creates a deep sense of immersion, as illustrated in the example above. It can provide narrative clues, enrich the lore of a game (implying a larger world), and hint at the actions a player should take, such as navigating a space. For the rest of this section of the paper, I will be exploring a few specific examples of environmental storytelling, and its greater effect on the narrative of those games.

**Stalker: Shadow of Chernobyl.**

A video game has the power to take a player to different worlds across time and space, explore alien civilizations and otherworldly habitats. Yet, in terms of level design, these spaces are so familiar, so recognizably designed for human navigation. This is often the result of the gameplay mechanics of the FPS being unable to negotiate alien spaces. Its a shame, really, and perhaps someday this will be tackled by more than a few fringe developers. In 2007, a small Ukrainian company twisted that idea, and created an obviously human constructed world, that felt alien and unnerving in S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Shadow of Chernobyl (henceforth referred to as STALKER) (GSC Game World). GSC Game World, taking inspiration from Andrei Tarkovsky's Stalker and its inspiration, the novel Roadside Picnic by Boris Strugatsky. In the novel, there exists an area referred to as "The Zone," a place in which an alien race came overnight and left behind artifacts. These alien artifacts drastically affected the environment,
altering materials and defying what humans know as the laws of physics. People that explore into to this space in search of treasure or adventure are called Stalkers. As can be expected, the Zone is a dangerous, unforgiving place. STALKER utilizes a similar Zone, but instead relates the change to the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster, creating one of many real-life connections to add a potent narrative.

STALKER’s use of environmental storytelling is masterful, from arrangement of shelters to realistic military and political issues. First, I will be discussing the Zone simply from a geological standpoint involving its navigation, then moving on to how the Zone is structured within the game that adds narrative paths.

First impressions of the Zone might be reminiscent of many other FPS games. The colors and tonality of the landscape, the makeshift military camps and greater enclaves, the abandoned and broken architecture of towns and homes usually as the result of war. This first impression the player experiences only adds to the danger of the Zone. There are many hidden dangers, invisible physics anomalies that could either electrocute the player or crush him under supernatural weight. If a player tries to traverse the terrain in STALKER like a generic FPS, the terrain will destroy you. To manage this hostile terrain, the game brings in a concept from Tarkovsky’s film, in which one of the main characters uses nuts and screws to test the environment, tossing from point to point to make sure the path is safe. STALKER uses the same system, and while further into the game the player learns faster navigations, it plays a pivotal role in the navigation of dangerous spaces.

Very quickly into the game, the player realizes that he inhabits a dangerous landscape. And to top things off, the landscapes changes. Where one danger lay on a traverse of the Zone may not be where it is on the return trip. After setting up this environment, the game begins to show you how mankind has adapted to this space. Surrounding the Zone is a military cordon preventing the player from leaving the area, and thusly, anyone from entering it. This sets up the narrative that anyone operating inside of the zone is separate from the rest of the world - outliers, criminals, adventurists - and separate from any governing body. The way people organize and fight for power is portrayed
realistically. "Enhancing the realism factor of the game narrative by incorporating plausible real-world potential future events, in the manner of a novelist, Tom Clancy’s Rainbow Six (itself a Clancy novel) demonstrate how this narratological crossover operates. In SSoC this works by reinforcing realistic notions of military operations, lethality of combat, the real world Exclusion Zone, with purely fictional elements of science fiction such as anomalies and artifacts, which are central to the game’s premise" (Harrison). The developers of STALKER decided that they would answer as many of the 'what happened here?' as possible, in order to create a rich and diverse world.

Aside from the larger military movements, STALKER gives a glimpse of how the individual adapts to the hostile environment presented. Most often, due to the low population of the game, this is revealed indirectly. Through found notes and exploration the player may find hidden stashes of treasure and weapons, most commonly located in dangerous or hard to reach areas, demonstrating that these are valuable caches of items and important to those who left them there - notes never mention specific places, usually these places are referred to in phrases like "the usual stash."

To conclude, STALKER's alien, hostile environment adds to the narrative in the game through shaping player interaction, sociopolitical groups, and allows for many small pieces of information and indirect narrative to imply that there is a larger world than what the player inhabits, and that time flows while the player is not present. 'What happened here?' can be constantly evaluated within the space - who hid this backpack here? Why didn't they retrieve it? Maybe they are on their way and what will happen when they find out you stole their stuff?

**Half Life 2's Citadel**

The second example of Environmental Story telling I will be looking at in this paper is taken from Valve's Half Life 2, released in 2004 (Valve, Half Life 2). The sequel to the much heralded Half Life, the game places the player character (the same man from the first game) into a different location some years after the events of the original game. The game opens (utilizing the same persistent
perspective as the original) with the player character on a monorail gliding into station. After a series of checkpoints in what is obviously a place under military control, the player emerges into City 17, the epicenter of the game. The city has architecture reminiscent of a an eastern European city except for an unavoidable feature: a large, alien-like tower located centrally. The tower, called The Citadel, literally towers over the landscape - in fact some investigative redditor (members of the news aggregate website reddit.com) figured out, by looking at the games programming, that the Citadel measures 8430.9 feet tall, around three times taller than the larger structure on Earth (Limer). In addition to its height, the Citadel seems to appear out of nowhere, as if it magically placed itself there, displacing anything that may have resided there previously. Jorge Albor, contributor to PopMatters, wrote:

The Citadel at the city’s center stands tall and menacing, towering over the neighboring buildings. Its smooth and clean facade is a counterpoint to the city’s rundown Eastern European architecture. Although the tower seems cut from a single piece of glass, a portion seems opened, revealing what looks like the artificial ribs of an alien construct. Wires reach from the building into the city, as if intravenously drawing life from its surroundings. The Citadel’s purpose eludes easy recognition, but two things are clear: this is foreign and this is dangerous.” (Albor).

And dangerous it is. Imagine an 8000ft tall, alien building hovering menacingly over a cityscape. Whatever its function is to the alien race that put it there (transport, base ship, interdimensional travel center, not that the citizens of City 17 know that), to the inhabitants of City 17 it is an immense symbol of oppression - an omnipresent architecture that represents an overbearing, technologically superior subjugator. In the beginning of the game, before events turn it into a war zone, citizens of City 17 try their best to avoid looking at it, or if they do, sadly speak of its presence. The Citadel, as environmental storytelling, creates a tense and aversive atmosphere which adds important the objectives the player character faces throughout the game. As a man fighting against an oppressive overlord, he inherits the conflict between City 17 and the Citadel, and thus becomes a heroic
figure, as important to the citizens of City 17 as the Citadel itself.

**Gameplay. On Puzzles**

Originally while writing this paper, I had trouble coming up with a good example of how gameplay can enhance or portray the narratives within a game. Dan Pinchbeck's theory of ludodiegesis covers most of this - things that exist in the game world reinforce the game world; things you can do in the game world reinforce the game world. This covers little things, but I found one example of a grander part of gameplay that increases player immersion - puzzles, and in particular, puzzles that remain ludodiegetic. Puzzles in games can be effective or detract from the experience of a game. Jack Allin, contributor to Adventuregamers.com, sums this up better than I can,

"The reason so many adventures get it so wrong so often is that puzzles are so contrived. Life just isn't about jumping through as many hoops as possible to accomplish even the most mundane of tasks. Obviously games are escapism, not real life, but that's a cop-out. The goal of any designer is to make people forget they're playing a game and sweep players completely up in a virtual world with its own set of rules. Breaking those rules just to shoehorn in yet another confounding obstacle is an immersion-killer that can't be redeemed by conveniently falling back on the "just a game" excuse. If it's a world where sharp things cut soft things, then ALL sharp things must cut ALL soft things. If it's a world where normal, everyday people operate shops, then having a door lock made of complex brainteasers is ridiculous. THAT is what turns non-adventure gamers off. Heck, it's what turns me off." (Allin).

For puzzles to be effective, and thus enhance narrative gameplay, they must be a number of things: something that a reasonable person might come up with, make ludodiegetic sense, and provide the player a reason for doing so beyond them barring progress. Thomas Grip, designer at Frictional Games, Inc has a distinct set of criteria for good puzzle design: locality, multiple solutions, low item density, coherent simulation, see it as an activity, part of the world, and story coherent hints (Grip). I'll
his points down.

Locality. Locality implies that the solution for the puzzle and all things necessary to complete the puzzle are found in close proximity.

Multiple solutions. There should be more than one way to solve a puzzle.

Low item density. Too many objects in an area can confuse the player as to what is important to solving a puzzle and what is just there environmentally.

Coherent simulation. "This means that mechanics work globally and are consistent throughout the game" (Grip). In other words, puzzles should be completed through actions that the player can perform during the entire game, whether it be picking up objects, moving heavy things, and jumping from point to point.

See it as an activity. Rather than being seen as challenges, puzzles should involve the player doing it because it simply makes sense to do so.

Part of the world. Puzzles should make ludodiegetic sense within the game world.

Story coherent hints. The narrative and structure of the game should imply the ways a puzzle could be solved. This ensures that players do not get stuck because they missed part of a solution.

The important takeaway here is that, when designed well, puzzles can be an intuitive part of gameplay, which in turn increases the immersion in the game enhancing the narrative aspect of it. A badly designed puzzle detracts from it, and thus many games do not include puzzles because of the possibility of immersion loss. But when done well, it helps cement the world the player is interacting with and gives further reason for a player to do what he is, mechanically speaking, supposed to do.
Part Three: Breaking The Rules

This section of the paper takes a look at how some games broke the rules of traditional gameplay and narrative design games such as those featured in Part 2 use. I'll be going into how they abandon traditional gameplay and how it worked out for them as games and ideas.

Thechineseroom and Dear Esther.

In 2007 Dan Pinchbeck, backed by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, founded his own development company based out of the University of Portsmouth, UK, to expand upon ideas connected to his doctoral work. In particular, to explore storytelling and gameplay in first person perspective. In thechineseroom's philosophy statement, it reads, "We also work closely with the University of Portsmouth, and are committed to the idea of development-led research. This means that we believe that one of the best ways you can learn about games is by making them, and feeding that knowledge back into academia" (Thechineseroom) Instead of simply writing about their theories, they build games that reflect that theory, then release it upon gamers to test it. Thechineseroom started off conservatively, making mods using Valve's Source Engine as well as the engine for DOOM 3. The first mod was a multiplayer death-match map which, at their own admission, never really worked (Thechineseroom).

The second mod took the first three levels of DOOM 3 and replaced all the bullets with rubber pellets. You were still able to shoot and effect Doom 3's creatures from hell, but they simply fell over and got back up. In addition, they added an abusive narrator who would "like nothing better than to see you end up as a zombie's breakfast, and is going to let you know any chance he gets" (ModDB Conscientious Objector).

The central idea of the game was to uproot the base mechanic of a first person shooter - you remove antagonistic agents from the environment by shooting them. Pinchbeck said about the mod "what happens when you can't get rid of stuff, and it actually gets more complicated when you go, not
less?" (Kane). While an interesting case, it wasn't widely received - at the time of this writing it had just under 26,000 views on ModDB.

Thechineseroom's third mod was an entirely different experience. Rather than manipulating a few gameplay mechanics and adding a narrative, Pinchbeck wondered "if you rip the gameplay and just leave the story, is it going to work? Are people going to respond to that? (Kane). This thesis lead to "Dear Esther, released as a Source mod in 2008. "Dear Esther" places you (as the player) on an island devoid of enemies, NPC's, or any recognizable goal or objective. As a player, you explore the island, triggering semi-randomized audio cues as you traverse the environment. According to Pinchbeck, the 'gameplay' of "Dear Esther" occurs outside the space of the game, where the player is piecing together bits of information to make sense of the game's storyline, which requires more than one play-through to gather most of the information due to the randomization of certain audio cues. (Pinchbeck, Dear Esther).

Dear Esther still retains a few aspects of interaction, such as a conventional FPS movement system - the standard WASD and mouse-look apply here. The walking speed is extremely slow compared to modern shooters however, and there is no way to run (players may abuse the jumping system to leap frog their way from point to point faster though). In other games, walking this slow is a deliberate player choice, most often used when wary of enemy presence or trying to move silently. In "Dear Esther" its a constant restriction, and the net result is that players end up concentrating more on the world around them since they cannot fly by terrain getting from objective A to objective B. Looking becomes a central part of the "Dear Esther" experience, and with looking in mind, players begin to take notice of details. Suddenly, every object becomes meaningful to the player. Why is this here, what does it mean? Paper boats become lost relics, books on a desk become sad reminders of life. The players begins to attach the narrator's content to objects scattered around the object. At a certain point about two-thirds into the game, the player, if observant, encounters a phrase scratched into a cave wall, "Behold, Damascus is taken away from being a city and it shall become a ruinous heap"
(Thechineseroom, Dear Esther). The narrator reveals that one character in the story may have entered the caves at some point, so a connection is made implying that that character scratched these words into the wall, but as a player, you are left wondering why. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, this external puzzle represents a lot of "Dear Esther"'s gameplay.

The mod was a huge success, much to the surprise of the development team. In fact, it was so successful that it prompted a remake, receiving a full overhaul including new music, more lines, and improved graphics that was released commercially in February 2012. The original mod was downloaded over 20,000 times, and the commercial release became profitable in six hours. By July of 2012, Dear Esther had sold over 250,000 copies (Reilly). It proved that this style of game both intrigued players and was commercially viable. However, despite its sales, it seemed to polarize the community between those that loved it, and those that questioned its validity as a game. Many players found the lack of conventional FPS gameplay boring and claimed a lack of content. Many claimed it was like watching a movie. On Valve's Steam subforum for "Dear Esther," one particularly perturbed poster was concerned that it was ruining the reputation of indie games.

Thechineseroom, obviously, was incredibly pleased with the reception of the 2008 mod, and even more so concerning the rerelease. In 2008, they released a postmortem essay reviewing the design goals and reception of the game. Of particular interest to them was positive response to the game, which they state drew comparisons to S.T.A.L.K.E.R. (a behemoth when talking about atmosphere and immersion in first person shooters) in terms of its ambiguity, audio and visual scope, and the emotions reported (Pinchbeck, Dear Esther). Many users reported feeling scared as well as sad, the latter emotion "normally fall[ing] beyond the affective range of games" (Pinchbeck, Dear Esther). In the closing statement, thechineseroom wrote, "Dear Esther has proved that FPS players want more than just guns and gore: work that is driven purely by story, with no action or goals, no closure and that denies the player any final understanding of what they have experienced. The value of this kind of storytelling experiment being released to the public domain is clear" (Pinchbeck, Dear Esther).
Amnesia: The Dark Descent

Frictional Games survival horror game Amnesia: The Dark Descent abandoned the traditional gameplay mechanics of survival horror games as an experiment in creating atmosphere and tension. Their premise was to strip down all the mechanics they thought took away from how scary a game could be (Grip, IGS). According to lead designer Thomas Grip, the main mechanics that needed to be removed were offensive gameplay (shooting enemies, killing monsters) and death. Grip, in a talk at the Independent Games Summit, described how being able to shoot a monster took away from how scary the monster could be. When an enemy becomes something to eliminate, it simply becomes a target - an agent onscreen that needs to be shot at. Grip essentially means that as soon as an enemy manifests itself, a player's only response is to shoot it, and thus what the enemy actually is does not matter.

Frictional Games solution to this was to take away the player's ability to kill enemies. Gameplay wise, this only left two alternatives to dealing with enemies: hide or run. By doing this, Frictional Games took away a large part of the player's control and created an atmosphere where the player is always on edge, looking for things that may or may not be there. Amnesia adds to this through its use of environmental storytelling. The game takes place in a dark castle with horrific events being implied through the level design. By removing interaction with other entities and creating a spooky environment, the player assumes that any room and any nook or cranny could be dangerous. The player begins to examine things have no real purpose, applying their own narrative to spaces which may or may not have one (Grip, IGS).

The second design choice Frictional Games choose to take away was the mechanic of death. Traditionally, death in video games represents failure of a level or an objective. When a player dies in most video games, they are given the chance to play through a level or attempt an objective once again. Death potentially makes games repetitive. In the horror genre, repetition lessens the experience of fear,
since a player will have already experienced it. Frictional Games, wanting to create a true scary game, abandoned this aspect of gameplay. In a situation that would normally cause death, Amnesia would have the player black out and wake up in a different part of the game, with no rhyme or reason to how the player got there. The game gives the impression that the horrors in the castle are not out to kill the player, but rather endlessly torment the player.

So, did these design choices work? Did Frictional Games create a masterpiece of horror by abandoning the traditional gameplay of survival horror games? Take the image below, this is a screenshot from a Youtube search of "Amnesia: The Dark Descent reactions."

There are over 250,000 hits from this search. The game became a sort of cult classic, prompting internet users to record their reactions to playing this game and post them online. The videos generally contain the same elements: screams, heavy breathing, hushed prayers of "please don't find me," even sobbing. The game has also been the subject of a few memes, shown below:
All in all, I'd say it worked.
Part Four: The Greater Game Industry and Conclusion

The last question I'd like to address in this paper follows: Do they concepts presented in the last section (abandoning traditional gameplay) hold any interest to mainstream game industry? The super developers and companies hauling in multi-millions of dollars a year? From my research, it seems the answer is 'not really, but.' The greater game industry is a machine that churns out all sorts of games at incredible rates with one main goal: profit. That being said, there are some titles being released by companies that have been back by major players, such as Sony, which is an encouraging sign of maturity in game development. While the FPS genre has not seen many of these games, due to the high potential profit of shoot em up games such as the Call of Duty series, other genres have enjoyed fresh ideas.

Sony patroned a small company called Thatgamecompany to make three games for the Playstation system (Thatgamecompany). Their first two games were very artistic games that focused on mainly on the concept of flow. The third, released in 2012, was named Journey, and it was a refined vision of their first two games. There was a sparse narrative, and the game revealed it smoothly through simple gameplay: exploration and extremely limited communication. Journey took a common concept of many games (traversing an area = progression) and made the central concept. Journey, in its basic gameplay, is getting from A to B, but as you might infer, the colloquialism "it is about the journey, not the destination" applies. The game was extremely well received too, and was given many awards, most notably the 2012 Indie Game of the Year.

Another game in this category is Heavy Rain, published by Quantic Dream for the Playstation 3 in 2010 (Quantic Dream). The game is an exploration in storytelling and player choice. The game is broken up into different scenes (levels) that circulate around a crime story. Each scene includes a number of choices and challenges that affect the story in some way. There is no 'wrong' way to progress through the narrative, as the game builds the narrative based upon the choices the player has made. In
addition, there is no way to backtrack to previous scenes, so choices the player made are permanent for each play through. This enables several different outcomes of the story. This style of branching narrative was seldom seen on a big game console release, and shows that there is a greater market for such a system beyond the independent developers and their fan base.

The Walking Dead, released in 2012, is similar in player choice to Heavy Rain (Telltale Games). Based upon the popular TV series, the game is played from a third person perspective with characters in the same situation as the TV show, a zombie apocalypse. This situation is extremely common in video games, but The Walking Dead manages to retain the serious, dramatic tone of the television series instead of becoming a generic zombie shooter. The game forces you to make decisions that affect your group of survivors, which sometimes may have the player character choosing to sacrifice a member to save another, that resonate with the dark and serious atmosphere of the game (Woods). This concept is antithetical to many games in which players often are able, through skill or luck, save everyone or complete the game 'perfectly.' The Walking Dead's challenge to traditional zombie game mechanics allowed to keep the dark suspense of the television series while standing on its own merit as a game. Through breaking the traditional rules of gameplay it transcended the tropes and stereotypes of the genre.

In conclusion, this paper took a look at the various ways narratives are presented in video games, then examined how breaking these traditional mechanics could enhance the narrative. Stripping the gameplay of games was found not to ruin the genre they resided in, but rather took the FPS to a new level, perhaps not better than where it came from but different and perhaps more mature as a form of art.
References


