RESEARCH ARTICLE

EVOLUTION OF 'FICTION' IN GAMING STORYLINES WITH RESPECT TO THE CONTEMPORARY CLIMATE

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ABSTRACT

This paper will be exploring the definition of the term 'fiction', and how the genre has evolved over the years, with the change in the socioeconomic atmosphere in gaming. Also, would be diving in examining the modern-day trends of storytelling. Will be discussing different cultural, psychological and societal nuances, concerning writing a storyline for an immersive and inclusive gameplay and ultimately for a game to be successful with a large audience; specially focusing on the local players' preferences.
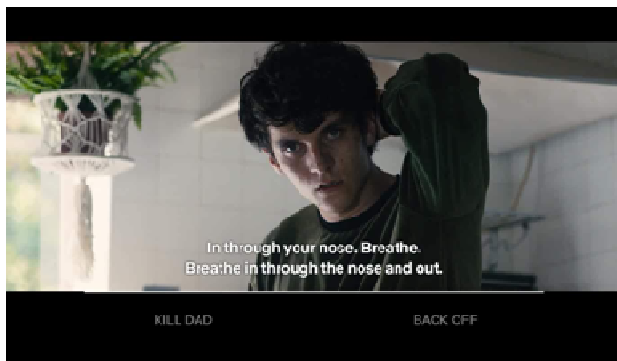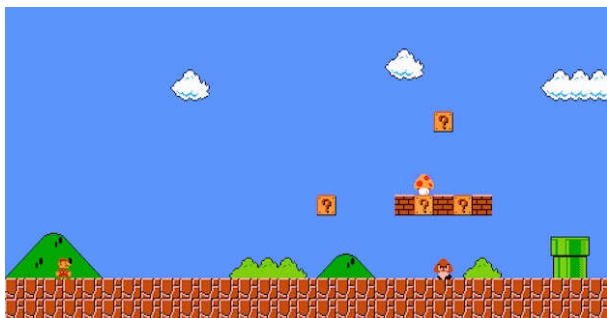
INTRODUCTION

Fiction, is – "The story that is written about imaginary events and isn't based on real people and facts" (1). Over the course of time the idea of fiction and overall storytelling has been so heavily manipulated with, that the above statement barely manages to contain even the basic premise of the narrative we get to experience today. This is especially noted when we look at the way the modern game narratives have evolved. To keep the players of the new generation engaged, the contemporary game creators are always on their tip toes, when coming to making an immersive, unique and memorable gameplay for the players. The new age games are the digital generation, which no more gets surprised by the basic three point story narrative structure. They need something which they do not expect, something which they would never even think of. Further more, at this point in time when VR, AR and ARG are spreading like wildfire, gamers seek maximum realism and plausibility in their game play, so that they feel immersed in the world they are playing in as much as possible. Looking back at about ten years ago, we can notice that it was not always like that.

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The games preferred in the onset of the 21st century, differ starkly from the games the youth desires now. This happened gradually, with the transformation of our society and the evolution of the different norms we hold culturally. Every little societal change affects how the young generations perceive the world around them, and the gaming industry isn't an exception. Super Mario Bros, was an extremely popular game when the gaming industry started first being introduced into the entertainment world, however newer titles, and even newer versions of this game have now surpassed the OG tremendously. Some major ways in which the contemporary story telling has advanced is in the way the story is delivered to the viewer/player. Nowadays, the thrill lays in making the player as immersed in the game as humanly possible, almost reaching undefined states of altered realities. The objective of the new age games, is to make the player question, whether his game could be his actual, physical reality. Virtual Reality games, Augmented Reality Games and Alternate Reality games, all a part of a huge modern day phenomenon known as Transmedia (3), are thus skyrocketing in popularity, with even movie narratives having caught onto the trend as well, producing shows like *'Black Mirror Bundersnatch'* a Netflix, which allows the viewer to interact with what he is watching. "Bandersnatch" comes with five possible endings. Viewers who choose the quickest path, and decide against any do-overs, can make it through the film in around 40 minutes. The average viewing time is around 90 minutes.

Altogether, there are over a trillion unique permutations of the story. However, this also includes relatively simple iterations that don't necessarily alter the story itself. For instance, one of the first decisions is helping Stefan (one of the protagonists) to choose which cereal to eat in the morning (2) Thus, the ever-evolving technological globalisation, may in the very near future, incorporate interactive game elements, in our otherwise generic viewing experience.

The Alternate Reality Games: Before diving deep into the world of ARGs aka Alternate Reality Games, lets establish its definition. That is, in fact, the tricky part as the ARGs encompass huge areas of media, and being an extremely new way of gaming, have a vague definition. As of now, ARGs are explained to be, in very broad terms, a new way of storytelling and user interaction with the narrative, which involves usage of transmedia and community building for problem solving. Some more technical interpretations include: A cross-media genre of interactive fiction using multiple delivery and communications media, including television, radio, newspapers, Internet, email, SMS, telephone, voicemail, and postal service. Gaming is typically comprised of a secret group of Puppet Masters who author, manipulate, and otherwise control the storyline, related scenarios, and puzzles and a public group of players, the collective detective that attempts to solve the puzzles and thereby win the furtherance of the story (4).

https://www.slideshare.net/remotedevice/transmedia-storytelling-and-alternate-reality-games
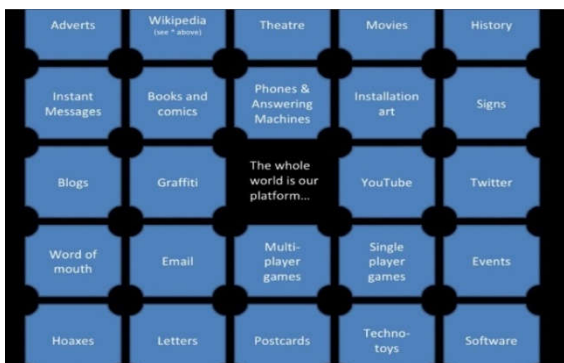
The form is defined by intense player involvement with a story that takes place in real time and evolves according to players' responses. Subsequently, it is shaped by characters that are actively controlled by the game's designers, as opposed to being controlled by an algorithm as in a computer or console video game. Players interact directly with characters in the game, solve plot-based challenges and puzzles, and collaborate as a community to analyze the story and coordinate real-life and online activities.(5) These kind of narrative has been uprising in the contemporary times, as more and more ARGs have been hosted by online platforms such as Youtube(6), to make the player's experience as believable as possible. These games, unlike the video game narratives popular in the 2000s, do not usually have a linear, limited storyline, but span over months and even years, needing the players attention in real time, as their decisions and responses shape the narrative as it progresses. This new form of narrative thus, grows and develops with its players, which hasn't been experienced ever before in any kind of narrative. According to The Guardian: "*this whole (episode) shows how powerful storytelling and internet video might be interwoven to create compelling new forms of gaming that entertain millions of people who don't normally consider themselves gamers. The interaction between whoever's producing these videos (the game master) and the millions of players is intricate, exciting, and very game-like at heart.*"(7)

As mentioned by this observation, ARGs can easily pull in much more audience (or players), as they do not need the usual consoles, PCs or high-tech gaming equipment. They allow the user to experience an alternate world, while using and interacting with the usual platforms he is used to. This breakthrough, really pushes gaming to a whole new level, as now the games aren't confined by any Currently predefined notions or boundaries. ARGs unlike games in the past are limitless. It is believed that the genre was started by 'BEAST', an ARG first among its kind launched to promote and tease Steven Speilberg's movie: "A.I.: Artificial Intelligence, ARG, one of the most immersive and intricate kinds of storytelling, and interactive gaming are being used widely for PR purposes, promotions and social experimentation. One such example, is *I Love Bees,* an ARG designed to promote the release of *HALO* According to Forbes - 'Viral marketing isn't new, but producing real-world games tied to a product was a novel idea when Microsoft launched "Halo 2." The ad teams that orchestrated the virtual game of "*Halo 2*," dubbed "*I Love Bees*," won awards for its ingenuity in 2004. Do virtual reality games drive sales? Maybe not, says Dan Hsu, editorial director of Ziff Davis' 1UP gaming network. But they sure build buzz. "'I Love Bees' really got existing gamers and other consumers talking about the universe of this game.' (8) Hence, in this world, where everyone is seeking new ways to entertain themselves, ARGs are rising faster than ever expected.

The role of the narrative in a game: Here, we will examine the storyline of *'Call of Duty : Modern Warfare'* which was the most popular game of 2019(9), was highly critically acclaimed and played world wide by millions of game enthusiasts. Call of Duty: Modern Warfare, has been achieving more success than any other Call of duty game ever before, and that's saying a lot, as the COD franchise is one of the most grossing video game franchises to ever exist. COD: Modern Warfare has earned more than $1 billion in sales, making it a megahit among the worldwide gaming community. (11) Some of its success, can be attributed to the fact that the

game can be played across all consoles, thus lifting all limitations from the players, but what needs to be understood, is how did the creators of the game managed to nail the narrative of the franchise so well, that a COD game, almost always becomes a hit.

https://wccftech.com/call-of-duty-modern-warfare-4-2019/

As stated, the major aspect which stands out for COD, is in fact the intricacy of its narrative. Speaking of *Modern Warfare* in particular, the narrative appeals to the viewer as it brings to light the notion, that in this world bad and good is subjective, from person to person, and from one situation to the other. In the game no one is particularly the good or the bad side, and the viewer is given the ability to differentiate between the two notions according to his own understanding. This freedom of choice, on moral ground is what really differentiates a good storyline from a mediocre one, as instead of being completely linear, it takes into the account different perspectives of different people, and hence appeals to a larger, if not all audiences. Taylor Kurosaki the Narrative Director at Infinity Ward, one of the greatest gaming storytellers of our time, previously having worked with Naughty Dog and with works like *Uncharted, Crash Bandicoot, The last of Us* and of course *Call of Duty Modern Warfare*(for which he was responsible for the story-telling of the campaigns) says:

"What's great about games is, rather than just seeing a protagonist on screen and empathizing with someone else that's external to us, we get to be that person. We get to walk a mile in their shoes and grow and evolve and actually inhabit them as they-as they figure out how they're going to overcome these obstacles." Whether it was editing for TV or writing the narrative for blockbuster video games, he emphasized how storytellers want their audience to feel empathy for the characters in their story. "It might not be a tough reach for our players to have empathy for a character like Kyle Garrick, who maybe looks like them, sounds like them, comes from a background like them or more similar to theirs," Kurosaki explained. "But the goal for us in this game was to present a character," such as Farah Karim, "that maybe doesn't look like you, doesn't sound like you, doesn't talk like you, doesn't come from a place that is similar to your own, and yet have just as much empathy for that character."

Not only has Infinity Ward evolved in how they told stories, but the medium itself also grew with them. Kurosaki mentioned how games in the 2000s didn't have the fidelity to show subtle facial expressions, such as when someone's eyes dart to show they might not be truthful, which give an additional layer of storytelling on top of dialogue. "We have full performance capture where you're not only capturing the actor's movements," Kurosaki explained, "you're capturing

their facial expressions and their voices all simultaneously. We can have a level of fidelity and realism that we couldn't have achieved before. And that allows us, if we're willing to, to tell these deeper, richer, more immersive stories." (12). Seeing this example of Modern Warfare, we can clearly see the amount of precision the creators put in to the narrative, to make the viewer totally forget his own reality and connect with the game the most. More over the evolution of technology and the way we present the narrative has also significantly improved, as every little detail is taken into the account by the game creators, making sure that their games come out no less than a contemporary masterpiece.

The common man of India and the world of gaming: Here, I will be presenting some quick statistics I obtained, after conducting an online survey among people of India, coming from different cultural backgrounds, being of different age groups, and of different genders. They were presented with a series of questions about games, gameplay and the importance of the narrative for video games in general:

Playability of local players with respect to their games

Do you play Video/Computer games regularly?
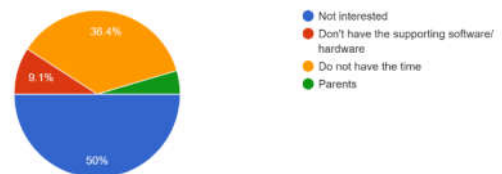30 responses
- Yes
- No

60% / 40%
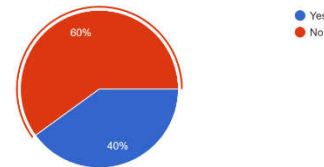
What's the minimum number of hours you dedicate to gaming in a week?
30 responses
- less than 1
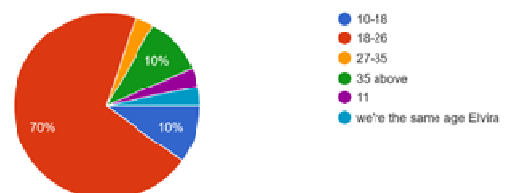- 1-3
- 4-8
- more than 8 hours

33.3% / 10% / 50%
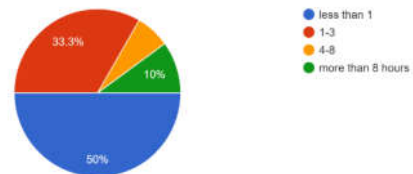
As displayed above the majority actually stated that they do not consider themselves to be regular video game players. This tells, about the fact that even now, the common man (at least of our country), perceived recreational activities specifically video games, unimportant, and to put it bluntly as a waste of time.

If no, what prevents you?
22 responses
- Not interested
- Don't have the supporting software/hardware
- Do not have the time
- Parents

36.4% / 9.1% / 50%

Age
30 responses
- 10-18
- 18-26
- 27-35
- 35 above
- 11
- we're the same age Elvira

70% / 10% / 10%

They do not consume the gaming Industry as much they do the movie Industry, which is a parallel to what is happening in a lot of other countries specifically in the West, where gaming is actively dominating the entertainment industry.

The demographic of local players

Another interesting aspect which came up in this study was the fact that despite 70% of the people being surveyed, were the main demographic/target audience for the gaming industry, about 60% of them stated they aren't regular players and that they are simply uninterested or do not have the time. So maybe this is the call to the game developers to rethink their narratives and mould them accordingly so that they in fact appeal to all different ages, for them to be able to grasp that 40% of active players, from any age group that they can.

Awareness about the Global gaming trends of the local players

Furthermore, although in the above discussion we spoke about the rising popularity of ARGs, majority of people surveyed, were not aware about them, yet again despite being the primary target audience for such gaming narratives:

Are you aware about the New Age Transmedia Gameplays, like Aleternate Reality Games (ex : 'I love Bees')
30 responses
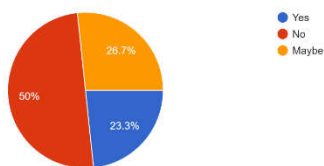
Again, this shows the Indian youth hasn't yet caught up to the global gaming sphere. Is this going to change with more prevalent promotions and releases of such immersive games? Or will they be drawn to games which incorporate more of their culture and traditions, some narratives which will feel and involve more familiarity to people for countries such as ours, well - we do not know that. What we do know so far, is that the gaming industry right now, is strongly built upon the western culture, and mostly involves west cantered storylines, western issues etc, which make the ethnic groups out here feel alienated from the gameplay, and diminish the immersion. This issue needs to be addressed if gaming would ever want to blow up in Central Asian countries, and be widespread among common people to much larger extent.

Significance of narratives/storylines for local gamers

Now lets come to storylines and narratives. As it has been asserted several time, by numerous sources, people do prefer stronger more coherent stories, in their games.

How much do you think the evolution of narrative (storyline) structure and story telling in games, helps in the development of video/computer games and gaming industry as a whole?
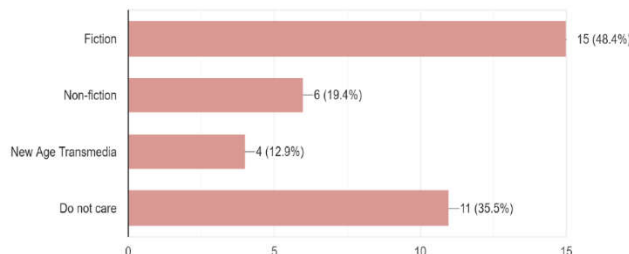31 responses
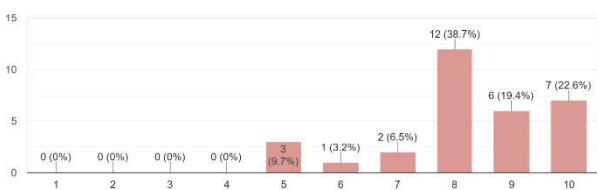
It makes them feel more involved with what's happening in the game's world, and makes them think about the game and the story even when they aren't playing it (fandom culture). The statistics gathered show that more than 60% of people do believe that the narrative plays a huge role in thesuccess of a video game and rightly so.   Almost half of the people surveyed believe that each and every single aspect of a video game is equally important for it to be a goof game (that is according to their own opinions of course). What is really peculiar to note is that none of the people surveyed picked immersion as a essential element of the games, although gaming creators now a days put immersion on top of everything else while brainstorming for a new prospective game. But it definitely will be fair to note that a chunk of people did think that Graphics are really important, which in itself is just a way to create immersion for the player. Now the last piece of information recorded, was also discussed throughout the entire paper, and that's the fact, that fictious narratives, is what propels a game to higher level of success:
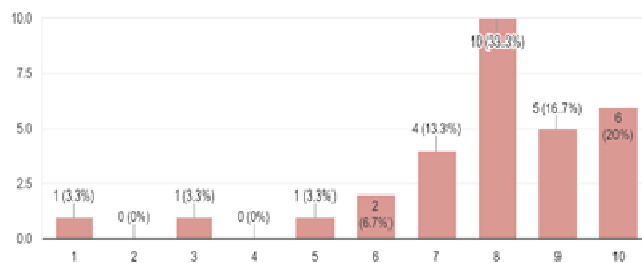

According to you what is the most important part of a video/computer game?
30 responses
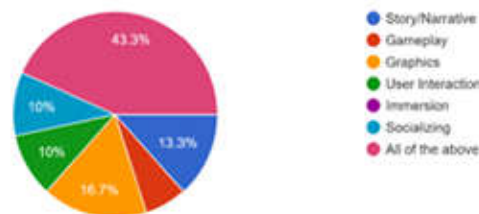
What types of narratives(storylines) would you prefer in your games
31 responses

According to you how important is the narrative (storyline) of the game for it's success?
30 responses

As you can see about 70% of people surveyed, do believe that the evolvement of how the storylines are narrated during the game is a way for the gaming industry to achieve success. About half of the people prefer fictitious storylines, because any outwardly experience is always welcomed by the public.

Conclusion

We have established that fiction and its meaning has been moulded and changed significantly throughout the evolution of gaming industry and storytelling in gaming.

Immersion and interaction now play a huge role while creating fiction for your gameplay, and new and innovative forms of storytelling are taking over the old ones. Moreover, inclusion of different ideas, perspectives, cultures and representation of different societal groups plays an imperative role in success of a game on a global level, in the modern day and age. This is thus now the responsibility and duty of narrative writers, to make sure that people all over the world would be able to relate to the stories they write, and feel like they belong in the world, where the game is taking place. Lastly, the numbers showed that common people do gravitate towards elaborate well written storylines over almost anything else that constitutes the game, and prefer to be engrossed by the story, and feel like they are living and breathing in the world of the game.

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