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“The Logic of Narrative”

Firewatch is a narrative driven mystery game that puts you in the shoes of a middle-aged man trying to escape his life by becoming fire lookout in Shoshone National Forest. The game received praise for its beautiful visuals, incredible voice acting, and unique story. Many people disagreed with these sentiments and in one Steam review a user stated, “Kept thinking that something would happen as I SLOWLY wandered through the forest. Kept thinking my actions or dialogue choices would have some sort of effect. Kept thinking that the story would have some sort of cool twist at the end that left me shocked. Kept thinking that in all of the little odds and ends, books, notes, etc. there would be some sort of hidden secret or Easter egg. Kept thinking that I would stumble upon something interesting as I wandered around. Nope, nope, nope, nope, and nope. Oh, and once you learn what's going on, the story really doesn't make sense if you just stop and think about it. I will have completely forgotten this "game" in a couple of days.” When a game like *Firewatch* is released, these types of reactions are common and stoke the flames of a well-known debate about narrative and its role in video games. This debate known as the narratology vs ludology debate and it has existed since the creation of video games. People who take the side of ludology (A.K.A ludologists) would agree with the Steam review of *Firewatch*, labeling it as a game with low player agency and low process intensity but still a game nonetheless. People who take the side of narratology (A.K.A narratologists) would argue

against the Steam review saying that the choices you make matter to the player and help the player form a better connection to the characters, giving the ending more of an impact. While these two ideologies seem like opposites they both understand that player choices drive games. *Dishonored 2* is a game that homes in on that shared mentality and tries to satisfy both narratologists and ludologists (Figure 1).



Figure 1: *Dishonored 2*

Dishonored 2 is a first-person action-adventure stealth game developed by Arkane Studios that falls under the subgenre of immersive simulators. This game uses Janet Murray's ideas detailed in *Worlds Apart* about narrative and its role in player made choices. The game also explores many of the ideas of alternative narrative in games explained by Henry Jenkins in his essay, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture". But, to truly understand how *Dishonored 2* walks the line of narratology and ludology we must understand the new research on game theory and its relationship with game studies.

Put simply, game theory is the study of logical decision making, something that video games are by defined by. In Jan Simons' paper titled "Narrative, Games, and Theory" he explores the idea that game theory can be implemented to write game narratives that strike the balance between ludology and narratology seen in *Dishonored 2*. But this concept isn't new to

games in fact, the developers behind *Dishonored 2* have a history of crafting games that are built off player choice driven narratives.

Dishonored 2's creative director was Harvey Smith a man who helped design *Deus Ex*, the game that defined the immersive simulator genre. The game established the fundamentals of the genre, putting an emphasis on echoing the effects of player made decisions and creating believable systems that can offer a wide variety of solutions to a single problem. Other developers who worked on *Deus Ex* went onto create games that carry the torch of this design philosophy. These games often have multiple story ending based on player's in game actions, and in the most extreme examples, like in *Dishonored 2*, every action that the player commits changes the story in some way. Due to their complexity, these games are developed differently, going against the conventional development process.

In an essay titled "MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research" the authors, Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, Robert Zubek, explain that the general framework for how most games are developed and experienced can be explained using the acronym, MDA, which stands for Mechanics, Dynamics, and Aesthetics. The paper defines mechanics as the, "Rules", the dynamics as the, "System", and the aesthetics as the, "Fun"". The authors use these terms to describe the framework for development stating the mechanics are developed first, dynamics second, and aesthetics last. The authors declare that the players experience the game in the reverse order, aesthetics first, dynamics second, and mechanics (Figure 2).

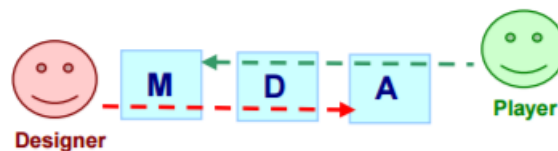


Figure 2: MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research

This development process supports the ludologists philosophy by putting the development of the mechanics before any type of story is written. For many studios, story takes a backseat to the development of mechanics, this often leads to stories feeling disjointed and separate from the player input, referred to as ludonarrative dissonance. *Tomb Raider* (2013) is famously branded with this term and because of this dissonance the game suffered. Other studios in the game industry, like Naughty Dog, go for the opposite approach, building the story first and then the mechanics and system around it. This approach also has problems as the player input can still feel separate from the story and lack luster compared to other games. While the MDA framework provides a good base for new developers to start from, to make something truly unique in terms of story and gameplay this standard framework needs to be questioned and mutated. *Dishonored 2* and the other games in the immersive sim genre do just that by not prioritizing mechanics over aesthetics or aesthetics over mechanics, instead they develop them simultaneously and link the two using player choice and game theory based logic. The root of this ideology comes from a book by Janet Murray titled, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*.

Janet Murray is a well-known narratologist and while she is labeled as a narratologist she is very different from the majority. In her book, she establishes that video games are based on choices and highlights the narrative capabilities of the burgeoning medium. In chapter two of *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Murray lays out her main thesis and ideas about the narrative possibilities that video games hold. In the beginning of the chapter she states that as a narratologist can't compare video games narratives to other types of narratives saying, "it would be a mistake to compare the first fruits of a new medium too directly with the accustomed yield of older media" (Murray 28) solidifying the idea that games require a unique way to tell a story. This first section of the chapter classifies games as new form of media that cannot be compared

to older forms of media, that have already gone through their own growing pains. She agrees with the fact that it is still too early to make judgements and that games need to go through a phase of figuring everything out. The second part of the chapter is where we see how the logic of player choice intertwines with game narrative.

In section two, Murray describes a book that plays with the idea of a narrative having multiple outcomes. She expresses that, “Time in Ts’ui Pen’s world is not “absolute and uniform” line but an infinite “web” that embraces every possibility.”” (Murray 31). These words would echo in the design philosophy of immersive sims. *Dishonored 2* and other games of the sort would fully embrace this web and embrace every possible play action. This type of multi-form narrative uses the integral idea that player agency is what makes games a unique medium and truly allows for player made decisions to have larger impacts. She solidifies this ideology in the conclusion of the chapter while describing a future VR gaming experience, “We would enter the story, and the plot would change according to our actions while sustaining its power to surprise and delight us.” (Murray 63). Warren Spector, one of the developers for the original *Deus Ex*, reflects this ideology in a quote strikingly like Murray’s, saying, “We set up a situation and let you interact with it and see the consequences of your choice. That's what gaming does.” (Warren). These quotes are perfect representations of *Dishonored 2*’s core mechanic that every guard you knock out, every character you interact with, every noble whose throat you slit has larger implications which affect the course of your own personal story in the game. This focus on player choice and its effects on the narrative and larger system of the game is called the chaos mechanic (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Results Screen

In *Dishonored 2* there are a variety of choices when it comes to approaching a combat situation, the player can either decide to be non-lethal or lethal. If the player is choosing the deadlier route their chaos starts to go up and as a result the levels become more difficult and the story changes as well. This is a perfect example of how player choice not only affects the story but the other parts of the game as well. This method isn't the 'correct' way to tell a story as there are so many other tools that game developers can use to construct an impactful narrative without the need to build complex systems.

In the long-form essay, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture", Henry Jenkins denotes that games are extremely varied in their approaches to narrative. He argues that there should be a variety of games that have varying degrees of narrative intensity and that narratives can be told in many ways. Jenkins breaks them down into five distinct categories, "Spatial Stories and Environmental Storytelling", "Evocative Spaces", "Enacting Stories", "Embedded Narratives", and "Emergent Narratives" (Jenkins).

Spatial stories and environmental storytelling is the method of telling a story using the design of digital space. This type of storytelling can be used to set up a world, give information

to the player, and as Jenkin states, “environmental storytelling creates the preconditions for an immersive narrative experience” (Jenkins). *Dishonored 2* is filled with examples of environmental storytelling; one of my personal favorites is in the level where you infiltrate a mansion filled with deadly witches. At the top of the mansion near the elevator shaft there is a small hideaway just out of sight. In the nook, there are a bunch of pillows, some bread, grapes, a book, and a candle. This tiny amount of environmental storytelling adds an incredible amount of depth to the place we are in and the digital people who are walking around. After finding that hidden cozy spot I found myself being more merciful in my takedowns of the roving witches who vowed to cut my head off if they found me. Spatial stories created using digital landscape and be very impactful to the player’s interactions with that world and system. This threads into Jenkins second narrative category, evocative spaces.

Jenkins defines evocative spaces as areas that, “give concrete shape to our memories and imaginings of the story world, creating an immersive environment we can wander through and interact with.” (Jenkins). *Dishonored 2* creates these spaces by describing the upcoming level to the player through narration. One example that stands out is before you are sent to eliminate the insane inventor Kirin Jindosh, you are informed that his mansion is actually a complex machine filled to the brim with killing machines. This information allows the player to not only plan how they will approach the mission but also imagine what mansion will be like as they traverse the city to get to it. These descriptions allow for the player immersed in the story and the system created by the developers. Between the narration before and after the levels in *Dishonored 2* the player is left to their own devices, interacting with the game’s system and having the freedom to explore the digital space. These periods of freedom where players are still adhering to the story but have the freedom to do what they like is referred to as enacting stories.

Enacting stories is one of the narrative strengths of *Dishonored 2*. Throughout the game your objective is to eliminate the nobles who overthrew you, and in each level, you are given choices on how to complete your goal. This freedom does affect the story but doesn't derail the overall narrative of the game. This not only gives the player to express themselves in their play-style it also gives them different narrative outcomes based on their unique playstyle. Enacting stories is a large part of immersive sims and another narrative tool that takes advantage of player freedom is embedded narrative.

As defined by Henry Jenkins, embedded narratives are stories told using, “textual cues and clues” throughout the game. This type of storytelling is non-obtrusive and gives the player the freedom to experience it or not. Immersive sims are famous for embedding notebooks, writings, audio-logs, and books to tell a larger story and give a greater context to the world the players are exploring. A famous example seen in *Dishonored* and *Dishonored 2* are scattered books that tell the stories of failed explorations to the far off and dangerous Pandysian Continent. By slowly uncovering the embedded narrative through clues and hidden texts the player learns that the rat plague in the first game was brought over from the continent. In the second game, we learn more about the Pandysian Continent and its possible inhabitants as well as a certain character's connection to the failed expeditions (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Map of the Dishonored world

Many other developers use embedded narratives to have a deep narrative without intruding on the player's experience with the game. While all of these examples of narrative in games are implanted by the developers behind the project, there is one type of narrative that the players create solely based off their interactions with the game's system, these stories are called, emergent narratives.

Dishonored 2 incorporates a lot of distinctive styles of narratives and it executes them very well but does emergent narratives far better than most other games on the market. *Dishonored 2* prides itself on its various systems that coordinate with one another, and being that these systems work with each other allows for thousands of ways to approach a single situation. One example given by a developer, is when he came across a firing squad about to kill a civilian, and by using a power that links the damage taken by one NPC to another, he was able kill the firing squad when they shot the civilian. It's because of this synchronization and player freedom that emergent narratives can be formed and as Jenkin states allows for a games space "to be rich with narrative potential" thus, "enabling the story-constructing activity of the players" (Jenkins).

What should be taken away from these examples is the idea that not all games have to require a multi-form story to be considered a good game narrative, in fact, games that rely heavily on embedded narratives, environmental storytelling, and enacting stories can be herald as narrative masterpieces. Games like *Bioshock*, for example, can have a deep complex narrative that is almost exclusively told by the environment, audio diaries, and character expositions can still win game of the year for its masterful storytelling. *Dishonored 2* tells its story using all the narrative tools discussed above and uses player agency on top of that, striving to for a balance between narratology and ludology. In Jan Simons long-form essay, "Narrative, Games, and Theory", he argues that this balance is accomplished using the logic found in game theory.

In his essay, Jan Simons makes the claim that the debate between narratology vs ludology is one that isn't productive to the advancement of games of a medium. He offers the idea that both sides of the debate should learn from each other and use the logic of game theory for narrative to find a middle ground for both ideologies. Simons goes on to argue that if the logic used to predict to choices seen in game theory was applied to how narratives in games were constructed it would allow for multi-form stories where the actions and choices of the player impacted the course of the story. Simons calls this concept the "logic of narrative"(Simons) and it can be implemented by game developers to plot out choices a player could make over the course of the game allowing for a player driven narrative. *Dishonored 2* implores the usage of the logic of narrative throughout the game, but the mission where this ideology is best represented is in the "Dust District" (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Dust District

The mission starts off with the player entering the middle of a territory war between the two major powers of the city, the Howler gang and the Overseers, your goal is to open gate locked by a riddle. They are given three options on how to obtain the answer to the riddle, you can either bring the dead or unconscious leader of one group to the other, or explore the city and find the clues leading to the answer. If the player chooses to give one leader to the other it will

decide who will win the territory war. While there might only be three choices displayed on the screen the player has a variety of ways they can execute this mission. Here are a couple of possible actions the player can take.

1. They could kill the leader of the Howler gang and bring his corpse to the Overseers to get the answer to the riddle.
2. They could knockout the leader of the Howler gang and bring his body to the Overseers to get the answer to the riddle.
3. They could kill the leader of the Overseers and bring his corpse to the Howler gang to get the answer to the riddle.
4. They could knockout the leader of the Overseers and bring his body to the Howler gang to get the answer to the riddle.
5. They could kill or knockout one of the leaders and betray the other after they get the answer to the riddle.
6. They could choose to stay out of the conflict and solve the riddle using the clues hidden around the level.
7. Or they can get the information from one of the leaders, load a previous save, and solve the riddle without needing to find the clues or play a role in the conflict.

These seven different options don't even factor in how the player chooses to explore the level or how they will dispatch the guards patrolling the area. This mission utilizes the logic of narrative to make each in-game action committed by the player supported not only by the feedback from the game but also from the overarching narrative of the game. This mission is a shining example of what video games are capable of when the fundamentals of the medium are applied to every part of the work.

Before creating work that is groundbreaking an artist must understand the fundamentals of their medium, this is true for filmmaking, acting, writing, painting, etc. One well known example is for the creation of *Star Wars: A New Hope* the crew filmed tiny model spaceships on a blue-screen backgrounds knowing that they could use editing, perspective tricks, and lighting effects to manipulate what the audience sees (*Star*). This technique shocked the world of cinema and paved the way for future special effects. Videogames are still going through a phase where they are trying to understand the fundamentals of its own medium. Right now, people on both sides of the narratology vs ludology debate agree that the fundamentals of video games lie in choice made by the player, but we have yet to fully understand the capabilities of player choice in games. Immersive sims with their usage of the logic of narrative is almost comparable to the perspective and editing tricks used in the creation of *Star Wars: A New Hope*. The developers of games like *Dishonored 2* found the root of what makes up a game, unearthed it, and are using it to its fullest extent. But just like any other game, immersive sims have their problems.

While immersive sims give the player a lot of freedom when it comes to how they approach a situation these choices revolve around stealth and violence. Many people have complained that games like *Dishonored 2* and *Deus Ex* are “crouching simulators” (Ferrari) rewarding players for playing in a specific way and not truly giving them the freedom to play how they choose to. This type of playstyle reinforcement goes against the logic of narrative and player agency that is so integral to the genre. While *Dishonored 2* is a fitting example of the possibilities of games and game narratives, the genre needs to break out of this stigma of being “crouching simulators” by diversifying and applying the logic of narrative to other types of games that don’t involve stealth.

Narratologists like Janet Murray might agree with my conclusion about applying the logic of narrative to games but ludologists might dismiss it as being too narrative focused. Many ludologists have argued that for games to mature as a medium they must embrace the “gameness” of the medium and focus on that rather than narrative which is considered to be the “opposite” of what a game is (Jenkins). Other ludologists might argue that using the logic of narrative might constrict the player’s possible actions they can commit to a small set, and that some player actions might not be accounted for in the system, failing to provide meaningful feedback to the player through narrative. While I do see the limitations of this idea and its usage I believe that the logical narrative can address the problems of game narratives that have plagued the medium ever since the beginning. The logic of narrative allows for the “gameness” of the game to take center focus while the narrative bends to the choices of the player effectively getting rid of the ludonarrative dissonance seen in many other games. I respect the fact that games should also advance through their game design, but I believe that using this new idea could lead to interesting new forms of game interactions supported by an ulterior motive different from what it says to do on the screen. As I stated above this genre of games has its problems and sometimes the choices of the player can feel limited due to the systems in place, but as computers become better at simulating virtual environments and games evolve and diversify this problem will start to disappear. The implementation of the logic of narrative will push the boundaries of what games can accomplish, and I am very excited to see what the future holds. I heard Prey was pretty good.

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