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Narrative Interfaces, Identity of The Game and The Integrity of The Interfaces

A Word of Introduction

The purpose of this paper is an attempt to address the issue of identity of the video game as a conscious (and mostly collective) composition from the perspective of narrative interfaces, or in other words: specific means of narration particular for the video game as a type of artefact. Such a description places this paper on the narrative side of the ludo-narrative controversy, which is – for the most part – true. However, the practice of the games themselves as “gaming” (and therefore games as a social practice) and perspectives involved in the analyses has grown far beyond the initial debate (for example: Ryan 2001, Calleja 2011, Laas 2013, Ensslin 2014, Will 2013, Wood 2017, and especially Koenitz 2015, 2017) and both the technology itself and the changing nature of the medium has challenged many of the fundamental concepts of the analyses and arguments from each side (Laas 2013). For example, *No Man's Sky* (Hello Games 2016)¹ challenges the very idea of the “end” of the game, though the concept of infinite experience is much older. On the other hand, *That Dragon Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016) – a game retracing the case of a child's terminal cancer from the

¹ The games mentioned in this paper were selected according to my own experience (at least in some limited form), none of these examples aspires to be “the example”.

perspective of the child and the parents – challenges the very idea of “pleasantness”, “satisfaction” or “challenge” which are often identified as a fundamental element defining “the game” as a genre or activity.

During the last three decades the games themselves have crossed many borders of genre, technology, social activity or types of articulation and have become an important part of the economy, a political statement (searching for the keywords: “Trump” or “Clinton” in the Steam Library is both a fascinating and embarrassing experience), an experiment, a self-helping medium (like: *Depression Quest*, The Quinsspiracy, 2013), and more, while still exploring their more “traditional” areas like simulation or challenge, while obviously attracting the focus of researchers from many varied fields. Here, I’d rather place this particular reflection outside such controversies as the abovementioned debate and problems alike following the approach of Jenkins (2002), Bizzocchi (2003, 2007, 2011) and Koenitz.² Mainly: acknowledgement that “not all the games have narrative” and that the “narrative” as a term has become very blurry during these debates, which should not surprise anyone taking into account the broad range of invested research methods and varied approaches.

Interfaces, Narrative and Integrity

The focus of this paper is on the interface role in creating narrative experience and the integrity of the game(s) continuity of the said experience, especially in the perspective of continuation or reviving the particular kind of interaction and storytelling. I approach these issues from a (predominantly) narrative stance. However, by treating the game as a product of collective effort involving technology, law (for example license of the product) and economic factors, this approach is obviously a bit different, closer to the “cultural” if not somewhat “social” area.

The interface itself is addressed here as “means of narration” not just as a “means of interaction” (which would be similar to a classic ludic stance) or “means of presentation” (such as the type of “Graphical Interface” used). Therefore, design of the interface is understood as an important element of narrative elements of the game from clear and intuitive cases like storytelling or graphical design, to less obvious ones such as the Point of View (POV, the perspective which a game offers for accessing its content). Bizzocchi, Lin and Tanenbaum

² Although I’d prefer to distance myself from Koenitz’s stance stressing necessity of creating a new theory for reflection on the games in general, I’d say that there is a need for a new, broader theoretical approach (especially on the border of “gaming” and “reality” and problems with the entertainment industry per se). However, “the whole new theory of games” (as games) seems to be a bit overly radical.

(Bizzocchi et al. 2011) identified four types of approach to what they called “narrativised interface” from the design perspective: a) “look and feel”, b) narrativised perspective, c) behavioural mimicking and behavioural metaphors, and d) “bridging” and mixed-reality interfaces. This typology addresses the numerous issues by analysing the interface from a narrative perspective. The first two apply to the graphical design of particular elements of the game like the cursor, frames, elements of decoration, font etc., and narrativisation of metrics of the game, namely: rephrasing the numerical values (for example: statistics) with descriptors or references inside the narrative.

The behavioural mimicking and metaphors point to elements of the interface design which (as the name suggests) reproduces some kind of activity addressed by the game. Their example is a specialised interface used in such games as *Guitar Hero*, although such interfaces have a much longer history, and interaction devices like joysticks or “automobile” wheels, which are both practically required for the designed experience in particular simulation (or simulation-like) games, are also good examples of the kind. The metaphorical example addresses the types of interface simulating activity without engaging any external device (beyond default ones), and their pretty obvious example is *Black and White* (Lionhead, 2001), a game in which the main form of interacting with the game world is (literally) the hand of a god, and another one, somewhat on the self-referencing level example, is the interface of the *Hacknet* (Team Fractal Alligator, 2015), a literal system console interface, which the player uses (by using real commands and existing tools) to play the role of a hacker.

The last type addressed is “bridging” and mixed-reality type of the interface involving activities outside the actual game. They used as examples (among others) *Tamagotchi* toys and the game *Majestic* (Electronic Arts, 2001). In both examples the player traverses from the “game world” to the “real world” becoming a bridge in the narrative. To fulfil the needs of the creature “living” in the toy the player must plan their own schedule accordingly, otherwise the creature will “die” rendering the device useless. The second example refers to the conspiracy narrative of the game, with which players interacted by means of real communication (email, messages, phone calls) and activities (visiting particular websites), a strategy also used before for promoting the movie *Blair Witch Project* (1999).³

³ Another example, which is quite elaborate and therefore only signalled here, may be double-enveloped interfaces in the case of (for example) YouTube (or other mediums like Discord) gameplays which engage audiences in the very gameplay. Giving the audience power over particular decisions during the course of the game, naming characters, introducing additional levels of narrative (e.g. NPC’s personal stories). The “double envelope” description addresses the fact that the game’s interfaces are enveloped by the interfaces of another medium (video streaming, communicators, forums etc.), it does not mean, of course, that the particular number of these envelopings is always two.

As, for example, Henry Jenkins (2002) argued, the narrative level of the game, which should be somewhat clear at this point, does not mean only “the story” or the “story Arch” (Adams 2010, Fullerton et al. 2008), on which many ludo-oriented researchers focus their critique of the narrativist stance. Instead, it also involves (among others) spatial design, as he wrote: “Game designers don’t simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces” (Jenkins 2002:4) and a player’s creativity as an active participant which is imminent and clearly visible in the (as he calls them) “emergent narratives” (e.g. *The Sims* series) and less in the case of “embedded narratives”, which would be the classic understanding of “storytelling” or “following the game’s narrative”. The role of the interfaces in each of his examples, while not addressed directly, is rather clear. The way in which the player engages in the spatial narrative (for example), even if there is no “environmental storytelling” visible in the design, at least at first glance, depends on the mechanics and interfaces and their mediating power.

The role of the interfaces, however, even “only” from the narrative point of view, is quite complicated. They obviously mediate between the player and the mechanics (and the world of the game) allowing engagement in the game as an activity. However, interfaces by themselves create important levels of gameplay (and their mechanics) and the narrative, including literal storytelling. A good and simple example is the inventory as an interface (or set of interfaces in some cases). Such an interface may function as an element of direct challenge known from other games (e.g. *Hanoi Towers*, or *Hangman*) where the player needs to manipulate the object in a certain way to accomplish the desired effect. They may also play puzzles creating a whole embedded gameplay of levels, of which an example may be a grid-based type of inventory, being (if the objects have size or shape) a literal example of the puzzle type game. Such interfaces may also introduce levels of managerial or economic mechanics and narratives. Another example is elements of both puzzle and crafting, in such cases objects may be connected or transformed into other objects through certain manipulations. These forms of interfaces may also be a direct element of the storytelling through an item’s description, including descriptions of important “plot” items and also small ones allowing the player to explore the game’s world further, beyond the immediate needs of “the plot”. Of course the examples presented do not exhaust the various rules of that one type of interface.

As most of the players (and in general: the audience of the medium itself) belong to the “graphical era” of interfaces, where the GUI (Graphical User Interface) has become a common common acronym of interaction with “the

machine”,⁴ the nature of the interface and the way the term is used in this paper needs clarification. While in most cases “the interface” may be, and for a good reason is taken as “the graphical interface” (the form of presentation), one should not forget that the interfaces themselves have a rather complicated – if not convoluted – structure.

For practical reasons, in this paper (because the interfaces themselves are not the main subject here) we will use only two of the possible layers as a quick demonstration of the potential problems arising here. The first one, which is currently often omitted, is a physical one (for the sake of simplicity I am also including here the software layer) as for example electro-mechanical devices such as a keyboard, mouse, steering wheel or joystick.⁵ The second one, which for simplification I will call here “symbolic implementation” further translates the described interactions into a particular context, in this example, actions in the game itself. This layer usually takes the most attention because it is the most visible and “closest” (so to speak) to the user as the experience of “interacting”, even if we might sometimes argue that in some cases, it’s not actually the case.

A specific example of the rather complicated nature of the matter at hand are “embedded” or “internal” interfaces with their own narratives, with which the player interacts *inside* the game as another, internal activity. Common examples are mini-games not serving as a direct part of a game’s primary mechanics (such as movement, combat, object manipulation etc.). This may include activities which are symbolic representation of a particular action such as the “computer hacking” mini-game but may also be a very specific, both narrative and ludic, experience. An example of this may be the presence of “a game inside the game”, the real (or “real inside the world of the game”) existing game put inside the “main game”. For example: in one of the instalments of the *Uncharted* series a player may play another game from the same developer (*Crash Bandicoot*) which is a significant element of narrative, establishing a relationship with his actual partner and also a pure (if I may say so) ludic experience. Another example is *Gwint*, the game present in *The Witcher* series, which became so popular that it

⁴ Whatever the said machine may be, of course. The presence of some form of GUI is almost literally “omnipresent” in many devices: from computers, phones, game consoles, to washing machines, freezers and cars.

⁵ This, of course, is not limited to the “interfaces of action” used to put direct input from the user to the machine but also “interfaces of feedback” such as for example: a display device, sound, vibration etc. This is clearer for analysis (and usually unclear for the common user because the technology is so common that it has become invisible) in the case of the multi-function devices which serve as both input and feedback devices at the same time. A trivial example may be the capacitive screen present in smartphones. Interfaces used for spatial oriented games (a dance mat or interaction sticks for example) or the quite broad matter of “Virtual Reality” interfaces are far beyond the main topic of this paper.

has grown into its own identity and independent development. Another one may be *Fallout. New Vegas* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2010). In this example a set of such “games inside the game”, each having its own interface which, while preserving aesthetical coherence with the main title, is independent from the main game mechanics and idioms (including a graphical one like an actual GUI). These mini-games are mostly an optional activity, but also serves a significant narrative role by their mere presence as an option.

Finally, the matter of *interface presence* is also a specific problem. In general, the mere presence of some form of visible indicators of (for example) metrics like health, ammunition, stamina, party members, inventory etc. may be read as a “distance factor” detaching the player from the game as an experience. In the case of certain titles, the visible part is almost completely removed or embedded into the direct presentation breaking the GUI (the player’s graphical interface) and viewport (the place of the action) division. Examples of this might be the *Dead Space* series which places the basic indicators of metrics (like the protagonist’s health bar) directly on the PC as an element of his suit or the HEV-suit from *Half-Life*, the player is granted access to the metrics *after* obtaining the suit – an indicator that the GUI is not “the GUI of the game” but “the GUI of the HEV-suit”. To some extent the same logic is present in the *Halo* series, however, in a less obvious form, because the player will never get the experience of the game without the combat armour of the protagonist (and the protagonist, Master Chief *and* the combat suit are *de facto* one entity). In general, one might say that the more the designer of the game wants to emphasise direct immersion as the main factor, the more effort will be put into diminishing (or modifying) the visibility or general presence of the graphical (“the GUI” in some form) interface.

Sometimes to the point of self-contradiction, example of which may be productions developed by David Cage (e.g. *Fahrenheit* or *Heavy Rain*, Quantic Dream 2005, 2010). The classic GUI interface barely even exists in these games, however, the player is constantly bothered by numerous “action minigames” (and inevitably interfaces) effectively defeating the desired outcome (“interface-less immersion”). Instead of greater immersion the player is constantly reminded that “this is a game, press the button”.

What is easy to miss while researching this topic is the way the layers already mentioned and elements of presentation are not only directly connected, but the borders between them are also blurred in practical implementations (mobile game consoles such as the GameBoy or Switch may be the best examples to understand this). What may be even more confusing is the way the last “layer” mentioned here creates particular kinds of interaction of which e.g. the GUI is only

one (though: often the most visible and because of that dominant in reception) of many. It is also worth mentioning that many elements of these interfaces have their own particular idioms of interaction embedding the physical layer – for example: WASD keyboard keys used commonly to move the character, “press key to activate” or “point and click to activate” interaction – which may be (or should be) treated as their own internal symbolic references.⁶

The point is: while debating interfaces (present in the game in the case of this paper), even if the graphical (or speaking more general: visual) presentation seems to be the most visible and significant, it is still only part of the interfaces actually used⁷ even if from, for example, a textual perspective: the most elaborate one. In this paper the main focus is on *presentation for the interaction* (POV, aesthetics’ choices, screen management etc.) perspective because of the selected type of examples and their main forms of articulation. The role of the above mentioned physical layer would be more prominent in simulation (or simulation-like) examples such as racing games, flight simulators and some FPS and action games for which these elements are crucial in their own narratives.

Interfaces, as I would argue, not less than traditionally understood narrative (storytelling in the form of e.g. “the plot”), may be treated as elements of the game identity. That very *signifier* which allows us to recognise the game as **this** game (or games’ series). This, however, especially in certain examples may not be so easy to identify, and also very strongly debatable.⁸ Such identification, or at least – an arguable presentation of one – is much easier in non-singular cases: sequels, series or successors. Taking as an example the two productions: *Half Life* (Sierra Studios, 1998) and *Diablo* (Blizzard North 1997) the “core” elements, and also the genre identifiers may be easily recognised. The combat mechanics in both places them clearly in their genres (First Person Shooter and cRPG respectively) and at first glance are the main definers. In both cases we have elements of direct and indirect (environmental in these cases) narratives, which may be seen

⁶ An example of this (besides the “WASD” idiom known from the PC) is the controller’s buttons assignment (XBOX, PlayStation). A different physical interface device may also lead to the fragmentation of a players’ community for this very reason – it’s especially present in competitive games elaborating precision or speed of reactions. Console and PC players are often separated because they could not compete with each other on fair, common ground because of the difference in interaction devices used by these communities.

⁷ Not to mention “external” ones which may not even be an element of the original game, from user modifications, to whole new programs, websites and other means of interacting with the game’s content. One quite elaborate example of this case may be a set of websites and external tools used by dedicated players of *Eve Online* (CCP games, 2003-) for interacting with a game’s internal market (including lottery/gambling interfaces), politics or a ships’ design (such as fitting simulation tools).

⁸ I would argue that many of the fierce debates about sequels, especially among the players (“if the sequel is a good one”), although not always in a conscious way, are in fact addressing this very problem.

as mundane, generic additions, not really necessary (especially in the case of the “story”) for the gameplay itself. It takes the sequels to clearly show what kind of gameplay mechanics and interfaces were (and are) mentioned as “core ones”. *Half-Life 2* (Valve 2004) shows what an important element not only the player character (PC) itself is to the game’s identity but also the mentioned HEV – the suit he equips – which the game’s narrative (and the marketing) emphasises strongly during the whole introductory part of the game. Without the suit (and later the gravity gun, which even more detaches the game from its default recognisance as just another FPS)⁹ *Half-Life* as a game is hardly “itself”.

In a similar way, while inventory management plays an important role in the first *Diablo* instalment, it is the sequel (Blizzard North, 2000) which establishes its crucial role for the gameplay and its primary loop: fight to gain power (experience points and the loot) to gain more power. Additional mechanics introduced in the sequels, such as the shared part of the inventory between a player’s characters (introducing elements of strategic meta-gameplay), elements of crafting, totems: special items which benefit the player with certain bonuses at the cost of precious inventory space, sets of items allowing a player to gain additional bonuses while at the same time being equipped etc. emphasises the inventory as core mechanics even more. One could even risk saying that the gameplay loop and the inventory interfaces established the whole genre (Diablo-esque cRPG) as it exists in many incarnations today.

The game interfaces’ integrity as a general term in this paper should be understood as a particular set of interfaces and narratives establishing a particular game’s identity independently of the classic identity tropes (“the plot”, the “genre” etc.).¹⁰ This kind of “working definition”, however, may be somewhat confusing and needs at least a bit of preliminary clarification. First of all neither term (“integrity” and “identity”) is very precise, for example, in numerous inquiries in the field of Ethics they are often pretty blurred.¹¹ I use the term “integrity” here mainly in the context of the interfaces while the term “identity” is mostly reserved for the “game” as an artefact itself.

⁹ The introduction of the gravity gun makes many idioms of the FPS genre (like the gun type gameplay, ammunition management and such) much less significant if not obsolete in the game’s later parts which subsequent DLCs (*Episode One*, *Episode Two*) emphasise even more.

¹⁰ This leads to another set of problems with the “genre” itself. The said qualifier, when observed carefully, rarely invokes a particular game’s actual qualities (like “strategy”, “action”, “arcade”), and is strongly dependent on the marketing strategy, not to mention the conscious efforts to create multi-genre or genre-independent works from particular developers.

¹¹ As for example in classical Greek moral philosophy (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle) “to be oneself” (identity) “is to be the truth with the one” (integrity), this way of thinking is pretty common in moral philosophy in general.

The first reflects how the particular set of interfaces is (so to speak) “faithful” to the particular gaming experience which includes interaction idioms, graphical and functional design of the interfaces (if applicable), types of feedback and ability to invoke a particular affective state in the player – which is reported usually by the players as “the feeling”, among others. The term “identity” is used here, in contrast, as a description of broader context: including the genre of the game, its social and symbolic presence and type of design of narrative itself. As can quite easily be noticed, both terms in practical examples may be embedded in each other creating a kind of “hermeneutic wheel” of understanding.

The game identity (for example: a particular type of FPS like the *Call of Duty* series) determines selected types of interfaces, often the ways of presentation (not limited to the FP POV) and their respective narratives, while traditionally understood narrative (as “the plot”) has a rather secondary importance for the game itself. At the same time the integrity of the interfaces (interaction idioms, the used device etc.) will determine (as I try to show later in this paper) how the game is able to incarnate its own identity, and their narratives may be – and usually are – the crucial element, especially in the case of games not really built around any significant “plot”. In the mentioned example it does not really matter what kind of “story” or “plot” (no matter how ridiculous it is)¹² the player experiences while significant modification to the weapon narrative would completely change the whole game. Such change may be intentional (as it was with the *Half-Life* series) establishing a whole new identity, but it may also be just the effect of mismanagement, error, lack of insight or intervention of other entities (like the publisher), producing a certain lack, or in particular examples one might even say “the void”, of identity in effect. As I argue, this case – the dependence of a game’s identity on the integrity of its respective interfaces (and inadvertently: dependence of an interface’s articulation on the game’s identity) extends also into the territory of, as one could say, “typical” narrative-based games where “the story” or “the plot” seems to be their most important part. These elements, as I argue here, create a fragile equilibrium which when intentionally broken may lead to the creation of a whole new experience (and even genre) but also may effectively destroy the game as a particular expected artefact or diminish its promise.

This leads to another matter: the games as artefacts and activity (“gaming”) do not exist only in the “gameplay” context. They are also elements of economy,

¹² However, as in his video-essay Noah Caldwell-Gervais (2015) argues, the change of the narrative tone was crucial in changing the political narrative of the game. While the first two instalments emphasise the individual courage of the mere soldier (the PC) thrown into the horror of war, later they are focused on power projection and power presentation while the war and the combat are an opportunity to exercise both.

not necessarily obvious technology advancement and limitations – which do not merely limit to (as it’s typically seen) the means of presentation, by limitation of computing power and available programming interfaces of the presentation device (like GPU) or numerous other social activities. Particular design choices do not necessarily depend solely on the technical or managerial proficiency of the developer, studio or producer, technology level, device type (is it a console, a computer or a smartphone) and such, though all of these things, and potentially more are a very important part of these choices. Creating and producing the game (and subsequently: playing one) also means interaction with social or legal constraints, which does not reduce itself to “social awareness” – the latter should rather be understood as a by-product of the particular social landscape and (in the case of entertainment corporation decisions) marketing strategy. Both the game’s identity and integrity of its interfaces in this perspective should be viewed as a complex structure, depending on more than, for example: “design decision”. These factors, which may be seen (or rather: mistaken) as “outside elements” of the game’s design and creation, lifetime and accessibility and, subsequently, identity and integrity, on the contrary play a very important role, yet are often ignored by researchers. These numerous factors and influences cannot be fully explored in this short paper. Instead, I propose to look at these issues from the perspective of a particular game, it’s revival attempt and further attempt to create a particular “sibling” identity.

Quite a story: *Planescape Torment*. Original, revival, successor.

Published in 1999 the title: *The Planescape Torment* may be an interesting example of the problems described, mostly because of popularity of the title as an example of “brilliance of storytelling” and rather unanimous acclaim in the narrative department. The game itself is often considered one of the unique gems in the industry’s history. Awarded numerous accolades and very good reviews at the time, even if it wasn’t a particular example of commercial success (Brother None, 2007), it is still considered a kind of pinnacle (for its technological era) of the narrative and artistic possibilities of the video game as a medium. It may also be considered as a good example of the value and importance of the interface not only for the gameplay but also the game’s narrative itself. Because of the nature of the example, the main issue here will be *visual presentation* and the role of implementation of the interfaces in this way.¹³

¹³ While, for example, the “mouse and keyboard” interface idiom – common for the era and still very important despite the presence of touch-type interfaces – is put aside. As a “way of interacting” it’s obviously important, yet its significance is far less crucial for the matter than in other types of games’ series (e.g. *Guitar Hero*) where the device of interaction might play a much more important role.

The game's design decisions are based on a few key principles and careful considerations following technology limitations at the time, the story and its presentation, the problem/dilemma articulation as presented for the player, selected mechanics (inherited from the licensed setting) and so on. The placement of the story in the *Planescape* setting, one of the Dungeon&Dragons universes strongly determined the visual and interface design. This setting emphasised the bizarreness of the environment, its ultimate alienating form even for the native inhabitants, while also presenting an uncanny familiarity of any peculiarity which may be met and the design of the visuals tried to embrace these elements. As one of the richest worlds (or rather plethora of worlds and generative and fatal matrix for them) among those present in D&D, its presentation was, however, a particular challenge. For the technology at the time, featuring a rich, strange and alien environment was particularly difficult. While certain titles (such as *Unreal* from 1998) definitely pushed the limits of the presentation possible with 3D technology, it came with the high cost of devices for the customer (namely: the cost of the accelerator), production process and very limited interactivity, mostly referencing to the *DOOM* (Id Soft. 1993) interaction idiom, design and mechanics.

For role-playing titles 3D technology also presented serious challenges. *The Elder Scrolls* series (in particular at this time: *The Elder Scrolls: Daggerfall*, which follows the success of its predecessor *Arena* from 1994 and *Ultima Underworld* from 1992), which embraced this form of presentation – first person perspective in a fully 3D environment, was not only plagued by technological difficulties but also problems with the interface and articulation of the game mechanics (especially the combat) visual compromises and, in general, the narrative itself. On the other hand, the popular isometric presentation – or in the case of hand-painted, static levels semi-isometric – by default tended to detach the player from the character perspective; in essence the PC in such a design is one of the pawns on the board manipulated by the player. One crucial design decision made by the developer of the game was the selection of the perspective, which strongly influenced the game's presentation. While the game uses *Infinity Engine*, the same one which fuels *Baldur's Gate* (Bioware 1998), the perspective is much closer to the PC and his companions creating almost intimate atmosphere, sometimes even claustrophobic, especially in the dungeons.

This decision was driven by the fact that the game's narrative is in essence a very personal story. The story is of an immortal, amnesiac (at the moment) creature: the *Nameless* (PC), on a quest, the sense of which as presented during the game, is yet to be found, and it is ultimately, up to the player what kind of

question there is and in fact the task itself is, because the famous question “What can change the nature of a man?” is actually not his own. In contrast with the normal way of establishing the PC and their place in the world as a newcomer or person of no apparent, actual significance, in *Planescape Torment* the position, history and abilities of the PC, are already in place, just not revealed to the player. The PC has a long (very long in fact) history, and the environment (the world(s) and the other characters) is, in general, much more aware of their presence than either the PC or the player. While for the player, and for the most part, for the PC the world is unfamiliar, if not alien, for the world the PC is not.

The perspective chosen by the designers: up close and semi-isometric, reinforces the way the game articulates both the personal nature of the narrative and detachment at the same time. The two important game mechanics – an actual immortality and the class change – are also reinforced by the perspective and the interface design itself. The player is always close to the PC and at the same time has the perspective of an observer. In that way, while in general the form of presentation determined by the engine is built around the party (and party management and tactical movement), the very same perspective is shifted. Crucial elements of the game have a very subversive nature, for example: solving part of the game’s puzzles requires leaving the party and literal suicide, numerous times. The PC is the only character able to solve this puzzle (created once by himself, by the way) because of his immortality. Death in the game is not only an experience, but is also, literally, a way of solving problems. In addition, crucial elements of the story driven puzzles – such as confrontation with the NPC presented at the moment as a kind of antagonist – demands detachment from the party. At each of those moments the close perspective and the “observer” position have a crucial role in the storytelling. This form of presentation keeps the manipulative “observer” or “director” perspective and approach and keeps the focus on the PC without reducing him to the mentioned “pawn”.

This particular point of view (POV), the close up semi-isometric which the player has, may be described in general as “directing” in contrast to the first-person perspective of “performing” (Rouse 1999). However, as I have already emphasised, the “close up” part alters such dynamics. In *Tomb Raider*, which is Rouse’s example of the “directing” perspective, the player manages the pawn (PC) from what he describes as a “suitable” distance, providing an effective way for manipulating the PC, interacting with the environment and the necessary level of environmental awareness. As a result, his perspective in fact reinforced the ludic interpretation of the interface stressing its managerial role within the game experience. In the case of *Planescape Torment*, as I’d argue, the close but

detached POV is strongly tied not to “management” or “directing” (though such elements exist within the game) but rather involvement and narrative within the limitations of the technology and the engine.

This argument may be explained better in the context of the attempt to revive the game with the benefits of newer technology, thus: beyond the limitations and constraints put upon the development team of the original. *Planescape Torment: Enhanced Edition* (Beamdog 2017) aimed to rebuild the original experience with modern technology (Brother None 2007) which included many minor tweaks, quality control (bug fixing) and overall quality of life (QoL) improvements, such as for example the game’s ability to work with widescreen resolution (though before this attempt modifications made by players existed achieving similar results) and higher resolutions in general. I prefer to call Beamdogs (and similar) productions “revivals” rather than “remakes” because unlike the “remake” itself the “revival” aims not just to refresh the presentation with the newer technology (for example: implementing better textures or more detailed models), but also to alter the articulation of the original through their new, forms which were non-existent at the time of the original creation. However, with all these improvements a very simple, yet important problem has arisen. The original game was meant to be played in 640x480 resolution (4:3 proportions) and the whole interface (including obviously artwork) is oriented around this limitation. And while having access to the original code and artwork the revival team has made a great effort to restore the original experience in the modern technology, something was missing in the translation. Namely: the point of view.

The ability to almost freely zoom the view presented by the game (one of the QoL improvements) inadvertently defeats the purpose of a few of the important game puzzles (for example: solving the labyrinth puzzle becomes trivial if one can easily see its shape just by zooming out), changes the environmental feeling – the game became much less claustrophobic and somewhat more colourful unlike the rather bleak original – and overall perspective orientation. While delivering a very good, polished and modernised experience, it became more generic and similar to the other titles based on Infinity Engine like *Baldur’s Gate* (Bioware, 1998) and *Baldur’s Gate II: Shadows of Amn* (Bioware 2001) losing, as I’d argue, important parts of its identity. I’d also argue that certain difficulties which the original implementation of POV and the interface presented for the player, such as rather a lack of suitability for effective tactical party management up to the point of tediousness in particular violent encounters, were intentional design decisions.

Unlike the other titles I have mentioned, combat as a mechanic is neither important nor particularly satisfying in the game. From the narrative structure its presence is a mere distraction, rarely even serving the purpose of being a border between areas of different levels of difficulty. On numerous occasions the class change mechanics, effectively require the player to weaken the PC, which is necessary not only for the plot itself, but also for the possibility to experience part of the gameplay. This further reinforces the low importance of combat as a game mechanics, for the very simple reason that succeeding in this kind of gameplay is to build it around gaining power, which games like *Diablo* implemented almost perfectly. While the PC is literally immortal and never loses their equipment, and the experience points (the power) may be acquired in a large number of other ways, without these stakes the violent encounters are negligible.¹⁴ This is an important element because *combat* (of some kind) as a main way of reaching the goals, gaining power or in general progressing through the game/story, was the main design principle in the genre at the time.¹⁵

From the presence of the party, the changes in the interface (mainly the resolution) are as important. In the original the player's team may contain up to six characters (including the PC) and their portraits, presented in the lower bar of the screen, are animated consuming most of the available space and pushing all other elements aside. The player's party is not "just a party" as in other similar titles. Those NPCs are a crucial element for the narrative. Many of the elements fundamental for the story and the storytelling itself are not only delivered by the party members or require their presence, but also revolve around them and the relationships between the PC and other NPCs and them. Moreover, part of the narrative is essentially not the PC narrative or "about" the PC, but "about" them and their narrative. And while a certain PC presence and influence connects these elements and many of them were once shaped by the PC (of which the PC is often unaware), the player is confronted with a different perspective: while the main story is his story, this story is not *just* about him breaking narcissistic player expectations. This is another example of subversion in the game. The PC is the central (literally) element of the narrative, however, at the same time this centre is shifting from perspective to perspective, from one NPC experience to another, challenging the "all about

¹⁴ While the PC starts as a combat oriented character (a warrior) and for the most part players will probably stay in this form, the design, as I'd argue, attempts to inform the player that the PC has fought enough (and in numerous incarnations).

¹⁵ This dynamic has its own subversion in the expansion pack *Baldur's Gate II: Throne of Bhaal* (Bioware 2001) to the *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn* (Bioware, 2000) in which the player is confronted with the moral consequences of the "combat to gain power" loop, effectively challenging the whole game's narrative and common game design in general.

me” (or my character) expectations and attitude of the player, even though that “all about me” is the main narrative structure *de facto*.

The decision to place their (party members) portraits as one of the most visible things, almost constantly present animated elements of the interface, reinforces this narrative articulation. As I’d argue, within the limitations of the technology and the engine given, this very placement and management of “party GUI”, at least to some extent, negates its mere functional form. Because of the animations and the significant part of the active screen (the viewport) taken up by the party, they have become more present as participants and spectators along with the player. However, in the Bullfrog’s revival these portraits are smaller, in a similar way to the other Bioware titles (which the studio also revived). The party portraits in the revival have become one of many elements of the interface and can be easily pushed aside. Based on the interface design, presence of the party members became less impacting in that way, in a word: less *present*.

Without raising big controversy, one could say that there is a strong connection (Bizzocchi 2007, Bizzocchi et.al 2011) between the presentation and the interface and the overall game experience and narrative. And while the revival described definitely succeeded in delivering part of the narrative experience, namely it succeeds in retelling the story, it also somewhat failed in its attempt to rebuild the atmosphere of the story, altering the narrative experience in the process.

Another attempt at restoring the *feel* of the game’s narrative instead of delivering a revived experience in the new technological environment, was *Torment: Tides of Numenora* (inXile Entertainment 2017). As already mentioned, by the “feel” I describe the particular affective state which the game (as an artefact, activity and social phenomena) invokes and reinforces. The matter of “the feel” whose field might be very broadly and liberally traced from the design itself (Swink 2009, Schell 2010, Ernest 2010), through the fields of psychology and sociology and marketing strategies up to literal “nostalgia marketing” (Cui 2015, Abrams 2019) cannot be thoroughly debated in this paper. Therefore, I have to ask the Reader to take this topic as a general and imprecise metaphor used here following the practice of its audience (gamers and reviewers alike) and often also developers, rather than a proper term.

Torment: Tides of Numenora made with the use of a crowdfunding platform was claimed as the “spiritual successor” to the original *Planescape Torment* from 1999, and the developer acquired the rights for the product after initial attempts to gain the license from the owners of the Planescape D&D setting (Wizards

of the Coast) by part of the original team (including Chris Avellone and Collins McComb) eventually failed around 2012. The game itself received generally good reviews, and because it's still marketed its financial success cannot be clearly determined (though the product was claimed to be profitable).

Unlike the Bullfrog revival attempt, this was a case of trying a new approach which would use existing, modern technology and its benefits, with deliberate multiplatform support, including PC (Windows, Linux), Mac, Xbox One, and PlayStation 4 – very different devices with their own interface idioms. This, however, proved to be difficult from the point of interface design and its narrative integrity. The narrative itself, from the storytelling point of view, may be seen rather as a derivative of the original *Planescape Torment*, to the point where the new story is just rebranded and slightly shifted in tone from the original one. This decision was to some extent deliberate (although problematic from the creative standpoint) because of customers' demands clearly established during the crowdfunding campaign. In short it was driven by nostalgia, with players demanding “more of the same” which the developer, for the most part, delivered.

This is, as I suppose, a very clear example of how these earlier mentioned “external” factors influenced the game design, its interfaces and narratives. The ambition of the creators of *Planescape Torment*, which were to create a game as an artistic, rich storytelling device embedding the player's agency, were enveloped by the license of a particular game already in existence. Therefore, many parts of the game (such as combat and test mechanics, but also many parts of the storytelling and world-building) are intentional recreations of these. Other parts (such as the death mechanics) are a subversion of players' expectations and serve an important role in the gameplay and narration.¹⁶ This, however, is always mediated through the existing narratives (and of course mechanics) in the Planescape multiverse.

By not being a directly licensed product and through different mechanics and aesthetics, *Torment: Tides of Numenora* attempts to create its own identity, and even if – especially for the players who know the original piece – it fails in the creative area and one could even claim that the concept is close to the plagiarism, such design decisions at least to some extent succeed in that matter. Being turn based and with a system which discourages combat up to the point of pure frustration severely limits any enjoyment from such encounters. One of the reviewers described these mechanics as “like Halfway and XCOM mixed with Divinity:

¹⁶ Or in this particular case: expected subversive content, because such mechanics might be treated as crucial elements for the original piece, therefore a proper restoration needs their reimplementations in some form.

Original Sin and The Banner Saga, only taking the worst aspects of each and discarding the good entirely” (Arias 2017). The game also delivers them in very low amount and practically almost all of them may be avoided. This is in fact a clear message (though delivered sometimes pretty heavy-handedly), demonstrating through design that combat is neither a preferred solution, nor an important part of the game, even more so than in *Planescape Torment*.

This feeling is further reinforced by the dialogue design which can (as in the other heavily dialogue driven productions) take up to half of the screen space (or even the whole screen in certain circumstances). However, just like *Planescape's* Bullfrog revival, the point of view is not concentrated on the PC. Therefore, the personal experience, even if present in the dialogue and story itself, is not delivered through the interface design, or necessarily through the visuals. The focus is shifted visually to the world.

This, however, while somewhat detaching from the source material of *feeling*, is consistent with the narrative. The elements of body horror, the feeling of being trapped and sometimes lost are barely present in *Tides of Numenora*. And even if someone could argue that they are, they do not pose it as important. The story, while in general presented as personal, is in fact far less oriented on the relationships and PC development through the game (especially after the first act) than *Planescape Torment* and more on the world, technology and its potential. The aim of the game is different and its identity lies elsewhere. The creators of *Tides of Numenora* were presented with a very different task than the team developing *Planescape Torment*, who had to establish a completely new world and new mechanics in the narrative and through the interface with elements they recognised as crucial from the previous title and its identity. However, while similar, or even almost the same on the surface level, these core elements are different. This creates a problem of establishment: the game often seems to go back and forward between concentrating on the story presented as the main narrative and the narrative of world-building. Such fluidity does not need to be seen as a flaw in the design – in fact I'd argue that the visuals and the interface design decisions fit well in that matter. There is, however, a problem, which one may speculate are a side-effect of the development difficulties, with the decisions in the narrative depth. After the initial first act many world-building (and also character interactions) lose their depth and determination.

One of the important parts of the promise to deliver the *feeling* again was the role of NPCs. And there new production indeed – especially in the latest game – falls short: characters deliver their intended narrative and simply either vanish (NPC) or just quickly become mere companions (potential party mem-

bers) which – for the most part – the player is able to mend almost as they see fit. They lack the certain level of irreparable flaw which deliberately fleshed out Planescape characters, not only on the dialogue level of the narrative but also the mechanics. However, taking into consideration the mechanics of *Tides of Numenora*, which makes it relatively easy, especially further on in game, to avoid failure in any test, this may also be considered a consistent design decision. The game attempts to tell its story in a few interconnected ways avoiding potential failure – for example, by cutting off the potential branch of failing a test – and also avoids that sort of problem with growing costs of developing branched narratives. At the same time the difficulty threshold is lowered, assuming that the player understands mechanics of the game, lowering the chance of “test frustration”. This avoids the situation where a player becomes disconnected with the narrative and focused on the win/failure factor, eventually losing motivation to play if the particular PC/NPC build is not able to provide success (or the “RND-God” is particularly malicious at that time).¹⁷

However, the most important story design difference, which influences the presentation and used interfaces lies in the focus of the narrative. As already mentioned *Planescape: Torment* is built around the PC in the very literal sense. If we use Propp’s (1976) terms, in almost each instance the PC is the hero, the antagonists, the traitor, the donator, even the magical device itself (the mcguffin). The story and the articulation of the narrative strongly revolves around him and by refocusing the player on the relationship with the NPCs (including party members) the game’s narrative design challenges the player’s expectations and habits. While the PC-centred design is common, to the point that it may be called the “default design”, the game not only fully embraces this concept but also twists it and constantly challenges until the last moment. *Tides of Numenora*, however, took a different, more classic approach, than many other attempts to revive the genre (an isometric crpg) following the said “default design”. The PC is the centre of the story serving as a player’s avatar; however, the narrative constructs are mainly outside the PC. These peculiar almost dreadful moments of narrative enjoyment for *Planescape Torment*, for which the game was praised – “So, this is because of **me**”, especially in disturbing conditions – are not present here. *Tides of Numenora* follows many narrative devices present in *Planescape Torment*, such as exposition and action through dialogue memories (although the mechanics of the memories seem to be pretty important, the narrative never explores them fully (for example in the *wrong* remembrance)), death as an experience, and confrontation with past actions

¹⁷ However, one could ask why, if that is the intent, any test mechanics at all are implemented if it has such low value (down to none in some circumstances)?

of the appearance of the actual PC. However, there's a different weight here. In the first game such confrontations are the result of the past actions of the PC himself, while *Tides of Numenora* confronts the player with the actions of someone else, namely the "Changing God", a creature able to transfer its consciousness from one body to another leaving behind the "cast-offs" (bodies with created ad hoc consciousness from the memories of past actions of the said entity). And while there are moments which attempt to use for example the impostor narrative, this structure has not been explored much in the game (which seems to be another missed storytelling opportunity). Therefore, there is a structural difference in the narrative on the "story" (plot) level and the interface narrative between these two games and – also taking into account the differences in technology – both productions acknowledge their core narrative design (unlike the revival), even if in the case of *Tides of Numenora*' the game is not very consistent in that matter. However, the promise of *feeling* was not really delivered (as reviewers and players eventually acknowledged), and if one wanted to look for such a thing, titles like *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019) probably embrace that feature better.¹⁸ One could say, and I'd support this stance, that the pressure from fans (and de facto: financial backers) to *deliver the feeling* effectively impaired the creative potential of the developer. To some extent, *Tides of Numenora* may be taken as an example of yet another casualty of unfortunate metaphorical (in this case) publisher intervention.

Facets of identity and interface integrity (closure not included)

There are, of course, simpler examples of relationships between narrative interfaces, their integrity and the identity of the game, than *Planescape Torment*. In the quest for "the perfect sequel" both of the earlier mentioned titles (*Diablo II* and *Half-Life 2*) would probably win, or at least would get a very high position. That is because the following instalments keep and reinforce the core elements of the titles' identity and interface integrity. Another relatively simple example may be the *Total War* series (Creative Assembly, 2000-). The double layer structure of the game – turn based strategy and real time battles – engages a particular set of evolving mechanics, and despite numerous changes in the metrics (for example the units' topology, economy of the strategic part of the game), settings (from "historical" to ones of licensed fantasy), as long as these elements are present and the integrity of interfaces is preserved in each of them, we may easily recognise any instalment as "a Total War game".

¹⁸ There is of course the question if it is possible to re-create a particular experience (not just a story, which of course may be delivered by means of different articulation) when playing a game like *Planescape Torment* without open plagiarism.

However, the integrity of the interface (and the game's identity in effect) is also a fragile thing. A good and simple example of this is the third game in the *Diablo* series (*Diablo III*, Blizzard Entertainment 2003). As I have already pointed out, one of the crucial (core) elements of the interface integrity, which establishes the game identity (as well as the specific genre) is the inventory and loot mechanics belonging to the primary loop of the gameplay: fight, gain power through loot (items), fight to gain even more power. The introduction of an Auction House and altered loot mechanics, which often rewarded players with items useless for an actual PC was an obvious incentive for investment in the game's internal market. This decision obviously altered the narrative of the interfaces related to this set of functionalities and introduced another layer of the interface with their own narratives (namely the Auction House). Another deep change was shifting the game dynamics from single-player with an optional (and very popular) multiplayer mode to only being a single-player with enforced (through interface design) participation in competitions, whether you want to or not, despite the mode of play (even in "single player" mode, the player still creates metrics in competitions). In effect both of the alterations mentioned changed the game's identity, to the point where other products (such as *Torchlight*, Runic Games 2009 or *Patch of Exile*, Grinding Gear Games 2013-) have taken its place, making the question "is *Diablo III* still a *Diablo* game?" non trivial.

The complicated (maybe a bit too complicated) example of *Planescape Torment* and its attempts at a revival and continuation has the merit that, at least to some extent, it shows how multilayered the issue may be. The influence of license – and subsequently, such things as determination of mechanics, presentation etc. – managerial intervention on the developer, or in the case of *Tides of Numenora* demands from the backers and their expectations in the crowdfunding campaign, the level of technology and presentation and interaction idioms connected with it, as well as the influence of the publisher and more, are unfortunately usually lost or mostly ignored in research despite what is sometimes their fundamental role in the development. In addition, the role of the integrity of interface design, partially as I have already argued, because their "core" nature reveals itself fully, usually in the success (or failure) of the sequel or other form of continuation, is at last worth some inquiry. It does not mean that the game as a continuation or sequel may be successful on the market only if the said integrity is kept. There are a lot of success stories (or at least marketability) of the series of games which have serious problems in this area, such as *Need for Speed* (Electronic Arts 1994-), a series which for no good reason (for a racing game at least) has a "storytelling" layer. However, if this one deals with the question of *feeling* is another story.

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Summary:

The paper aims to address the issue of the game’s identity in the context of narrative interfaces and their integrity. Following the approach of Jenkins (2002), Bizzocchi (2007, 2011) and Koenitz (2015, 2018) I propose to address the said topic by paying attention to the integrity of the narrative interfaces design and their role in the presentation and experience of “the game” as particularly “that game”, especially in the context of attempts to recreate a specific experience (remake/revival, sequel and sibling identity), for which the main example is the game *Planescape Torment* and its revival (Enhanced Edition) and “spiritual successor” *Tides of Numenora*. A short study on the said example, as I argue, shows that the main issue has a multilayered nature (including technology, studio politics, artistic design, license legal limitations and such), and the integrity of the interfaces, especially those which may be identified as “core”, is an important part of them and seemingly small changes, may break it completely. And while the storyline may deliver literally “the same” story, changed (or broken) integrity of the narrative interface’s design cannot be restored, creating what is in effect a different experience, and in essence: a different game. However, keeping the said core integrity intact makes it possible to sustain the game identity (and its experience) allowing for the extending of existing mechanics, additional layers of gameplay etc.

Keywords: game design, narrativity, interfaces, computer game theory, computer-human interaction