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### Connecting player and character agency in videogames

#### Abstract:

In game studies, ‘agency’ is typically defined in terms of the ‘choices’ or ‘freedom’ granted to the player, which prioritises the influence of ludology on player engagement while discounting the impact of narratology (Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum 2010: 11). Alternative approaches to agency in games are under-theorised but equally important. This paper explores how player agency extends beyond in-game choices to their individual understanding and interpretation of a text, and how this form of player agency is equally evident in creative writing texts and other narrative mediums. Furthermore, this paper considers the understandings of ‘character agency’ that have been established in traditional creative writing and considers how this form of agency can influence our understanding of narrative in games. Character agency – and the autonomy of characters that it implies – engages an audience in the motivations of characters they (seemingly) do not control, and practitioners should consider how player agency intersects with the agency of non-player-characters (NPCs) if we are to understand the multi-faceted relationships audiences have with game narratives. This paper explores the ways game studies can engage with a broader consideration of agency, and how narrative is improved by the intersection of these approaches.

#### Biographical note:

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#### Keywords:

Creative Writing – Agency – Narrative – Choice – Freedom

## Introduction

The concept of ‘agency’ is widely discussed in game studies, but analysis typically focuses solely on narrow definitions of *player* agency, which prioritise maximising freedom of player choice as a method of engaging an audience in the game experience. The result is the assertion that player freedom is paramount, which in turn implies that pre-designed narrative is less important to player engagement. However, the popularity of narrative-centred games indicates that these games are still engaging players, and an alternative or broader approach to analysing agency is necessary to better understand this audience response.

‘Agency’ also has an assumed – but different – meaning in the creative writing discipline. When scholarly texts discuss ‘agency’ in relation to traditional written texts, this typically refers to *character* agency and whether the characters within a text have the perceived ability to influence their narrative. While this scholarly writing uses the term ‘agency’, there is limited research that specifically focuses on exploring and defining forms of agency within the creative writing discipline.

Both game studies and creative writing could benefit from expanding their assumed understandings of agency, and considering the intersection between games and literature. While texts like Ensslin’s (2014) *Literary Gaming* explore the space between these mediums – particularly in the form of ludic elements within ‘hybrid’ texts – I am suggesting not only blurring boundaries between mediums, but also broadening the lenses used to consider a wider range of both games and traditional creative writing texts.

Parsler (2010: 135) defines agency as having ‘the capacity to act as a cause’ in the cause-and-effect process that drives a narrative arc. ‘Agency’ as a term for describing an agent’s ability to ‘act as a cause’ is underpinned by sociological and philosophical definitions of agency (Cuff, Sharrock & Francis 2006: 328; Parsler 2010: 136) – an in-depth exploration of which lies outside the scope of this paper. This understanding of agency relates not only to player agency as we typically understand it, but also to alternative views of player agency and alternative forms of agency altogether. Player agency, character agency, and other forms of agency each similarly imply that an agent has the ability to make choices, and that these choices have an effect on a narrative arc.

Current understandings of player agency within game studies can be reimagined to incorporate an audience’s commitment to meaning (Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum 2010: 11), including not only their choices within a text (if they are offered any) but also their choice to engage with and interpret that text. Similarly, other categories of agency – such as character agency, framework agency, and camera agency – can be applied to games. By focusing on agency in terms of narrative, we are able to analyse the medium using existing tools and techniques, better understand the ways agency of player-characters and non-player-characters intersect with player agency and designer/author agency, and question the assertion that player freedom is paramount in game design.

## Player/audience agency as freedom and choice

Despite being seen as a ‘broad and complex topic’, discussions of agency in game studies tend to focus on ‘empowering’ players (Parsler 2010: 142). Debates around agency in games assume that ‘unrestricted self-agency is the core pleasure of game experiences’ and typically prioritise either player freedom or player choice (Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum 2010: 11).

MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler (2007: 1) describe ‘full agency’ as ‘the ability of a player to move as they will and make totally free behavioural choices’, and argue that this ‘full agency’ is what game designers should be aspiring towards. Wardrip-Fruin et al. (2009: 1) also believe player agency is about the freedom of choice, defining agency as the way a game system supports the player’s desires. Similarly, Mateas and Stern (2006: 647) describe agency as ‘the feeling of empowerment that comes from being able to take actions in the world whose effects relate to the player’s intention’.

Murray (2016: 126) has a slightly different definition of agency, which highlights that the multitude of choices provided to the player is not as important as how meaningful they are. In her foundational text, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, she states that agency is ‘the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices’. Leger’s (2014) definition of agency also emphasises meaningful choice.

As Mateas and Stern (2006: 647) have asserted, ‘if there are many buttons and knobs for a player to twiddle, but all this twiddling has little effect on the experience, there is no agency.’ However, this understanding of choice as ‘buttons and knobs’ implies that these choices are primarily founded in game mechanics, not in a game’s story. Despite ‘meaningful choices’ often having an impact on a game’s narrative, Adams (1999: n.p.) suggests that this narrative should further permit the player’s freedom, and should not be a construction of the author: ‘It’s not our job to tell stories. It’s our job to build worlds in which players can live a story of their own creation.’ This view is supported by Newman (2002) and Thomas (2006: 107), who believe that, to increase player agency – and therefore player engagement – designers should focus on the ludic elements of games, and ‘flatten’ narrative elements. These scholars prioritise hiding the author’s intent in favour of elevating the player’s ability to act within a game space.

The conflict between mechanics and narrative in discussions of player agency relates to the ‘so-called ludology/narratology debate’ (Pearce 2005) that began in the early 2000s. Despite scholars like Frasca (2003) suggesting that such a debate ‘never took place’, it is possible to locate a divide in game studies between scholars who feel that games can be analysed alongside other narrative mediums, and those who debate ‘narratives’ and narratology’s relevance to game studies’ (Aarseth 2001: n.p.). The assorted views that comprise this debate (including whether or not the debate occurred at all) exceed the scope of this paper, but the parallels between this debate and the more localised discussion of agency in games is worth considering.

Claims that the most unique trait of games is a player’s ability to interact with the medium via mechanics is reductive. Hosking (2014: n.p.) suggests that the key difference between games and other forms of media is not that games allow players to interact *with* a game – including its narrative – but rather that the narrative is able to interact more directly with *them*. Because the player takes the role of an avatar within

the game, non-player characters (NPCs) are then able to influence that player without the ‘safety of the fourth wall’ (Hosking 2014: n.p.), dissolving the barrier between the audience and the story. Habel and Kooyman (2014: 1) extend this, stating that the key difference between films and games – specifically in their research area of horror films/games – is that in games, players ‘have their sense of individual autonomy and agency directly challenged’.

Game studies has typically ignored the unique ability for games to interact with the player in favour of highlighting the ways players can interact with a game. This can be seen not only in scholarly explorations of agency, but also non-scholarly writing in games media and in designers’ writing about their craft. In seeking a well-rounded perspective of the undertheorised topic of non-player-character agency, I have referred to non-scholarly sources from publications like *Gamasutra*, *The Escapist*, *Polygon*, and designers’ own websites in addition to scholarly sources.

Fulop (cited in Wired Staff 1995) does not believe that games can be examined in terms of their similarities with films. He refers to a player-character as a ‘cursor’ and believes that the relationship between audience and protagonist is fundamentally different in films because when watching a film, an audience member imagines themselves as the protagonist, but while playing a videogame, the audience merely uses the protagonist to navigate ludic elements (Fulop cited in Wired Staff 1995: n.p.). Similarly, Frasca (2001: 168) states that it is ‘hard to argue that [videogame characters] have a personality’, and that characters must be given less characterisation as more freedom is given to a player.

If current assumptions about player agency prioritise player freedom, this means – based on this logic – they also prioritise reducing the personality attributed to characters. Frasca (2001: 168) asserts that most videogame characters are ‘flat’ and used for functional purposes – like in folk tales – rather than being rounded characters who undergo transformations throughout a tale or in some way surprise an audience.

Despite the assertion that games must be considered differently to other narrative-centric mediums, game studies has borrowed research methodologies of existing disciplines – such as creative writing and film studies – and used these tools to examine the weight of the narratives that games present. kopas (in Macklin 2017: 251) has emphasised that videogames are not just about the choices that players can make: games can be considered as ‘texts’ and can therefore be analysed ‘the same way one might look at a novel, film, or television series’. The meaning of games can be found in the characters, stories, and events that take place within their worlds (Macklin 2017: 251). By considering player agency through this lens and adding narratological discussion to the oversaturation of ludic exploration of agency in game studies, player agency can be seen as a tool or technique used to further a story, rather than as an ultimate ‘goal’ of game design.

### **Expanded understandings of player/audience agency**

By expanding the ways we consider agency in games, ‘we can start to better understand game experiences where a player has limited or restricted actions, but remains fully

engaged' (Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum 2010: 11). This also allows us to challenge the assumptions that developers make about 'what players want from their play experiences', particularly in regards to the way 'freedom' is currently described in a way that places it in conflict with narrative (Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum 2010: 11).

Contrary to critical discussion that represents ludology and narratology as antithetical, in many games, ludic elements coexist with and support stories, and vice versa (Frasca 2003: 3). Similarly, it is possible for the concept of player agency to coexist with pre-designed narratives; as Mallon (2008: 2) states, these two aspects of game design 'need not clash', which is 'contrary to certain arguments in the literature'. Although some players approach games 'ludically', Parsler (2010: 140) feels that 'the majority' make choices based on 'the way they have interpreted the narrative'. The 'disproportionate value' that has been given to the ludic elements of player agency shows limited consideration of how players can be engaged by narrative, and of how other agents in game texts – such as player-characters and NPCs – can also exhibit agency that players can collaborate with (Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum 2008: 262).

In some ways, it is understandable that player agency is considered more often than other forms of agency in games, as the ability for the player to experience a game world through 'choice', 'failure states', and 'interactivity' is seen as the key difference between games and 'every other art form' (Bruckheimer 2009: n.p.; Gaynor 2008). However, this does not mean that player interaction within games is the only aspect of games worth considering; nor does it mean that other narrative mediums do not incorporate interaction between text and audience. In their discussion of horror games and films, Habel and Kooyman (2014: 11) highlight that the boundaries between film and videogames are not as well-defined as some indicate, suggesting that films are not just a passive text to be absorbed by an audience. Audiences must still exhibit agency in response to films, including the choice to engage with and commit to a narrative, so that the film can cause an emotional response in that audience.

The idea of 'commitment' is explored in the work of Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum (2010: 115), who suggest that 'commitment to meaning' is an additional way of defining player agency that broadens its applications and can help people understand 'the pleasures of interacting with authored content' (Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum 2010: 113). The idea of 'commitment to meaning' broadens the existing understanding of player choice to not only the choices that a player makes within a game through an avatar, but also the player's choice to identify with and engage in a narrative. In this model, authorial influence does not need to be hidden, and audiences are able to work in collaboration with game designers to create meaningful experiences without necessarily relying on the player's ability to make meaningful in-game choices.

### **Intersection of player and character agency**

When discussed in creative writing scholarship, 'agency' adopts a different, assumed meaning to that found in game studies. 'Character agency' describes the perception that characters within a text have the ability to influence their own story and potentially the greater narrative arc. Despite the fact that these characters are following a narrative trajectory pre-determined by the author, an audience is able to attribute motivations and

intentions to characters (Parsler 2010: 136). This form of agency is used in creative writing as a lens for analysing the perceived control characters have over their narrative arcs; as Sanchez (2014: 85) describes it, ‘a character’s agency can be mapped through [their] desire, the obstacles that interrupt its fulfillment, and the destiny that results from the confrontation with these obstacles’.

Though uncommon in discussions of agency in games, this alternative meaning is not entirely unexplored in game studies. For example, in her study of text-based tabletop games, Hammer (2007: 74-7) defines two forms of agency in addition to that of the player – or ‘participant’: these are the agency exhibited by the characters and the agency exhibited by the framework. In this model, character agency describes the agency that characters – not their authors – have within the game world (Hammer 2007: 74-7). The systems involved in tabletop role-playing games are unmistakably similar to digital game systems, and therefore Hammer’s concepts of character agency can also apply to videogames.

However, some scholars do not believe that videogames have demonstrated a capacity for developing character agency. For example, Thomas (2006: 102) states that videogames are not as capable as films at depicting interactions between characters outside the audience’s control in a way that creates strong emotional reactions in audiences. Perhaps part of this issue in the way ludic approaches to games have not only limited discussions of narrative and agency, but have also limited what can be considered a game, disallowing linear and narrative-focused games from being connected with the label: while increased player agency (as it is understood in terms of choice or freedom) is heralded as one of the ‘sanctified best practices’ of game design, games that are narrative-driven and tell personal stories where authorial influence is celebrated, not hidden, are seen as ‘not games’ (Alexander 2017: 61).

Some game studies scholars have stressed that the stories within games are inherently different to those of other narrative mediums (Juul 2001: n.p.), and that therefore the role of a game designer cannot be compared to that of an author (Gaynor 2008: n.p.); however, despite this assertion, narrative designers who create story experiences for players rely on ‘traditional fiction and cinematic techniques’ in their dialogue, scene, and story development, particularly in cut scenes (Thomas 2006: 107). Narrative designers exploit understandings of style, plot, character, setting, and theme established in creative writing theory (Rollings & Morris 2000), and so these aspects of game design deserve further analysis in game studies.

The underexplored nature of how literature and film techniques are used in games can lead to these techniques feeling disconnected from ludic elements. For example, characterisation during cut scenes can be ‘neglected’ by ‘users and authors of games’ because they are seen as being ‘in the way of the interactive elements’ (Thomas 2006: 107). However, Hosking (2014: n.p.) suggests that this interactivity should not be considered inherently separate to characterisation. In videogames, it is through interacting – with characters, with the game world, and with the system – that players learn about the game’s narrative, and this act allows characters to seemingly make meaningful choices and interact with the player in return, which increases the player’s in-game opportunities (Hosking 2014: n.p.).

Without agency, it is impossible for NPCs to be fully characterised (Hosking 2014: n.p.). NPCs are powerful vessels in videogames, as they are not under the control of the player and seemingly have the power to act *upon* the player (Parsler 2010: 135). By appealing to the audience's perception that NPCs have the capacity to act, they are made to seem more real (Parsler 2010: 142), and this impacts on the verisimilitude of the narrative and the world in which it is taking place.

For example, in *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013), the developers made deliberate design choices to 'humanise' the player's NPC companion, Elizabeth, and make her relationship to the player-character, Booker, more engaging (Hosking 2014: n.p.). The developers placed objects in the game world that Elizabeth would comment on and interact with as a way of creating more genuine interactions between her and the player-character and, thus, between her and the player (Hosking 2014: n.p.). This choice intended to give Elizabeth agency so that the player felt like she was 'there for them' and was their 'partner in the experience' (Yin-Poole 2012: n.p.). However, despite the use of these techniques to emphasise Elizabeth's NPC agency, she is still mostly subject to the whims of the player and follows the orders of the player-character in most instances. She does not have intentions or motivations that are separate to the player, and so she becomes a vehicle for player agency, with her character agency being mostly superficial (Lucat 2017: 9).

Lucat (2017) compares *Bioshock Infinite* to *The Witcher 3* (CD Projekt Red 2015), finding parallels between *Bioshock*'s Elizabeth and *The Witcher*'s Ciri. In *The Witcher 3*, Ciri is granted more character agency than Elizabeth as she is not positioned as a sidekick for the player-character, but rather has her own combat strengths and her own narrative agenda, which she 'pursues independently of Geralt and the player' (Lucat 2017: 13-4). *The Witcher 3* reveals Ciri's power to the player through flashback sequences where the player is permitted to play as her for a short time, guiding her through her own pre-determined narrative; these sequences are not about the player's control, but rather the player being exposed to Ciri's own independence (Lucat 2017: 14).

Both of these games show that the agency of the player, player-characters, and NPCs is important, and that these forms of agency can work in tandem to create a more impactful narrative experience. Imbuing NPCs with a sense of autonomy can help humanise these characters and give their relationships with the player-character greater authenticity; however, *The Witcher 3* also shows that player agency is not always the ultimate goal of designing a game, but is instead a tool that can be used to strengthen the player's understanding of and engagement in a game's narrative.

### **Authorial intent and illusory agency**

In *Puzzled at GDC 2000: A Peek Into Game Design*, Kreimeier (2000) recounts a talk by Doug Church at the Game Developer's Conference in the same year, where he stated that, 'Our desire to create traditional narrative and exercise authorial control over the gaming world often inhibits the player's ability to involve themselves in the game world'. Kreimeier believes that adopting narrative models from existing mediums, like literature and film, imposes too much authorial intent on a game experience and thus

disengages the player. As an alternative, he suggests removing the notion of ‘storytelling’ from games and tells game designers to consider the ‘possibility that there might be little future for narrative in cyberspace’.

The assertion that amplifying player agency is the ‘goal’ in creating a videogame causes those who design and critique games to believe that the player or audience is ‘paramount’ (Brice 2013), thus dismissing the intentions of the designer. Although traditional creative writing outputs give the audience the opportunity for ‘the admiration for the genius in someone else’s work’, Gaynor (2008: n.p.) feels that the role of a game designer differs from that of other authors or creators: instead of designing work that the audience sees as belonging to ‘someone else’, he states that the game designer should strive to ‘provide the player with an intriguing place to be’ and allow players to craft their own narratives within that space. This is reflected in games that Gaynor has worked on with The Fullbright Company, such as *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company 2013) and *Tacoma* (The Fullbright Company 2017), which prioritise providing players with a place to explore over creating a linear story that reflects the intent of the designer.

However, these stories were still created by somebody, and their influence cannot be entirely erased; Thomas (2006: 112-3) laments the fact that artificial intelligence is currently not effective enough at mimicking ‘natural language’ and ‘convincing behaviour’ to create narratives, and that therefore a designer needs to contribute. He would prefer a designer’s intent not be visible at all.

To ‘solve’ this, Thomas (2006: 112) suggests providing players with ‘more robust authorship tools’, arguing that ‘narrative agency’ is primarily about the player’s ability to create their own story. Similarly, Mallon (2008: 13-4) suggests that ‘one of the largest challenges facing narrative-game design’ is the question of how to give players the opportunity to contribute to a game’s story, and believes that ‘unless we provide such opportunities, narrative ... risks being sidelined in the development of games’.

By celebrating authorship tools that allow players to write their own narratives or modify game systems as the ‘ultimate agency’ (Frasca 2001: 172-3), players are placed in conflict with the game worlds they inhabit (Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum 2010: 112) and, in turn, with the narrative-driven personal experiences often crafted by marginalised game creators (Brice 2013). ‘Play-centric’ or ‘player-centric’ models of design – which position the process of playtesting above all else and emphasise the player’s desires over the designer’s (Fullerton 2014) – have become the default (Brice 2013). While the process of playtesting can be used to ensure that a game has the designers’ desired impact (Fullerton 2014) or to hypothesise whether the game will be ‘successful’ (commercially or otherwise), positioning player-centric models of design as the best or only option furthers the narrative that the player is the most important agent in relation to a game, and that therefore the author is secondary.

However, as Thomas (2006: 112-3) mentions, it is (currently) not possible to entirely remove authorial influence from a text – and it is questionable that this goal, which is founded on a narrow understanding of agency, should truly be pursued. Smith (1994: 36) indicates that an audience’s imaginative engagement with any texts authored by somebody else (as opposed to narratives they have imagined themselves, such as when



daydreaming) will always be restricted by the constraints applied by that author. While one ‘solution’ might be attempting to craft the aforementioned ‘authorship tools’ that allow players to have authorial control over the games they play (Thomas 2006: 112), another is to alter our traditional models for what games seek to achieve – how might we embrace authorial intent, rather than attempt to disguise it?

As an example, Anna Anthropy’s *dys4ia* (2012) positions itself against traditionally accepted priorities in game design. The game system does not allow the player to choose the direction of the narrative, and the choices they can make within the mini-games that comprise the title often feel superficial. But this is a deliberate choice, used to emphasise aspects of Anna Anthropy’s autobiographical story – as Macklin (2017: 252) suggests, it makes sense that the player is unable to steer this narrative in any meaningful way, as ‘it’s not ours to choose, anyway’.

*dys4ia* propels the player through a series of ‘interactive glitches’, with the narrative continuing whether the player successfully completes each mini-game or not (Macklin 2017: 252). Many of these events end prematurely and imply that they may not have been ‘winnable’ at all. The game uses failure and the feeling of not being in control to tell the story of gender transition, which itself is a narrative of navigating – and not always succeeding – within a system (society) that an individual cannot dictate. Anna Anthropy ‘breaks the rules’ of game design to tell a story of ‘breaking the rules’ of society.

The mini-games in *dys4ia* use lines of evocative text and symbolic interactions that the player must reconcile with one another to create the narrative. The player’s agency in this instance is not their ability to control the actions that are taking place, but rather to understand and interpret these actions. This relates to Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum’s (2010: 112) definition of agency as ‘commitment to meaning’, which broadens definitions of player agency to include the choice a player makes to engage in a pre-designed narrative, as previously mentioned in relation to an audience’s active choice to engage with a film. By describing agency in this way, it allows space for players to work with designers – with the designer’s intent often represented in the motivations and choices of player-characters and NPCs – to create a game’s narrative together. Rather than positioning players as an audience that wishes to exploit systems and disregard authorial intent, this narratological approach considers the player as a ‘performer’ who works collaboratively with the designer (Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum 2008: 251).

To better understand collaborative models of storytelling, Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum (2008: 261) make a comparison to improvisational theatre, an interactive model that allows for the harmonious co-creation of narrative between performers. Improvisational theatre allows everybody to contribute to the construction of the narrative; this differs from games, where ludic-centric analysis suggests that only one person (the player) should be in control of the narrative trajectory and its interpretation (Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum 2008: 261). The concept of a game audience as ‘performers’ reveals alternative ways that players can interact with games, being engaged by the act of making choices that align with their pre-determined ‘role’ or player-character (as dictated by the designer) rather than having ‘full’ player agency (Tanenbaum &

Tanenbaum 2008: 252). By positioning the player and designer as collaborators, the tension between authorial control and player agency is lessened (Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum 2008: 261).

The distinction between players making their own choices – or being led by choices suited to a pre-designed player-character – relates to Fullerton’s (2014: 110) discussion of agency and empathy within the dramatic element of ‘character’. She uses the term ‘agency’ and ‘empathy’ as the ends of a spectrum, and states that the balance between them is ‘the most important’ consideration unique to game characters. She believes that the choices players can make, including the potential for ‘creativity, role-playing, and identification’ are at the opposite end of a scale from ‘the potential for players to develop an emotional attachment to the character, to identify with their goals and, consequentially, the game objectives’. To illustrate this, Fullerton states that it is easier for players to identify with and experience agency when playing with a player-designed avatar in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) or *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (BioWare Austin 2011) than in games featuring pre-designed characters with intricate backstories, like Kratos in *God of War* (SCE Santa Monica Studio 2005) or Wander in *Shadow of the Colossus* (SIE Japan Studio & Team Ico 2005).

Although Fullerton (2014: 111) also states that player-created characters have ‘as great a potential for empathy (if not more) as story-driven characters’, placing these terms at opposing ends of a scale makes them seem like opposing forces. It suggests that players cannot experience agency in games when characters have been pre-designed with motivations and backstories – which may suggest that player and character agency cannot coexist. This relates to MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler’s (2007: 5) suggestion that roleplaying is not the same as having agency, as a player having freedom within a game system is distinct from their ability to assume a role within that system.

However, I posit that these points about agency / empathy or agency / roleplaying are not actually discussions of agency versus not-agency at all, but rather discussions of two different *types* of agency. Player agency in terms of freedom or choice within a game system can coexist with the player’s agency in choosing to enter that game system, as well as with the agency of the player-character and NPCs that also inhabit that system. To return to *dys4ia*, in this game the player is made to feel as though the game is controlling them, not the other way around; however, they are still given opportunities to act upon that game world in ways that – though potentially superficial – initially feel meaningful. The player can make choices within the game, as well as choosing to play the game, and the player is able to interpret these decisions as they wish, while having them contextualised by the visible influence of the author. This subversion of traditional player agency in *dys4ia* relies on the idea of *illusory* agency.

‘Illusory’ or ‘perceived’ agency is well-established in ‘more passive media’, according to Parsler (2010: 137), who emphasises that traditional narratives work because audiences can imagine that characters have their own desires and the ability to act on them, despite them being fictional and unable to influence the narrative trajectory. He gives the example of *Die Hard* (McTiernan 1988), stating that an audience might perceive the protagonists – John McClain and Hans Gruber – as having agency, but in

reality ‘their capacity to act as individuals exists only in the imagination of the viewer’ (Parsler 2010).

Games complexify this, with some characters able to be controlled by the player in a way that might influence the narrative, creating a tension or a potentially collaborative relationship between player/s and the designer/s. Illusory agency can be used in games to bridge the gap between ludic and narratological approaches – giving players the illusion of meaningful choice (Murray 2016: 126) or authorship (Mallon 2008: 2) in order to better engage them in the narrative experiences they are not conditioned to expect in games. If the common understanding of player agency is about players being able to make meaningful choices, then illusory agency is about players *feeling* like they can, despite their actions leading only to ‘incidental conclusions’ (Parsler 2010: 136). The intention of illusory agency is to give players something to do in a sequence that implies they have more power than they actually do, thus creating an emotional investment for the player (Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum 2010: 113).

Bruckheimer (2009: n.p.) believes that illusory agency – the act of deceiving players into believing games are more interactive than they are – is the solution to the conflict he sees between the linearity of authorial control and the interactive aspects of videogames. Habel and Kooyman (2014: 3-4) agree that it is the balance between the narratological and the ludic that creates the joy in videogames, and the ways a game oscillates between letting a player be in and out of control are what engages them in play, rather than giving them constant freedom.

MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler (2007) use *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* (Troika Games 2004) as an example of illusory agency. In this game, players feel as though they have freedom and are making choices that impact the narrative arc, but the trajectory of the narrative will not be altered by the player’s actions. It uses devices, such as providing players with character creation options, to make players feel as though they are influencing the course of events and to encourage them to remain engaged in the narrative because they been superficially involved in the story that transpires (MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler 2007). This game system demonstrates the grey areas in Fullerton’s (2014: 111) agency / empathy scale, with players feeling illusory agency by making choices about their character, but also identifying and empathising with the character’s pre-designed trajectory. A player’s commitment to a narrative by feeling empathy for a character is one form of agency (Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum 2010: 112), just as their ability to actualise their own desires within a game system is another. The act of feeling empathy is closely related to the concept of ‘identification’ in terms of ‘how spectators relate to fictional characters’ (Smith 1994: 36).

### **Additional forms of agency**

This paper primarily focuses on player agency as freedom and/or choice, player agency as commitment to meaning, character agency as the perceived autonomy of non-player-characters, and illusory agency as the intersection of these types of agency. It is important to note that these are forms of the overarching concept of ‘agency’, and that additional forms also exist outside the scope of this paper.

For example, as mentioned earlier, Hammer (2007: 74-7) determined that ‘framework agency’ is a component of tabletop roleplaying games, and defines this as the way a game system restricts the behaviours of players and controls the narrative outside of the influence of non-player-characters. The agency of game systems and the ways they reflect authorial intent warrants further exploration.

Similarly, Smith (1994: 36) suggests that discussions about identification often revolve around the ways an audience might ‘vicariously experience the thoughts and feelings of the protagonist’, but in film, the additional consideration of audiences ‘identifying’ with the *camera* have also been highlighted (Metz cited in Smith 1994: 37). Typically the ‘camera’ perspective in a film is an external third-person view of characters, but this is complexified when considered in relation to videogames. While sometimes a game’s ‘camera’ is a third-person view, it is also often the first-person perspective of a character. Sometimes the camera can be moved by the player, and sometimes it cannot be. Sometimes one or more of the characters being shown can be controlled by the player, and sometimes all control has been temporarily suspended during a cut scene or cinematic. Regardless of this complexity, the result is similar – just as the audience in a film is able to interact with a pre-determined narrative by identifying with characters or the perspective of the camera, they are able to do the same with characters and the camera in videogames – whether these characters are player-controlled or not, and whether this camera is in fact also the perspective *of* a character. This act of identification is another form of agency that warrants further investigation.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the common understanding of agency in game studies as being related to the freedom of players to make meaningful choices within a game system, typically without being able to see the designer’s influence on that game system, I have established that there are additional lenses through which to consider agency in games. Player agency itself can be seen in broader ways that incorporate Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum’s (2010: 115) concept of ‘commitment to meaning’, which blurs the line between agency and empathy in games, and suggests that the player’s choice to identify with a character (who has their own agency) or engage in a story can be defined as simply a different form of agency. Players do not need to be in conflict with a game narrative or system, and can work collaboratively with designers to experience an author’s story or to construct a story alongside them, with player agency being used as simply another technique for enhancing a player’s emotional connection to a narrative rather than the ultimate ‘goal’ of game design.

Other forms of agency are also worth considering in relation to game studies, such as (non-player-)character agency, framework agency, and camera agency. Similarly, creative writing could benefit from engaging more deeply with the idea of player/audience agency, and use these theories of audiences interacting with texts and texts interacting with audiences to create more engaging narrative experiences.

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