

This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.

Author(s): Kerttula, Tero

Title: "What an Eccentric Performance" : Storytelling in Online Let's Plays

Year: 2019

Version: Accepted version (Final draft)

Copyright: © The Author(s) 2016

Rights: In Copyright

Rights url: <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en>

Please cite the original version:

Kerttula, T. (2019). "What an Eccentric Performance" : Storytelling in Online Let's Plays. Games and Culture: A Journal of Interactive Media, 14(3), 236-255.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412016678724>

Games and Culture

"What an eccentric performance": Storytelling in Online Let's Plays

Journal:	<i>Games and Culture</i>
Manuscript ID	GAMES-16-0033.R2
Manuscript Type:	Original Manuscript
Keywords:	let's play, narrative, video games, youtube, online, video
Abstract:	<p>In this article I examine the phenomenon called Let's Play and conduct a narrative analysis on two Let's Plays made of Sierra Entertainment's Phantasmagoria games. The Let's Plays tell viewers a story different from the one told in the games, that is, they tell the story of the player rather than of the game. In that story, the experience of playing a video game is revealed to the audience. This story would be hidden without the player-narrators know as Let's Players around the world. I conduct my analysis by describing seven different narrative elements that form the narration of a Let's Play and explain how these elements together form this story of the player.</p>

SCHOLARONE™
Manuscripts

“What an Eccentric Performance”:
Storytelling in Online Let’s Plays

Video games are a form of interactive entertainment. But what if the games were stripped of their interactivity and published in the form of strictly written stories that could be interpreted as movies and books are? This is where the Let’s Play comes in. A Let’s Play (LP) is a narrated video or a piece of writing about playing a video game. The selected game is played in a free tempo and the type of narrative is up to the narrator. There is no single rule of how to make an LP, as they come in varied styles. (Ligman, 2011, pp. 8–11; Hale, 2014, pp. 6–8; Croshaw, 2011, p. 2) The main idea is to show footage of gameplay, usually with a narrative (Kerttula, 2014, pp. 82–83; Croshaw, 2011, pp. 1–2). There are many videos that are called LPs but which lack a narrative. These videos are more often referred to as longplays, because they include nothing but the complete gameplay itself (FAQ. (n.d.)).

In this article the I study the narrative elements of an LP. In addition, I attempt to determine how the narration of an LP alters the narrative of the game being played. Because the videos make the games non-interactive, I am also interested to find out how the gameplay is narrated and represented when stripped of interactivity. In this sense, the games represented in LP’s get connected to wide array of different media material, such as movies and literature. Therefore, it is important to examine the narrative aspect of the LP’s, because via them, the games converge to other media in ways they perhaps could not have before.

The two games selected for closer analyses in this paper are Phantasmagoria (Sierra On-Line, 1995) and Phantasmagoria 2: A Puzzle of Flesh (Sierra On-Line, 1996). They are horror adventure games, the first being written by Roberta Williams and the latter by Lorelei Shannon. In 2008, the gamer Noah Antwiler (aka. Spoony) made an LP of the second game (see Antwiler 2008). Originally, the videos were split into 15 twenty-minute episodes, but these have now been combined into five hour-long episodes. For this reason, the continuity between the five episodes is uneven. Antwiler’s live-action LP of Phantasmagoria 2: A Puzzle of Flesh is still one of the most well-known of its kind currently available on the Internet. Its impact can be seen, for example, in the user reviews of the game when it became available at Good Old Games as a digital download. Many users quoted Antwiler’s LP in their reviews, with one user, spiritzarconian, mentioning how it has affected the popularity of the game:

WHAT AN ECCENTRIC PERFORMANCE

2

“I can tell by the comments alone that I’m not the only person who bought this because of a certain Let’s Play out there, and frankly that’s the best reason to get this.” (Spiritzarconian, 2010)

After Antwiler’s LP, many more LPs of both Phantasmagoria games emerged. One of those is EnsignRicky011’s written LP of the first Phantasmagoria (2014). This LP is interesting because at its beginning, the writer acknowledges the influence of Antwiler’s LP. However, the one major difference between the two LPs in question is that the written LP lacks audio commentary. The author uses only screenshots and only a few video clips to prove his points, but the commentary is made by text only.

The live action LPs seem to contribute to what Glen Creeber (2011) considers a continuation of television history: digital homemade stories for the vast audience of the Internet (p. 603). Additionally, as Michael Strangelove (2010) states, today’s audience has a wide array of media material to use when rewriting the meanings of existing products (p. 163). LPs are a prime example of this because without the original source material and the possibility to record it, they would not exist at all. From the perspective of the story, LPs can be placed roughly into two categories: (a) written stories with screenshots and (b) videos. There is also a style that combines these two by using video but narrating the gameplay with text instead of with voice. For example, on her YouTube gaming channel Let’s Player PinkKittyRose narrates her video gameplay with Final Fantasy-style text boxes.

When it comes down to the personalities, gaming journalist Ben Croshaw (2011) has pointed out that many Let’s Players seem to think that the videos are more about the personality of the player-narrator than about the narrative of the game itself. By doing so, the player-narrators place the focus on themselves rather than on the games they are playing. (p. 2).

Many of the elements in LPs also fit into what Henry Jenkins (2006) calls convergence culture, in which the role of the audience is essential not only as commenters but also as creators. The Internet makes all types of media converge, but through the audience and the way that new media is consumed and created by them, the meanings begin to alter (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 16 & 270). As mentioned, the convergence in this case means that the LP’s bring the games also closer to other media and alter the form in which the games were originally presented.

Interactive Narration Without Interaction

Phantasmagoria and Phantasmagoria 2: A Puzzle of Flesh are straightforward adventure games, where the story proceeds linearly as the player solves puzzles along the way. In both, the main plot has no diverging branches, except for the ending of the second game, which the player decides in the last moment of the game. This is what Chris Crawford (2003) calls a puzzle system, where solving puzzles moves the story forward, even though exploring and interacting with the game world mixes up the order where things between major plot points happen (pp. 259–260).

Now, in a puzzle system such as Phantasmagoria, the player is assumed to spend significant time solving the puzzles and experimenting. Though the game is linear, it allows the player to spend his time freely in the game world. Therefore, as Jesper Juul (2004) has suggested, watching the gameplay is simply not the same thing as playing the game itself (p. 133). As James Newman (2013, p. 62) writes, videos of gameplay generally provide tips and insight into game mechanics and techniques only. A player can acquire deeper insight into the story by exploring and trying various aspects of the game, but ultimately the player cannot actually interfere with the story—or in the cases of games with multiple endings, stories—that the writers have planned. The search for the story elements gives an illusion of interactivity, but in reality the story is linear, even if there are possibilities for different stories in multiple playthroughs (Iuppa & Borst, 2007, p. 224).

The Phantasmagoria games are interesting objects of study for more than their puzzles and narratives. Both games in the series were part of attempts by Sierra to bring cinematic qualities to gaming, thus narrowing the space between games and film. The cutscenes as well as the game scenery are designed to resemble a movie, with lighting, camera angles, and other visual elements one would recognize from a movie (e.g., King & Krzywinska, 2006, pp. 114–115). In the mid-1990s, Sierra, like many other companies, tried to fuse movies and video games in many of its products. Along with their introduction of new titles such as Phantasmagoria and Urban Runner (Sierra On-Line, 1996), the interactive video format was also introduced to existing franchises—such as Gabriel Knight, Police Quest and, to some extent, King’s Quest, even though the seventh installment in the oldest of the Sierra franchises used animated video cutscenes instead of full motion video.

WHAT AN ECCENTRIC PERFORMANCE

4

Phantasmagoria and other Full-Motion Video (FMV) adventures by Sierra differ, however, from other attempts to capture movie-like qualities and storytelling in a video game in how they fused elements from classic adventure-gaming with cinematic elements. Many of the early FMV games were referred to as rollercoasters, where the player had limited options to affect the gameplay, story, and the playtime. There were a few exceptions, such as Congo the Movie: Descent into Zinj (Funsoft, 1995) and Ripper (Game-Tek UK, 1996), but those games used first-person perspective, whereas in Sierra games the protagonist is always visible and the use of camera angles is similar to that found in traditional adventure games.

The amount of movie material in both Phantasmagoria games is huge. From a ludological point of view (e.g., Aarseth, 2004, p. 362), it is true that the movies and gameplay are intertwined so that the movies affect gameplay and in some sense, vice versa. This is true not only in gameplay, but also in a game's narrative and visuals. Whenever a player can be active, the game attempts to mimic, as much as is possible, the same style that the movies have. This mimicry is why I have used narrative analysis to examine the LPs in this study. The narrative elements show how the narration is a necessary element of adding the dimension of the player to the whole story. I analyze and refer to the original games and their own narrative in the selected pieces in order to make a contrast between the game narrative and the LP narrative. This contrast also makes it easier to point out the possible shifts in genre the LPs make.

The studied LPs are clearly humorous, seemingly drawing their humor from the lack of quality in the games. The acting and gameplay in general are consistently ridiculed, and, in the opinion of the players, the games are not very good. This is a view supported by reviews of Phantasmagoria 2: A Puzzle of Flesh at the time of its release. It was received poorly by both critics and gamers around the world (see Phantasmagoria: A Puzzle of Flesh). This humorous perspective pervades the narration.

Phantasmagoria

The first Phantasmagoria was released in 1995 with significant hype and advertising behind it. The game was lauded as the first real symbiosis of horror movies and video games. The enthusiasm and effort behind the project were clear. The game came on 7 CD-ROM discs, where each disc represented one chapter of the story. There was an element of marketing in this decision, because at that time no other game was supposedly as huge in size as Phantasmagoria

WHAT AN ECCENTRIC PERFORMANCE

was (Main, 2011). The game was also a remarkable success, selling over a million copies and becoming, at that time, Sierra On-Line's best-selling game (Phillips, 1996).

Phantasmagoria tells the player a story of a young, recently wed couple, Donald Gordon and Adrienne Delaney, who move into an old mansion in the country. Donald is a professional author who is supposed to get enough space and peace to complete his latest novel, which leaves Adrienne, the story's heroine, unemployed for the time being. The house they move into seems to be haunted by the spirit of an evil magician named Carno. The magician's spirit begins to possess Donald, who starts pursuing his wife around the mansion. In one of the most controversial scenes of the game, the possessed Donald even rapes his wife. This much debated scene was one of the points in story where writer Roberta Williams felt that she would need to make players connect with the story and characters. The emotions provoked by such scenes were, according to Williams, necessary for the horror elements of the whole story (Jong & Williams, 2006).

The story begins with basic drama with the necessary introduction of the characters and locations. As the evil spirit becomes discovered, the horror elements start emerging along with the psychological terror and ghost stories. By the end of the game, the story assumes the form of gore and splatter horror, especially in the scenes where the protagonist dies. In comparison to its sequel, the world in the first Phantasmagoria is much more open, as only a few entrances are blocked at the beginning. The Carno manor is a huge place with many aspects to discover and try. In the visual narrative, the horror elements are evident. From mysterious crypts and demonic paintings to the color scheme and the huge number of mirrors, everything in the house seems to both intrigue and intimidate Adrienne.

Phantasmagoria 2: A Puzzle of Flesh tells the story of Curtis Craig, who works as a copywriter in a corporation called Wyntech. As the story unfolds, we learn that Wyntech is up to no good and allowing no one to interfere. The game is played in the usual point-and-click fashion, where the player controls Curtis by pointing at things on the screen with the computer's mouse, allowing Curtis to interact with his surroundings. Unlike the first game, Phantasmagoria 2 incorporated science fiction into the story, including interdimensional travel and aliens. According to its writer, Lorelei Shannon, these twists in the plot were criticized by many fans, although she also claimed that the elements were in the story right from the beginning (Bellatti et al., 1998).

WHAT AN ECCENTRIC PERFORMANCE

6

Even though the story is not a continuation of the original *Phantasmagoria*, its structure is similar. After the introductions, the horror elements are of a more psychological kind, but the splatter horror comes much sooner than in the original. By the end of the story, the horror takes one further turn into gory science fiction. Furthermore, as Michael Mateas (2004, pp. 25–26) has noted, many puzzle-based adventures force the player to randomly try to combine different inventory objects, therefore distracting the player somewhat from the narrative. This is also the case with *Phantasmagoria 2*. Although it can be seen that the puzzles are part of the overall narrative, what actually happens is that the wandering around and trying different objects brings the story to many halts. Then again, a successful trial-and-error attempt is usually rewarded with more video that moves the story forward and these parts are always connected to the just solved puzzle.

Phantasmagoria 2 limits the places a player can visit in a number of ways. For example, a player cannot exit Curtis's house at the beginning without finding the proper items. The game also incorporates a minimal world map, where locations appear only when the time is right. The player cannot enter these locations whenever, because some of the puzzles and story elements must be uncovered before moving on to the next one. This design also makes the story of the game much more linear than its predecessor. The player is forced to do things in a certain order so that other things happen. For example, after certain plot points, the map opens up a route to Curtis's psychiatrist. However, if the player tries to enter the office too soon, Curtis says that it is not time for his appointment yet. This can get confusing, because the game never provides the exact time when Curtis is supposed to have the appointment. The only solution is to first solve the given puzzles and keep trying to get to the office. Despite that, both games fit Crawford's description of a puzzle system. While the player is active, the stories of the games are on hold until something is accomplished, be that a solved puzzle or a discovered dialogue.

Let's Plays as Stories

The narrative structure of a video game is very much different than for movies or novels. Because some video games let the player explore and in some cases even choose the way the story unfolds, the relationship between a story and the gameplay is meaningful. Especially when writing for an open world video game, the writer needs to make the player go through all important parts of the story, so that the story could be complete. (DeMarle, 2007, pp. 72–74). Even for *Phantasmagoria* this is true, even though the story is linear. The writer cannot dictate

WHAT AN ECCENTRIC PERFORMANCE

7

where the player should go next and cannot assume that the items for example are picked up in a written order.

An LP is more straightforward structurally, as the audience cannot interfere with the decisions of the player-narrator. Therefore, the narrative has to be analyzed with traditional methods. One way to decipher the narrative of LPs is through, for example, the Hero's Journey model of Joseph Campbell and Syd Field's three-act model (Jacobs, 2007, pp. 27–31). These two approaches, however, leave many questions unanswered. What if, for example, Antwiler had played the game before? What would the expectations be and how would the narrative change? Could the game still surprise the hapless hero? Did he try to follow the three-act structure, or is it only because of the game's own narrative? Because of the different backgrounds of Let's Players, the phenomenon must also be analyzed with a range of methods.

These differences are also why I have decided to view LPs through narrativization, that is, through how the players tell the story of their experience and with what elements. As Hayden White (1987) has written, narrativization could be seen as a way to transform historical material into a story (pp. 1–25). In both the live-action and written LPs, this is exactly the case. Both LPs enter into a dialogue with the source material and give new meanings to the original narrative. According to Monika Fludernik (1996), this kind of narrativization helps to understand the original material better. Regarding White's theories, Fludernik also comments on how, instead of narrativization, White should use the term storification, because he seems to be searching for plot, with the traditional story elements of a beginning, a middle, and an end (pp. 31–35). When it comes to LPs however, there is a plot as stated above. The reason for this is easy to see: the source material has a traditional plot, so the ways the players narrate the playing experience has to follow this structure, even though the story differs from the original. In her book *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, Catherine Kohler Riessman (2008) identified seven characteristics and functions that a narrative can have. LPs fulfill these criteria in their own way, because they certainly possess a distinct rhetoric, one in which the narrator leads the audience to the story of how the actions and story in the game really went (pp. 8–9). This framework is useful in this study, as it makes it possible to get deeper insight into what the player-narrators are actually saying in the videos—how the stories form for what specific elements.

To begin deciphering the stories, I have first played both of the games as well as watched and read both of the LPs several times in order to acquire an in-depth view of what the story is

WHAT AN ECCENTRIC PERFORMANCE

8

about. By comparing the original narration of the game and the narration of the LPs, I started to search for elements with which the LPs make their own narrative structure and at the same time alter the narration of the original games. I refer to the Let's Players as player-narrators, to make presence to the particular dual role they are taking. This is important to notice, as the player-narrators are documenting their playing experience with the narration. If the player-narrator would not be playing the game while narrating, the essence of the story would probably be different.

At first I started to take notice about the themes the player-narrators lines in the LPs and making categories from there. One by one I then started narrowing the themes into smaller number of different elements that the narration held. From there, I identified seven elements, that fulfilled the themes the narration had: descriptive narration, story narration, audiovisual narration, game mechanics narration, intertextuality, reflective narration, and alternative narration. These elements are not the ones defined by White or Riessmann, but rather inspired from those. Even though a line may be vaguely commenting on the mechanics of the game, via the other elements the comment can acquire an intertextual dimension while also providing the story with alternative narration.

Descriptive narration is what the player-narrator sees in front of him and what he knows or does not know about the game. In the live-action LP, a descriptive narrative line can be as follows: "Got a screwdriver, a picture, there's a dead rat? A condom, is that a condom? Whatever that was."

The line is linked to an image in which we see various items in a drawer. All of those items are present and visible, and the player-narrator tells us what he sees. Therefore, in this line Spooky only tells the viewer what is in front of him right now, without adding anything to the story. This also applies to written elements in the game that are not originally narrated by voice, but become so via the Let's Player.

In contrast, the items on display are not narrated in the game, because they can be interacted with and the game interface provides the player with more specific information about the items in view. This serves the game's own narrative in the way that Curtis is merely looking at items he knows are already there. Similar lines are also present in the written LP: "Car parts? Is that what I'm seeing in here?"

WHAT AN ECCENTRIC PERFORMANCE

9

This narration can also be considered as story exposition. In the game itself, the items seen in the drawer must be figured out by examining them with the interface. Because this possibility does not exist while watching an LP, the exposition is carried out by the player-narrator, he is thinking out loud while playing.

Descriptive narration also contains background information. These lines share information with the viewer about the game, the player-narrator or anything that has something to do with the LP session. It can work alone, or it can have, as in this line from the live-action LP, self-reflection on the side, under the descriptive narration:

“I haven’t heard much about this one, so I’m going in basically blind, although I have heard it has a lot of mature themes and a lot of gore to it, so let’s check it out.”

Here Spoony makes it clear he has not played the game before, an important piece of information when watching the LP. On the other hand, he has clearly read or heard about the game and he expresses an expectation of mature content. The background information provided at the beginning of the written LP also reveals aspects of the game at hand:

“Phantasmagoria is a horror FMV game published in 1995 by Sierra, and designed by Roberta Williams of King’s Quest fame... Was it controversial? Yes. So much that Australia outright banned it.”

Here the player-narrator of the written LP informs readers of issues they should probably be aware of before continuing. In this case, the ban in Australia refers to the number of controversial scenes in the game, which gives the reader an idea of what should be expected from the game and the LP to come.

Story narration has much more to do with the original storytelling of the game and the story of the LP in question than just basic descriptive narration. This level includes all the sub-elements that interfere with the narration of the story. Here’s an example from the live-action LP: “Oh, you see that? It said something there! It said ‘usurper’ or something like that!”

Spoonies says this at the part where the supposedly demonic word flashes on the computer screen in Curtis’s cubicle so quickly that it is difficult for the player to see. In the game, these flashing words are meant to be Curtis’s delusions. There are several parts where something happens on the screen, changing the meaning of words and images in the scenery. In the game, these work as another window to Curtis’s mind, to give the player an idea that perhaps something is wrong in the protagonist’s head. In the LP, the experience of these events is shared

WHAT AN ECCENTRIC PERFORMANCE

10

between the viewer and the player-narrator. The events pass by quickly, so in this case Spooky says what he has just seen, as an instinct. As these events are important in the story for understanding the main character better, the player-narrator narrates them so that they are not missed.

In the written LP, there is more story narration because of the absence of moving images. Therefore, the player-narrator must explain what is happening in the scenes, so that the reader can understand how the plot of the game is evolving. One example of this kind of narration goes as follows: “Adrienne squeezes a few drops of...wine?...out and proclaims ‘It’s Good’.”

These lines are usually connected with a scene where a cutscene is playing and the narrator must explain to readers what is going on. For example, in this case, the line is paired with a screenshot in which Adrienne is turning the tap of a barrel, but the further information and the subsequent line of dialogue would be missing without the story narration by the player-narrator.

When the players’ narration of the story lacks other defining elements, the players merely narrate the story of the game to the audience while at the same time giving some insight into their mindset. As both examples show, the player-narrators are unsure of what is happening in the game, which makes them narrate events in order to help understand what the game is trying to say. For this reason, I was careful in my transcoding to include only lines related to the original story under story narration.

Audiovisual narration comments on the sounds and images of the game. This narrative usually critiques the audiovisual design of the game, but there can also be story-telling elements linked to the aesthetics of the game. In the live-action LP of *Phantasmagoria 2*, Spooky provides audiovisual narrative like the following: “Green cubicles and purple walls, that’s how we do things at Joker Corp!”

This line seemingly comments on the unsightly aesthetic design of Curtis’ office (Figure 2), while also connecting the visual to somewhere else with an intertextual cultural reference. The colors remind the player-narrator of the Joker, the arch-villain from the Batman universe, and he shares this insight with the audience.

The game itself does not explain the colors and the aesthetic design of the office has nothing to do with the narrative. These kinds of audiovisual cues are perhaps present to give the playing environment distinction, to make it stand out from the other environments in the game.

WHAT AN ECCENTRIC PERFORMANCE

11

Therefore, the way the player-narrator narrates the surroundings gives these places new narrative meanings and connects them to the overall story outside of the game narrative.

In the written LP, the narration of the audiovisual aspects is similar to that in the live-action one: “I love how it’s this nice cozy kitchen in most respects, cute little tapestry, and then there’s the fucking demon engraved over the stove.”

In these two examples, the player-narrators comment mostly on the art direction of the game, rather than on the graphics from a technical point of view. With the art direction comes, of course, commentary on the visual architecture of the game, such as this line in the written LP:

“Okay Adrienne. I can accept the possibility that you bought this house without looking inside it. But. Did the scowling giant face attached to the house escape your attention somehow? Anyway, from this location, all I can do is go back, so let’s head to the right this time.”

This line refers to the giant head protruding from the side of the Carno Mansion (Figure 3). Even from the game’s own narrative point of view, this particular piece is hard to understand, because the aforementioned head cannot be interacted with in the game. The elements do, however, serve the narration more than the aforementioned color scheme of Phantasmagoria 2. The Carno Mansion is supposed to be scary and gothic, to give the player a feel of a sinister environment. Despite the lack of possibilities to interact with the surroundings, the head and other decorative elements in the mansion visualize the story in a way that is consistent with the horror genre.

Game-mechanics narration comments on the gaming elements of the subject in question. At this level we can find answers to such questions as what the interface of the game is like, how it feels to play and use the game, and what is done right as well as wrong in the playability of the game.

This way the game-mechanics narration seems to take place in what Salen and Zimmermann (2004, p. 67) call the “space of possibility,” as the player-narrators often narrate the mechanics from the point of view of what actions are possible. In the live-action LP, one can see that this refers to not only the game interface, but also to the movement in the game world: “Time to work on that Pensky-file...[shouting] if I ever get back to my cubicle! This is so awkward!”

WHAT AN ECCENTRIC PERFORMANCE

12

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

In this example, as mentioned before, Spooky has not played the game before and has to get accustomed to the interface and the mechanics of the game. This leads to situations where Spooky has no idea what he should do or, for example, how to combine items. In the example, Spooky has gotten lost in the office building because of badly designed viewpoints. Instead of seeing this as an audiovisual problem, he refers more to the overall design and playability of the game. There is also a reference to the interface here, as the game seems to lose the sense of direction when the room is changed.

In the written LP the player-narrator does not make it clear if he has played the game before or not. However, the way he narrates the game-mechanics and interface suggests that maybe this is his first time with the game:

“The skull in the lower left will introduce itself as “The Hintkeeper” if you click on it, and warns that using him too many times will “ruin the game”. So, yeah, gonna avoid that one. The thing on the left is unclickable at the moment, and I’m gonna assume that’s because I have no inventory.”

This passage reveals that the player-narrator has not played the game before, because instead of telling the reader directly what the different elements in the interface are, he makes assumptions and shows caution towards the game’s hint system.

The element of *intertextuality* connects the game mechanics, visuals, and story to other forms of popular culture, such as movies, music, and other video games. In the games themselves, the intertextuality generates deeper meaning for the events and requires knowledge of certain cultural artifacts, even though it is possible to play the game without the knowledge (Kücklich, 2006, pp. 105–107). For the LPs, the intertextuality works in a similar way: you can watch the video without knowledge of the reference, but you will get more out of the narrative with it. For example, under the story narrative, an intertextual cultural reference, such as this one made in the live-action LP, is not alone: “I’m Mike Wallace. I’m Lesley Stahl. All this and Andy Rooney in 60 minutes.”

Spooky says this line over the opening cinematic of the game as standard narration. The line refers to the CBS television news program 60 Minutes and suggests that the current visuals of the game resemble the show’s opening credits. Should you not know the show that the line refers to, it adds little to the viewer’s knowledge.

WHAT AN ECCENTRIC PERFORMANCE

13

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

In the written LP, there are also a number of intertextual references to other LPs, including to Spoony’s LP of Phantasmagoria 2: “Oh man, a mirror. Now, if the Let’s Play of Phantasmagoria 2 has taught me anything, mirrors can be fun!”

This line assumes that the reader has watched Spoony’s LP and knows why the mirrors are so seemingly important. There is also a narrative assumption here. In Phantasmagoria 2, the mirrors are a part of the story. When the player looks in the mirrors, they reveal many insights into the protagonist’s mind. However, in the first Phantasmagoria, the mirrors trigger only cutscenes in which Adrienne checks her make-up and hair, and thus contribute little to the actual storyline.

The intertextuality with other media artifacts is also present in the written LP:

“Why, what a charming New England village...in Stephen King’s Maine”

Or

“Okay, so this is what it’s like inside David Lynch’s head.”

The tone of intertextuality in the written LP is the same as it is in the live action one. Even though the audience can only see screenshots instead of video, the images are enough to explain the references to those who are familiar with, in this case, the work of the author Stephen King and the filmmaker David Lynch.

The intertextuality is also different from the references found in the games themselves. For example, Phantasmagoria 2 has a few scenes where it refers to the popular culture of the mid 1990s, such as in one passing reference to the musician MC Hammer. However, the array of intertextuality seems to be much wider in the LPs, including references to literature, movies, music, and sometimes even to other LPs. It is also important to note that because the LPs have been made much later than the games themselves, the potential variety of intertextual references is also much broader, which can be seen in connections made to, for example, Internet memes.

LP in Youtube and other video-services can also be seen as a form of vlogging, recorded gaming diaries. However, as Michael Wesch (2010) has written, the vlogs are introspective, continuous monologues (p. 26). Let’s Plays on the contrary can be quite social. It’s not unusual to see a Let’s Play narrated by multiple people. Quite many Let’s Players also reflect on their viewers, such as Finnish Let’s Player wildeem, who plays games online with her viewers and can even have a conversation online with them during the recordings (Kerttula 2014, p. 85). This results in *reflective narration* (e.g., Strangelove, 2010, pp. 74–77). In Antwiler’s case, because

WHAT AN ECCENTRIC PERFORMANCE

14

his whole LP is divided into episodes, the audience has given him some tips in the comment section between the episodes and he uses these hints to his advantage.

“So, as you can see, my first step was to, of course try to click the wallet on myself, which didn’t work. But, I later learned by caving in and reading the instructions and by the input of you loyal listeners out there, by uh...if I click on the eyeball on the lower left corner it should probably search the wallet.”

This line is about a puzzle Antwiler could not solve in the previous episode because of the seemingly cumbersome interface. Therefore, the audience that had played the game before gave him information about the interface and some hints to the puzzle instead of revealing the answer. This seems to work and the puzzle is solved. The line also contains some narration of game mechanics—specifically of how Antwiler has tried to use the interface—but it is through the audience that he finally understands how it actually works.

Reflective narration seems to be rare, however. Many LPs, especially of shorter games, are posted as single, standalone works. This does not leave room for the audience to provide tips to the player. In the written LP, the commentary from the audience is absent, because the whole text was put up on the site at one time. In addition, even though there is an option to comment, no comments have to date been made. So, instead of direct dialogue between the audience and the player, the player-narrators reflect with the audience in different ways during the adventure.

“Already stuck, guys. I don’t know. (Live-action LP)”

“It’s worth noticing that if you didn’t grab the snowman earlier, you can make it into the theater without being caught, and there Adrienne thinks she sees Harriet... (Written LP)”

These two examples from the LPs show how the player-narrator takes the audience into account by either recognizing them or by giving them some information about the gameplay. So even though there is not necessarily actual social interaction between the player and the audience, the player-narrators are aware that their stories are being watched and read. The player-narrators speak to the audience even if the audience is not there.

This brings us to the self-reflection (Kerby 1991, pp. 39 – 40) of the Let’s Player. These are moments when the player-narrator refers to something about himself, be that his earlier experiences in the genre, his feelings and his thoughts about the game, or anything that has to do directly with the player himself. These moments are usually brought up with explicit narrative,

WHAT AN ECCENTRIC PERFORMANCE

15

1
2
3 such as this revealing comment by Spoony: “You know, this is awfully too much like my normal
4 day at work, so remind me again why I’m playing this?”

5
6
7 In this self-reflection, we learn something about the player-narrator. These lines reveal to
8 the audience, for example, the player-narrator’s relation to the game. Depending on the player,
9 there can also be lines with information about the daily life of the player-narrator, but these lines
10 seem to connect to the game experience in one way or another.
11
12

13
14 In the line above, the viewers learn something about the player-narrator’s personal life,
15 mainly his profession. It seems that the player-narrator works in some sort of office outside his
16 online personality and it also hints that Spoony cannot support himself by just making the videos.
17 This aspect of his life is later detailed more in his vlogs and blog entries, but even if viewers do
18 not see those they learn something about the player-narrator.
19
20
21

22
23 These elements deal almost completely with the game’s own narrative, and this leads into
24 perhaps the most peculiar of the identified narrative elements: *alternative narration*. This type of
25 narration molds the original narration of the game in the direction the Let’s Player chooses. On
26 many occasions, it serves to ridicule the game, but it also seems to bring something new to the
27 silent moments of the game and can even affect the persona of the game character. Alternative
28 narration can include alternative dialogue or a new monologue to replace the original lines from
29 the game. On some occasions, the alternative dialogue comes up after the original line and
30 supplements the line with further meanings:
31
32
33
34
35
36

37 “Curtis: I’ve read every book I own at least twice.

38
39 *Spoon*y: Maybe I should go to a library.”

40
41 This kind of dialogue between the game’s protagonist and the player is a common style of
42 narration for Spoony. However, the style is strange overall, because it is not so much dialogue as
43 it is a continuation of the original line. By that, Antwiler assumes the role of Curtis Craig for a
44 moment and takes himself away from his role as Spoony, only to return to it a moment later.
45
46 Spoony also adds dialogue to the silent parts of the game. For example, Spoony remarks “What
47 an eccentric performance!” in a scene where Curtis is in a nightclub and tries to talk to a person.
48
49
50

51 This person does not respond. Instead, he only looks at Curtis, lifts his sunglasses and
52 smiles. By again assuming the persona of the protagonist, Spoony changes the meaning of the
53 original scene completely, in this case giving personality to an otherwise meaningless character.
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

WHAT AN ECCENTRIC PERFORMANCE

16

Alternative narration, however, plays out as an omniscient narrator. For example, in the opening scene (Figure 1) where there is no narration from the game, Spoony narrates the scene with his own lines: “Start off slow with those electrical shocks, if you go too high, he has nowhere to go.”

At this point, the narration of the game itself can be heard and Spoony replaces it with the narration of his own. The viewer can actually hear what is being said in the game, although Spoony’s voice is notably louder.

In the written LP, the dialogue between the main characters and the narrator is very different, because we cannot hear the original dialogue in real time. In a few examples the player does add some alternative narration or monologue in the written LP, such as the scene in which Adrienne tries out a magical wishing machine. Here the player captions the image with the phrase, “I wish I was big!”

In the actual gameplay, the machine greets the protagonist with an evil prophecy. However, this result does not satisfy the player, who then leaves the role of Adrienne and returns to his own: “Hey, that didn’t answer my wish at all!”

There is still alternative narration to be found in the written LP though. For example, after the opening scene the player shows us a still image of Donald (Figure 4) and makes up his own line for the situation: “Somebody kept me up last night.”

As Spoony’s LP of Phantasmagoria 2 progresses, the frequency of the different types of narrative elements begins to diverge. In the first two hours, there is much more narration related to the game mechanics than in the final hours. This difference is most likely because Spoony is playing the game for the first time. In the later hours, alternative dialogue and narration occur more often due to a lack of need to comment on the now learned gameplay. Narration about the audiovisual aspects is always present without any change in frequency.

As mentioned previously, Phantasmagoria 2 has two endings and the live-action LP shows viewers both by editing in footage of each one. In this way the audience learns the whole storyline of the game and acquires a complete picture of the events that unfold. Showing both endings is possible because the previous decisions that the player has made, except for the final one, do not affect the ending. This is also explained at the ending of the LP.

It can also be seen that the different elements are usually interconnected with one another, so that one line can have multiple elements and perspectives to it. Although the

narration could be studied from a single perspective—intertextuality, for example—the web of elements in the narration is dense, making it a single complete story with connections even to itself. These shifts in the narration then make up the structure of the story, which diverges from the narrative structure of the game itself. This structure adds up as the story of a player, not of the game. It’s also important to notice, that the story of the player is never the same, as all player-narrators tell their own stories. The story could be seen as a historical text of how the events of the game went from one person’s cultural perspective, which the audience listens from their own perspective (White 1978, 84 – 87).

Table 1 shows the amount of narration types at the beginning and end of both LPs. The written LP has fewer total lines than the live-action one, but the amounts indicate some interesting points. The most obvious change between the beginning and ending is the amount of descriptive and alternative narration in Phantasmagoria 2. Although initially there are many types of descriptive narration occurring, towards the end of the live-action LP the alternative narration becomes more prevalent, amounting to a third of all narration in the final two episodes. In addition, the amount of alternative narration is much lower in the written LP.

Another significant difference is that, when compared by the amount of lines in total, the written LP contains far more descriptive narration than the live action one does. By looking at the structure of the written LP, it is clear that the narrator has to describe his actions and the cutscenes more than he would have to in the live-action LP. However, the author of the written LP, EnsignRicky011, mentions that he has been influenced by Spooky’s live-action narration. This influence can be seen in his writing style, but as indicated in Table 1, the narrative elements are different from Spooky’s performance.

At the end of both LPs, however, the amount of gameplay narration declines. One reason for this could be the nature of the game structure: in both games the ending is more straightforward than the beginning. A second possible reason could be that both players have learned how to play the game, therefore reducing the need to continue explaining the gameplay elements any longer.

Conclusion and Future Studies

Taken together, the elements outlined above contribute to the form of a Let’s Play. It can be seen that the narrative of an LP draws on other forms of popular culture, such as reviews, comedic television shows, and Internet memes. By mixing these elements together, LPs create a

WHAT AN ECCENTRIC PERFORMANCE

18

unique entity but at the same time tell us subtle things not only about the narrators, but also about the world surrounding them. All of the elements mentioned do not necessarily appear in every LP. If the focus is on, for example, the gameplay, there might not be as much commentary on the audiovisual aspects of the game. However, the two LPs analyzed in this article represent the possible elements of the narration well.

LPs also narrate some narrative gaming elements that are more difficult to observe. According to Janet Murray, even the puzzle game Tetris could contain dramatic content (Murray, 1997, p. 144). While the dramatic content in the game itself can be questioned, watching an LP of Tetris (see Deceased Crab 2008) perhaps shows what this dramatic content could be through the narration. Excitement, disappointment, victory, and defeat are all in plain view as the player proceeds through the gameplay. This is how Let's Players alter the narration of the source material. LPs ultimately reveal a hidden layer of the game narrative: the story of the player and the experience.

This easiest part of this hidden layer to point out is the gameplay, that is, those parts where the game does not continue the story. Just as a Let's Player could be narrating a game of Tetris, in the Phantasmagoria games the narration does not cease as the game is being played nor when the gameplay itself is narrated. So, referring again to Hayden White, the narrativization in these two LPs does, in fact, transform the material into a story, but the story differs from the original. Both LPs discuss the source material and give new meanings to the original narrative. The narration also connects the games to the media world differently than they were upon their first release. As the games age and new media products arrive, the Let's Players bring these games to a much larger network of referential material.

Of course, this kind of narration could also be found, for example, in movie commentaries or online audio commentaries such as RiffTrax. The one big difference between the audio commentaries and LPs is that LPs argue not only with a game's story, but also with its mechanics. Even though LPs are not reviews, they certainly include critical commentary.

However, it is clear that the games in the LPs are merely objects and vessels for the story. Even though the gameplay is an important point of the narrative structure of an LP, there is a shift of narrative and of protagonist that moves the focus from the game to the player. To put it simply, an LP is a story about playing a video game in which the main character is the player, not the original protagonist of the game. What cannot be accessed by deconstructing the structure

WHAT AN ECCENTRIC PERFORMANCE

19

1
2
3 of an LP, though, are the affection of the personality and the voice of the Let's Player. In future
4 research I aim to examine the reasons behind the popularity of LPs as well as what the audience
5 sees in the videos that makes them worthwhile. I cannot, therefore, bypass the player-narrator
6 himself.
7
8
9

10 The theoretical framework used in this study can be used in many ways in other studies.
11 From the narrative elements discovered here, it would be easy in future studies for example take
12 the element of intertextuality and analyze it deeper. By deconstructing the narrative structure, I
13 can identify those aspects the audience wants to hear in the narrative. If they consider
14 commentary on the game mechanics important, or maybe on the story and characters of the
15 game, the narrative they look for is easily identified. A second line of future research is an
16 analysis of the visual narrative in LPs. We can hear the commentary of the player-narrator, but
17 we also observe his actions visually while in the game. Not all actions are commented on
18 audibly, so therefore the visual narrative elements of how the player-narrator interacts with the
19 game world needs to be examined.
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29

30 This study has been funded by the Academy of Finland, and is a part of the research
31 project Ludification and the Emergence of Playful Culture (276012).
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

References

- Aarseth, Espen. 2004. Quest Games as Post-Narrative Discourse. Marie-Laure Ryan (ed.) *Narrative across Media. The Languages of Storytelling. Frontiers in Narrative*. (pp. 361–374) Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Antwiler, Noah (2008, October 28). Let's Play Phantasmagoria 2: A Puzzle of Flesh [Hour 1] [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://spoonyexperiment.com/phantasmagoria/lets-play-phantasmagoria-2-a-puzzle-of-flesh-hour-1/>
- Bellatti, A., Larme, A., O'Sullivan, L. (Interviewers) & Shannon, L. (Interviewee). (1998). *Lorelei Shannon Interview* [Interview transcript]. Retrieved from Phantasmagoria 2 Overview Memorial <http://anthonylarme.tripod.com/phantas/p2intls.html>
- Crawford, Chris. 2003. Interactive Storytelling. *The Video Game Theory Reader*. (pp. 259–274) New York: Routledge.
- Creeber, Glen. 2011. It's Not TV, It's Online Drama: The Return of Intimate Screen. *International Journal of Culture Studies*, 14. (pp. 591–606). Thousand Oaks: Sage. DOI: 10.1177/1367877911402589
- Croshaw, Ben. (2011, March 8.) Let's Talk About Let's Play [Web log post]. *The Escapist*. Retrieved from <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/video-games/columns/extra-punctuation/8703-Let-s-Talk-About-Let-s-Play>
- Deceased Crab (2008, October 4). Let's Play Tetris 1: A-Type [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=URMRcixgQE8>
- DeMarle, Mary. 2007. Nonlinear Game Narrative. *Game Writing: Narrative Skills for Videogames*. (pp. 71–84). Boston: IGDA.
- EnsignRicky 011 (2014, n.d.). Let's Play PHANTASMAGORRRRIA!!! [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://libraryforlorn.blogspot.fi/p/lets-play-phantasmagorrrria.html>
- FAQ. (n.d.) World of Longplays. Retrieved from http://www.longplays.org/viewpage.php?page_id=1

WHAT AN ECCENTRIC PERFORMANCE

- Fludernik, Monika. 1996. Towards a “Natural” Narratology. London: Routledge.
- Hale, Thomas. 2013. From Jackasses to Superstars: A Case for the Study of “Let’s Play”.
[Unpublished Master’s Thesis]. University of Roehampton, MA.
- Iuppa, N & Borst, T. 2007. Story and Simulations for Serious Games. Oxford: Focal Press.
- Jacobs, S. 2007. The Basics of Narrative. *Game Writing: Narrative Skills for Videogames*.
(pp. 23–42). Boston: IGDA.
- Jenkins, Henry. 2006. Convergence Culture: Where Old Media and New Media Collide.
New York: New York University Press.
- Jong, Philip (Interviewer) & Williams, Roberta (Interviewee). (2006, July 6.). *Roberta Williams*
[Interview transcript]. Retrieved from Adventure Classic Gaming
<http://www.adventureclassicgaming.com/index.php/site/interviews/198/>
- Juul, Jesper. 2004. Introduction to Game Time. *First Person. New Media as Story, Performance and Game*. (pp. 131–142). Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Kerby, A. P. 1991. Narrative and the Self. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Kerttula, Tero. 2014. Peli, jota ei voi pelata - pelivideoiden kulttuuri. *Pelitutkimuksen vuosikirja 2014* (pp. 81–87). Tampereen yliopisto. Retrieved from <http://www.pelitutkimus.fi>
- King, G. & Krzywinska, T. 2006. Film Studies and Digital Games. *Understanding Digital Games*. (pp. 112–129). London: Sage.
- Kücklich, J. 2006. Literary Theory in Digital Games. *Understanding Digital Games*.
(pp. 95–111). London: Sage.
- Ligman, Kris. 2011. Let’s Play Super Rutgers RPG: Interactivity by Proxy in an Online Game Culture. [Conference paper]. University of Rutgers School of Communication, NJ.
- Mateas, Michael. 2004. A Preliminary Poetics for Interactive Drama and Games. *First Person. New Media as Story, Performance and Game*. (pp.19–33). Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Main, Brendan (2011, March 8). House of Horrors. *The Escapist*. Retrieved from
http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/video-games/issues/issue_296/8699-House-of-Horrors
- Murray, J. 1997. Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative on Cyberspace. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Newman, James. 2013. Videogames (Second edition). London: Routledge.

WHAT AN ECCENTRIC PERFORMANCE

22

Phantasmagoria: A Puzzle of Flesh (n.d.) Retrieved from

<http://www.mobygames.com/game/phantasmagoria-a-puzzle-of-flesh/mobyrank>

Phillips, Catherine. (1996). Phantasmagoria: A Puzzle of Flesh. InterAction, Volume 2, Number 9. (pp. 64–66). Retrieved from

http://www.sierragamers.com/uploads/24082/Interaction/027_InterAction_Volume_9_Number_2_Summer_1996.pdf

Riessman, C. K. 2008. Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Salen, K. & Zimmermann, E. 2004. Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Spiritzarconian (2010, March 2). So Bad it's Good [User review]. Retrieved from

http://www.gog.com/game/phantasmagoria_2

Strangelove, Michael. 2010. Watching Youtube: Extraordinary Videos by Ordinary People. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Wesch, Michael. 2009. Youtube and You. Experiences of Self-Awareness in the Context Collapse of the Recording Webcam. Retrieved from

<http://krex.k-state.edu/dspace/handle/2097/6302>

White, Hayden. 1978. Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press

White, Hayden. 1987. The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation. Baltimore: University Press.

Tables and Figures

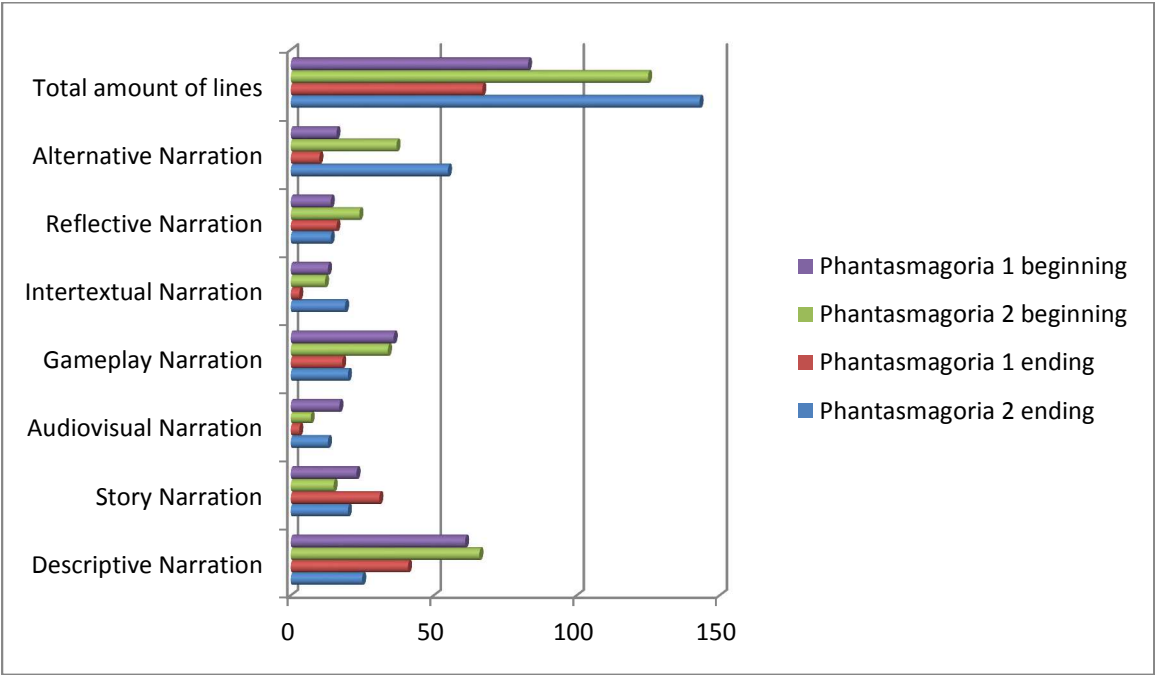


Table 1. Amount of narrative elements at the beginning and end of the Let's Plays

WHAT AN ECCENTRIC PERFORMANCE

24



Figure 1. Phantasmagoria 2: A Puzzle of Flesh opening scene.



Figure 2. Phantasmagoria 2: A Puzzle of Flesh gameplay scene.

WHAT AN ECCENTRIC PERFORMANCE



Figure 3. Phantasmagoria gameplay scene.



Figure 4. Phantasmagoria opening scene.