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# 1. Introduction

“My sources are unreliable, but their information is fascinating.” (Brilliant)

This quote by author and cartoonist Ashleigh Brilliant hints at why many narratologists may be fascinated by the unreliable narrator. Unreliable narrators can make for engaging and interesting storytelling by introducing elements like unpredictability, uncertainty, and mystery to a story. However, the use of the unreliable narrator in storytelling also raises the question of what makes a narrator unreliable? How can someone recognise the unreliable narrator? How and why is the unreliable narrator used? Understandably, the concept of the unreliable narrator has garnered a lot of attention in literary studies. Even though the examination of the unreliable narrator has spread to other fields like film studies, the medium of video games has been largely neglected. Even with the emergence of the academic field of Computer Games Studies in the year 2001 (“Computer”), which has brought an increased focus on the narrative potential of video games, scholars have not yet explored the implications of the unreliable narrator on video games.

One reason might be the ongoing discussion within the academic field of Computer Game Studies about the narratological potential of video games, which has brought forward many different approaches when talking about video games. One possible approach is to treat games as an outlet for humanity's physiological need to play (Pratt). This fundamental idea behind video games and their design is supported by the academic field of ludology. Ludologists believe that video games are games and the act of playing—the playfulness, the action—are the central aspects of gaming. Representatives like Markku Eskelinen or Espen Aarseth recognise that video games incorporate various forms of art (music, visual art, etc.), but do not see them as art themselves. In their opinion, ludology is not about story and discourse but actions and events. Narratologists like Janet Murray, on the other hand, argue that games are similar to traditional art forms because they can evoke emotions, express views and

opinions, and can be open to interpretation by telling a story. Narratologists, therefore, refer to ideas, terms, concepts, and analytical tools taken from traditional literature studies when dealing with video games.

Video games combine features from different media to form a new and unique entertainment medium whilst providing the user/audience with a feature that other traditional media cannot, namely the element of interactivity. Whilst literature, film, music or theatre require the audience to experience the narration in a rather passive way, video games need the user to act and be the participatory, driving element in the narrative, and as a result creating an unprecedented level of immersion. However, the level of the user's influence and participation in the narration has its limits as he/she walks along paths defined by rules and restrictions established by the authors and programmers. Nevertheless, as video games have become more sophisticated and technically advanced, the possibilities of the user to influence the game and the game influencing the player have increased as well. Nowadays it is quite common to give the player at least the illusion of choice and freedom. This results in the possibility to experience, and even influence, the narrative and narration in individual ways. For example, the player might have the choice of how far he is willing to get involved or immersed in the story and along which path the story might take him/her. The game might provide different sources, exposition like hidden audio logs or side quest, to learn more about the game world or the narrative, influencing the player's perception, understanding, and choices. One result of the narrative and reader/player becoming increasingly intertwined is the increased possibilities for and the potential importance of the unreliable narrator in video games.

My research is leaning on the narratologists' approach towards video games without dismissing and rejecting the contributions and ideas ludology provides for an analysis of the unique medium that is video games. Therefore, it accepts and supports the notion of video games having narrative capabilities and aims to add to the ongoing debates in the field of game studies. Many researchers in the field of game studies have debated the narratological potential

of video games and how the unique features of the medium can be used for various storytelling purposes. Yet, the topic of the unreliable narrator has not been covered by scholars in conjunction with the medium of video games and game theory. As a result, this thesis will focus on the analysis of the unreliable narrator and its influence on video games and vice versa. Consequently, this work tries to find answers to the following questions:

- How is the unreliable narrator established in video games?
- What methods/tools do game developers use to establish unreliable narrators in video games?

To accomplish this goal, an understanding, description, and analysis of the basic concepts of narratology and the unreliable narrator must be developed. These concepts are used to identify the unreliable narrator and compare and contrast how he/she works within a different medium. Additionally, a basic understanding of video game design is necessary to determine differences between narratives in video games and other media, and how the uniqueness of video games influences the narration and the narrator, and ultimately the perception and experience of the audience. Therefore, my work includes chapters that outline key concepts, ideas, and discussions concerning the unreliable narrator in literature and the question if video games can be a storytelling medium. This will be followed by detailed analyses and discussions of the narrative-driven video games *Dragon Age II, Spec Ops: The Line, Portal,* and *Mass Effect 1-3* in order to determine the factors and elements which are used to establish the unreliable narrator in video games.

In literary theory, unreliability is defined as a rhetorical device that is used intentionally by the author, but occasionally unreliability is accomplished due to the author's ineptitude. The concept itself was proposed by Wayne C. Booth, and he defined the narrator as "reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not" (158-159). This sparked further extensive research on the concept of unreliability in literature. Within this research focus, we can identify the rhetorical approach and the constructivist/cognitivist approach.

The rhetorical approach sees the author as the main reason/source of the narrator's or the story's (un)reliability, as it can be based on story facts but also the author's norms and intentions. However, the audience must pick up on the norms and has to be in accordance with the norms and values of the author to decipher the unreliability of the narrator (Phelan 47-48). Whilst some representatives of the rhetorical approach researchers have identified different types of unreliability (e.g. Hansen, Phelan), others have been interested in the features and causes of unreliability (e.g. Olson, Riggan, Rimmon-Kenan).

The constructivist/cognitivist approach differs from the rhetorical approach by the idea that the unreliability of the narrator depends on the interpretation of the text by different readers. Tamar Yacobi has defined five key mechanisms by which readers resolve textual incongruities and is therefore seen as the main representative of the constructivist/cognitivist approach.

In general, the rhetorical approach claims that the author is the source of the narrator's unreliability, whilst the constructivist approach focuses on the reader's reaction to the narrator. Nevertheless, it is important to mention, that both approaches are not clearly distinguishable from each other, but they tend to overlap in various areas and ideas. Nünning is one of those researchers who favour a combination and synthesis of both approaches.

As the concept of the unreliable narrator has its roots in literary studies, the analysis of unreliable narration has been predominantly focused on prose fiction. However, since the 1970s some scholars have turned their attention to the unreliable narration in film and other media or genres as well. Researchers like Chatman, Currie, Bordwell, or Kozloff have discussed the impact of techniques, effects, or features that are unique to film, TV, or radio. Unique features like music, voice and cinematic camera can add further elements to the audiences' perception of the unreliability of a narration. However, whilst the focus of scholars has expanded towards analysing more modern media like films and TV, the discussion of the unreliable narrator has not yet reached the youngest visual media, namely video games.

# 2. Narratology

Narratology commonly is defined as the study of narrative and its structures. More precisely, it is interested in the mechanisms and procedures which are part of story-telling. Peter Barry states that the focus of narratology is not the analysis of individual stories but "to study the nature of 'story' itself" (224). However, an important distinction must be made between 'story' and 'plot'. Whilst the former is "the actual sequence of events as they happen" (224), the latter is "those events as they are edited, ordered, packaged, and presented in what we recognise as a narrative" (224)[1]. The story starts at the beginning and lays out events chronologically. In contrast, the plot, as a version of the story, is not bound by chronological restrictions. This chapter will provide an overview of some important contributors to the field of narratology and its basic concepts.

## 2.1. Aristotle, Propp, and Genette

Barry identifies Aristotle, Vladimir Propp, and Gérard Genette as three key figures when it comes to the history of narratology (223-224).

The Greek philosopher Aristotle described 'character' and 'action' as the main elements in a story. In general, the action, or plot, is used to reveal the character. The plot itself consists of the three key elements '*hamartia'* (a sin or fault), '*anagnorisis'* (recognition or realisation), and '*peripeteia'* (turn-around or reversal). By analysing different stories, Aristotle identified similarities and differences and centred his theory of the three key elements around the main protagonist of the story (Barry 224-227).

Like Aristotle did with Greek stage tragedies, Russian Formalist critic Vladimir Propp investigated similarities in Russian folk tales. He analysed hundred Russian folk tales and developed a list of thirty-one functions, from which these folk tales used parts to construct their

[1] Barry – Beginning theory 2017

narratives. A tale does not have to contain all thirty-one functions but can take as many functions as needed. However, the order of the functions must stay the same. For example, the villain cannot be defeated before the hero is tested and gains a magical item that helps him defeat the villain. Furthermore, Propp described possible character types which are called seven spheres of action:

1. The villain
2. The donor (provider)
3. The helper
4. The princess (a sought-for-person) and her father
5. The dispatcher
6. The hero (seeker or victim)
7. The false hero (Barry 230)

By combining and using the different blocks from the list of the thirty-one functions and the seven spheres of action, the plot of any folk tale in the Russian corpus can be generated (Barry 227-231).

French structuralism (1966-1980) played a decisive role in "the formation of narratology as a methodologically coherent, structure-oriented variant of narrative theory." (Meister 34) It was heavily influenced by Russian Formalism and Propp's take on morphology. Ideas and concepts by Ferdinand de Saussure (structural linguistics), Claude Lévi-Strauss (structural anthropology), and Noam Chomsky (transformational generative grammar) impacted French structuralism as well. Algirdas Julien Greimas, for example, proposed six functional roles of characters: "main vs. secondary character, opponents vs. helper, sender vs. receiver" (Meister 36). Roland Barthes suggested the terms 'kernels' and 'satellites', with the former being events and parts of a story that cannot be excluded, while the latter being used to supplement the basic plot (Meister 34-39).

Even though Propp did important work in the field of how simple character archetypes can be used to form complex realistic fiction, his work does not answer the questions about how narratives are told. This question was examined by Gérard Genette (Barry 231) whose findings will be summarised next.

Generally, a narrative can be presented through ‘mimesis’ or ‘diegesis’. During the former mode, the narrative is dramatized and presented directly, as it shows rather than tells the reader what is happening. It often uses dialogue with direct speech. Diegesis can be described as a summarising mode. By providing an overview the narrator tries to link information as efficiently as possible. These modes are often used in combination to tell a story (Barry 232-233).

‘Focalisation’ is defined as the point-of-view from which the story is told. Basically, a distinction between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ focalisation can be made. Internal focalisation uses the character’s internal viewpoint. It provides access to information, like the character’s thoughts and feelings, that is normally inaccessible to outsiders. External focalisation, on the other hand, deals with the viewpoint outside of the character. When the author provides access to all the thoughts and feelings of multiple characters, this is called zero focalisation, which is commonly known as ‘omniscient’ narration (Barry 233-234).

The storyteller can be further classified into ‘covert’ or ‘overt’ narrator. A narrator that cannot be identified as a distinct character is called a covert, effaced, non-intrusive, or non-dramatized narrator. An overt, intrusive, or dramatized narrator is defined as a distinct character with a name, personal history, and personality. Whilst the covert narrator is seen as a neutral storyteller who simply functions as a telling medium, the overt narrator has a personal connection, may it be as a witness or a participant, to the story told. These dramatized narrators can be divided into ‘heterodiegetic’ and ‘homodiegetic narrators’. The former is not part of the world the story is set in, whilst the latter is someone who is a participating character in the story and part of the fictional world (Barry 234-235).

Time references are a common tool in narratives for referring backwards or forwards in time. ‘*Analeptics’*, or flash-backs, are used to refer to events in the past. ‘*Proleptics’*, or flash-forwards, refer to events happening later in the narrative. Usually, narratives begin in the middle

and use flash-backs and flash-forwards to develop a story and engage the reader (Barry 235-236).

Stories are not always one-dimensional and straight-forward. Often authors use multi-layered narratives to tell their tale. These 'frame narratives', or 'primary narratives', consist of 'embedded narratives' (secondary narratives). Genette also calls the embedded narratives 'meta-narratives', and often they are the main story whilst the frame narrative provides, as the name says, the frame or setting for the story. Frame narratives can be classified into 'single-ended', 'double-ended', or 'intrusive narratives'. The single-ended narrative describes a narrative that does not return to the frame narrative after the embedded story ends. The double-ended narrative one re-visits the frame narrative. The intrusive narrative returns occasionally to the frame narrative during the narration of the embedded story (Barry 236-237).

The writer has multiple possibilities to represent speech and thoughts in a text. The most obvious choice is the use of direct speech. Usually, the speaker can be marked as the speaker through an attached phrase, which is called 'tagging', but the combination of direct and untagged speech is also possible. Furthermore, the use of indirect speech is also a common way of representing speech and thoughts in texts. These different ways can be used for different effects. Genette described them as a model similar to layers and called them 'mimetic speech', 'transposed speech', and 'narratised speech'. Each layer gets progressively further away from the actual spoken words, with mimetic speech representing the closest and narratised speech the furthest Barry (238-240).

## 2.2. Poststructuralism and "New" Narratologies

The poststructuralist period of narratology (1980-1999) was characterised by the importing of concepts and theories from other disciplines. Whilst Seymour Chatman discussed narratology in connection to visual narratives, Mieke Bal and others pointed out the importance of

narratology for the analysis of intertextuality and intermediality. Furthermore, Susan S. Lanser explored the influence of gender on narratology and its consequences on the point of view and mode of presentation by referring to feminist studies, and Marie-Laure Ryan extended narratological models and theories to artificial intelligence. But the postclassical phase did not only import and adopt concepts from other disciplines. It also exported concepts and theorems and therefore played an important role in the so-called "narrative turn" (Meister 40-41)

The post-classical and "New" narratologies brought a shift from the structuralist to the cognitivist approach. Important contributions by Monika Fludernik and Andrew Gibson challenged the text-based and structuralist viewpoints. Surveys by Ansgar and Vera Nünning grouped the new narratologies into eight categories. According to Meister (42-47) three out of those eight categories, namely 'contextual narratology' (analysing narratives in cultural, historical, thematic, and ideological contexts), 'cognitive narratology' (focus on the human intellectual and emotional processing of narratives), and 'transgeneric narratology' (using narratological concepts in non-traditional domains), are "the dominant methodological paradigms of contemporary narratology" (44).

## 3. The Unreliable Narrator

Unreliability in literary narratives is often used as a rhetorical device. It provides the reader with a deeper understanding of the narrator and is the signpost for his/her trustworthiness. Unreliability is often a conscious decision by the author for the deeper characterisation of the narrator. However, narratorial unreliability can also be the result of authorial oversight or limitations, and therefore lead to unwanted side-effects.

When looking at unreliable narration as a key concept of narratology two different groups can be identified leading the discussions around the concept. Representatives of the

rhetorical approach to unreliability focus on the relationship between the implied author and the implied reader to assess unreliability in texts. The constructivist/cognitivist approach claims that unreliability depends on the individual reader and his/her interpretation of a text (Shen).

In this chapter, I will take a closer look at the rhetorical and constructivist/cognitivist approaches regarding unreliability in literature. This basic overview of the main representatives of both approaches will cover the most important ideas and concepts of the unreliable narrator in literature.

## 3.1. The Rhetorical Approach to the Unreliable Narrator

### 3.1.1. William C. Booth

In 1961 William C. Booth proposed the concept of unreliability, and its intentional use by the author, in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction.* He discussed the relationship between the reader and the author, and how the author, the narrator, and the reader interact. To make this relationship possible, Booth proposes the existence of the 'implied author', whom he describes as "the author's 'second self'' (151). Booth suggests that this implied author is a superior, purposefully created version of the real author. However, the narrator is not necessarily the same as the implied author. Booth distinguishes between a 'dramatized narrator', who is usually different from the implied author, and the 'undramatized narrator', where there is no distinction between author and narrator (151-152).

On the topic of unreliability, Booth argues that the distance between the implied author and the narrator helps in judging the fallible or unreliable narrator. According to Booth, a narrator is "reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not." (158-159). To be unreliable the narrator does not have to be deceptive on purpose, but quite often he/she is not aware of

certain deficiencies that make him/her unreliable (159). Consequently, the unreliable narrator is defined by exhibiting a different moral standard than the implied author (Hansen 227).

James Phelan, as a supporter of Booth's implied author, defines unreliable narration as "a mode of indirect communication" ("Estranging" 224). More precisely, the implied author "communicates with his or her audience by means of the voice of another speaker addressing another audience." ("Estranging" 224) The relation between the implied author and narrator can be seen on a very wide spectrum. This spectrum ranges from "mask narration" ("Estranging" 224) on the one end, where the implied author delivers his/her ideas through the character narrator, to the other end of the spectrum, where the unreliability of a narration is based on the three main axes of communication (the 'axis of facts and events'; the 'axis of understanding/perception'; the 'axis of values') ("Estranging" 224).

### 3.1.2. James Phelan

For Phelan, the narrator's function is to report, to interpret, and to evaluate. He/she acts as the teller and discloser, The authorial audience reinterprets what is told. Furthermore, Phelan suggests that "unreliable reporting occurs along the axis of characters, facts, and events; unreliable reading (or interpreting) occurs along the axis of knowledge and perception; and unreliable regarding (or evaluating) occurs along the axis of ethics and evaluation." (*Living* 50).

Phelan also identifies six types of unreliability. These six types can be divided into two larger categories. The first category includes 'misreporting', 'misreading', and 'misevaluating' (misregarding). The second one consists of 'underreporting', 'underreading', and 'underregarding' (*Living* 49-51). Generally, the difference between the first and the second category is based on the difference between providing wrong or only insufficient information. Misreporting occurs due to the narrator's lack of knowledge or mistaken values. Misreading is often the result of faulty knowledge or perception, and misevaluating involves the narrator's

ethical values and evaluation of situations and characters. Underreporting is the result of the narrator withholding information and telling less than he/she knows. When the narrator interprets a situation, character, or event because of a lack of knowledge, perceptiveness, or sophistication, underreading occurs. Underregarding may be the result of an insufficient ethical judgement by the narrator (Phelan, *Living* 51-52).

It is important to point out, that multiple types of unreliability often interact with each other, and a narrator can be unreliable in multiple ways. By proposing this taxonomy, Phelan tries to move away from the binary approach regarding reliability and unreliability (*Living* 53). Instead he proposes a new distinction regarding the technique of unreliable narration, namely 'estranging unreliability' and 'bonding unreliability'. The former "underlines or increases the distance between the narrator and the authorial audience" ("Estranging 223), and the latter "reduces the distance between the narrator and the authorial audience" ("Estranging" 223-224). In estranging unreliability, adopting the narrator's perspective, overlooking the inconsistencies in his/her reports, interpretations, or evaluations, increases the distance between the authorial audience and the implied author ("Estranging" 223-225). In bonding unreliability, the implied author endorses the unreliable narrator's values, morals or ethics, which decreases the distance between the narrator and the authorial audience, even though the authorial audience recognizes the narrator's unreliability. Phelan distinguishes between six subtypes of bonding unreliability: (1) literally unreliable but metaphorical reliable; (2) playful comparison between implied author and narrator; (3) naïve defamiliarization; (4) sincere but misguided self-deprecation; (5) partial progress towards the norm; and (6) bonding through optimistic comparison ("Estranging" 226-232).

The first subtype gives the authorial audience reliable metaphorical insights despite the narrator being unreliable along the axes of facts/events and understanding/perception. In the second subtype the implied author "uses unreliable narration to call attention to similarities or contrasts between himself as teller and the narrator as teller" (Phelan, "Estranging" 228). The

third subtype uses the naivety of the narrator and his/her unique perspective to close the perceptual distance between the narrator and the audience. The fourth subtype, sincere but misguided self-deprecation, creates a bonding between the narrator and the audience through a different evaluation of ethical and moral values. The fifth subtype occurs often with different variants of unreliability based on norms. The final subtype, bonding through optimistic comparison, is successful when the narration compares estranging unreliability to something less estranging and the reader evaluates one situation as better than the other. This is especially useful when a comparison between multiple narrators within a single narrative is necessary (Phelan, "Estranging" 226-232).

### 3.1.3. Seymour Chatman, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, and Dorrit Cohn

Seymour Chatman supports Booth's notion that unreliable narration is an ironic form. Instead of evaluating the reliability of the narrator based on his/her personality, the implied reader reconstructs a narrated story and uses the level of discourse to identify inconsistencies. Throughout an established secret communication between the implied author and the implied reader, the narrator's unreliability, which may stem from a variety of personality traits (like cupidity, gullibility, innocence, etc.), is made accessible for the attentive reader. This makes it possible that an untrustworthy narrator can provide a reliable account of a story (233-235).

However, the detection of unreliability is not always as straightforward as recognising discrepancies in stories and facts. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan points out the difficulties ambiguous texts pose on judging a narrator's reliability. Generally, she classifies covert extradiegetic narrators as likely to be reliable, especially when he/she is heterodiegetic as well. On the other hand, intradiegetic narrators, who are also homodiegetic, are labelled as more fallible because their "limited knowledge, personal involvement, and problematic value-

schemes" (103). Their role as participants in the narrated events and situations increases the likelihood of them being unreliable (102-103).

Building on the concepts of factual unreliability (i.e. unreliability based on a mis- or disinformed narrator) and ideological unreliability (because of a biased or confused narrator), Dorrit Cohn proposes a clearer differentiation between unreliable narration and discordant narration. Whilst the former can be identified based on facts, the latter is concerned with values. To recognise the discordance between the narrator and the author, the reader has to notice "that the *author* intends his or her work to be understood differently from the way the *narrator* understands it" (307). According to Cohn, a secret communication between the author and the reader gives the reader the possibility of questioning the narrator's reliability. However, Cohn states various requirements for discordant narration to happen. Firstly, the diagnosis of discordance can apply only to a fictional narrative. Secondly, the narrator must express his/her subjective opinions. And thirdly, the narrator's normative views need to clash with the narrated story. Nevertheless, despite listing a set of conditions for the reader to help with identifying an unreliable narrator, Cohn emphasises that it is the reader's (more or less conscious) choice to perceive and recognise narrative discordance (Cohn 307-309).

### 3.1.4. William Riggan

William Riggan dedicates a book-length investigation into the world of the first-person unreliable narrator based on Booth's concepts of the implied author and unreliable narrator. In his book *Picaros, Madmen, Naifs, and Clowns: The Unreliable First-Person Narrator,* Riggan identifies four types of unreliable first-person autobiographical narrators: the 'picaro', the 'clown', the 'madman', and the 'naïf'. For Riggan, the method of first-person narration is the most natural way of telling a story. The recounting of first-hand experiences gives a narration authenticity and realism. The more personalized the relationship between the narrator and the

audience becomes the higher is the narrator's credibility and reliability. However, because of the naturally limited amount of knowledge a realistic human narrator can possess, a first-person narrator cannot be absolutely reliable (18-21). Furthermore, the reader's or listener's emotional and intellectual response to the narrator plays an important role when assessing reliability:

> The archetypal first-person narrative situation thus involves two sets of subjective and therefore humanly fallible elements: the narrator's memory, selective processes, and attitudes in the telling of his story; and the auditor's assimilation, comprehension, and retention of what he hears, in conjunction with his own human reactions to the storyteller as an individual. (Riggan 20-21)

The first type of unreliable first-person autobiographical narrator is the picaro. The picaro (or picara) is the main protagonist of the picaresque novel. It is defined through its episodic structure and emphasises action, adventure, humour, and social satire. The term picaro itself is often translated into English as "scavenger", "scamp", "rogue", or "delinquent". The focus of the picaresque novel is on the life of a single person. He/she is an anti-hero, who was raised by often morally decadent parents in a lower social and economic setting. This stigma is never lost throughout the story. The picaro is often described as a criminal with no particular profession or purpose in life. His/her character is often rebellious and incapable of deep emotions. The picaro relies on cunning and trickery to reach his/her goals. He/she is driven by an inferiority complex and is pessimistic by nature. Generally, the picaro "serves as an example of vice, a symbol of depravity, and an embodiment of the obstinacy of sin" (Ricapito qtd. in Riggan 41). Even so, he/she is often able to capitalise on opportunities, his/her story generally does not result in a happy end (Riggan 39-42). According to Riggan, the picaro's egotistical nature, his/her prowess in playing roles and disguise, his/her inner psychological workings, the implied author's presence and influence, and the fact that his/her story is narrated in retrospect, makes the picaro potentially unreliable and has to be taken into account by the reader (77-78).

The clown or fool has its origins in second-century Greece, where "social parasites" (Riggan 79) performed for the amusement of others. This amusement was delivered through the clowns' physical traits, as they were often of dwarfish or bodily deformed nature, their

antics or their rhetorical performance, and by their ability to display wit and a knack for satirical commentary. This character type found its way into literature, where, by the means of irony and the use of ambiguity and insanity, the wise fool has been often used to hold a mirror up to society (Riggan 79-83). Laughter, entertainment, or aesthetic bliss are imperative for the author to form a narrative that is told through the clown's perspective. To recognise the clown's unreliability, the reader needs to be aware of the fundamental amorality or abnormality of the narrator. (Riggan 107-108).

Riggan's examination of the third unreliable narrator type, namely the madman, covers a wide range of narrative possibilities. The narrative distance between the narrator and the implied author may vary from close similarities between them to an obvious separation. The narratives can range "from outright polemic …, to veiled social critique and psychological studies …, to fictional journeys into the world of irrational fancy …, to a deeply personal foray into existential despair and morbid neurosis …" (141-142). The narrators can represent all kinds of social, economic, and intellectual backgrounds, and they can tell their stories in a variety of forms (e.g. the retrospective investigation; a jail-cell testimony; a deathbed confession; etc.). However, despite this diversity, Riggan notes that the mad narrators have one thing in common, namely the theme of isolation. The narrators' incapability to function in society, the recurring theme of nonconformity, and their inability to deal with human relationships are represented throughout their narratives. Their personality and behaviour lead to a vicious cycle of action and reaction until the narrators are pushed over the edge of sanity. These factors are the reason for a natural unreliability of the narrators and they make it difficult to reconstruct an accurate picture of reality (141-143).

Finally, the naïf's narrative is similar to that of both the picaro and the madman in regard to the implied author's use of the unreliability in the narrative to criticize social norms and practices. However, whilst the picaro and madman often personify the vices and social ills they critique, and consequently become untrustworthy in matters of ethical and moral questions, the

naïf lacks the experience to do so. As the picaro and madman are influenced and formed by a society rotten to its core, the naïf's inexperience makes it possible for him/her to critique it as someone who is hardly influenced and corrupted by the negative effects. Therefore, the naïf is often portrayed as a positive figure, even if he/she is not able to provide a reliable narrative (Riggan 169-170).

Riggan concludes that the unreliable first-person narrator naturally relies on "dissimulation and reticence" (173), with all four types of unreliable first-person narrators using them to a different degree. Because of his/her self-centeredness and egotistical nature, the picaro is more drawn towards dissimulation. Similarly, the clown, as a character who is accustomed to taking on different roles and reshaping characters, is more about dissimulation than withholding information. The madman, on the other hand, incorporates both dissimulation and reticence into the narrative. However, because his/her world view is naturally distorted, the madman's use of both principles is mostly not a conscious choice. And lastly, the naïf is closer to the madman than to the picaro and the clown. Because of his/her naivety, the naïf's narration is not consciously deceptive or misguiding (173-180).

### 3.1.5. Greta Olson and Per Krogh Hansen

Greta Olson, in the tradition of Booth's model of unreliability, suggests a differentiation between fallible and untrustworthy narration. Generally speaking, the limitations of the homodiegetic narrator have a fundamental impact on his/her unreliability. Because of their role as "inhabitants of their textual worlds, these narrators cannot have metatextual, omniscient knowledge." (101) However, this natural lack of information does not mean that they are automatically unreliable. If narrators report with factual accuracy and respect the values of their narrative, Olson regards them as reliable. In the case of fallible narrators, questionable judgement or perception, or being biased marks their unreliability. External circumstances and

not their questionable character make them fallible. As a result, the reader must consider the information the narrator has access to, and if the narrator would report reliably in other circumstances. Untrustworthy narrators, on the other hand, are unreliable because of moral or ethical deficiencies. Their character is the reason for the mistrust the reader puts in them, and not external factors. Olson recognises that unreliability must be seen along a spectrum. Some narrators can be identified as untrustworthy from the outright, but sometimes the reader has to successfully identify discourse markers, like mental instability for example, to be able to recognise that the narrator is untrustworthy (101-104).

Considering both the rhetorical as well as the cognitivist approach, Per Krogh Hansen proposes four forms of unreliable narration: 'intranarrational unreliability', 'internarrational unreliability', 'intertextual unreliability', and 'extratextual unreliability'. By proposing these four types of unreliability, which range from the rhetorical approach's discourse centric to the cognitivist's reader-centric theories, Hansen tries to establish a synthesis of both theories (241).

Intranarrational unreliability is defined by the use of discourse markers to indicate the unreliable narrator. Markers like verbal tics or unresolved self-contradictions are used to expose the narrator (P. Hansen 241).

Internarrational unreliability is defined as "situations in which a narrator's version of incidents is contrasted by another or several other narrators' versions" (P. Hansen 241). Here, the unreliability is based on the information provided by other sources, which are often assessed as superior and more trustworthy. The use of multiple sources makes it possible to construct a "Master Tale" (P. Hansen 241) in order to determine if the narrator is unreliable. However, if it is not possible to extract such a superior version because none of the narrators has privileged knowledge or superior authority, all narrators are deemed unreliable (P. Hansen 241-242).

Intertextual unreliability relies on already established character archetypes to establish unreliable narrators. The reader can identify these archetypes by literary knowledge or discourse markers. These character types, such as the naïve or mad narrator, are usually

established as unreliable by drawing on commonly known genre conventions or by providing intratextual markers for the reader to identify. However, these archetypes can also be used by the author to play with the reader's expectations (P. Hansen 242).

Extratextual unreliability takes the reader's values or knowledge into account. It heavily depends on the knowledge the reader brings to the text. Hansen describes this category of unreliability as the most ambiguous because the (un-)reliability of narrators can shift over time and is also dependent on the reader (P. Hansen 242-243).

## 3.2 The Cognitivist Approach to Unreliability

Tamar Yacobi, in her contribution to the debate about the problem of reliability in narratives and literature, proposes five principles the reader uses to resolve textual incongruities: the 'genetic'; the 'generic'; the 'existential'; the 'functional'; and the 'perspectival'. (Package 113-114) Because her work shifts the focus from a text-centric to a reader-centric approach regarding the concept of unreliability, Yacobi is seen as the pioneer of the constructivist approach (Shen 15).

The genetic principle describes the influence the author and historical context of the work itself have on the text's inconsistencies (Yacobi 114). The generic principle takes into account the impact genre conventions can have on the reliability of a narrative. Different genres follow different genre-specific conventions, which may clash with the reader's "everyday canons of probability" (Yacobi 115). By applying the existential principle, the reader solves inconsistencies through coming to terms with the structure of reality in the particular work of fiction. By accepting the logic of the fictional storyworld, the reader can spot incongruities (116-117). The functional principle defines textual inconsistencies as a result of the work's artistic and creative goals. Such oddities and incongruities are seen as intended and required by the reader to make the text work (117). Lastly, the perspectival principle focuses on the narrator

and how his/her subjective perception is the source of inconsistencies. The limited view of the observer/narrator, which interferes with the facts, make it possible for the reader to recognise the unreliable narrator if he/she is able to become aware of these interferences. (118-119).

Ansgar Nünning, as one of the main representatives for a constructive/cognitive approach, advocates for a reconceptualization of unreliable narration. This reconceptualization can be done by synthesising the rhetorical and constructivist/cognitivist approach, as he claims that unreliability is a phenomenon consisting of an authorial agency, textual components, and reader response (90).

Nünning respects Booth's contributions and ground-breaking work for the field of narrative theory, but in his opinion, it "creates as many problems as it sets out to solve" (91). He criticises the concept of the implied author as inadequate for determining a narrator's unreliability. In his point of view, the main problem is that by using the implied author as the basis for analysis, unreliability is treated exclusively as a textual feature. Nünning argues that the implied author is a construct established by the reader, and therefore it should not be treated as a structural phenomenon. Furthermore, he sees the introduction of the implied author as a concept as a reason for critics to focus on the author and his/her intention. It serves "as a yardstick for an ethical kind of criticism and as a check on potentially boundless relativism of interpretation" (92). Additionally, he criticises the restrictive nature of the implied author as it allows only one correct interpretation whilst failing to define what unreliability is. Most theories focus on "a moral distance between the norms of the implied or real author and those articulated by the narrator" (93), which is seen as problematic by Nünning (91-93).

According to Nünning, unreliability is not so much based on the narrator's character traits but rather a result of the reader's interaction with the text. Furthermore, determining whether a narrator is reliable or unreliable is a subjective judgement by the reader based on his/her norms and moral convictions:

> "… whether a narrator is regarded as unreliable not only depends on the distance between the norms and values of the narrator and those of the text as a whole (or of the implied author) but also on the distance that separates the narrator's view of the world from the reader's or critic's world-model and standards of normalcy, which are themselves, of course, subject to change." (Nünning 95)

Since, according to Nünning, no generally accepted standards of morality exist, it is possible for a narrator, who is unreliable to some, to be reliable to others (Nünning 95).

Nünning recommends interactive models that acknowledge the reading process and a reader-oriented pragmatic or cognitive framework. These models can be based either on referential frames or on the knowledge of literary conventions. For the first set of models, Nünning proposes three referential frames that take into account everyday experiences. The first frame allows the reader to judge the narrator's reliability by comparing his/her behaviour in relation to the norms of the real world. The second referential frame "depends on the reader's knowledge of the social, moral, or linguistic norms relevant for the period in which a text was written and published" (98). The third frame relies on the reader's knowledge of psychology and human behaviour. For the second set, Nünning's examples for literary frames of reference include "general literary conventions; conventions and models of literary genres (cf. Yacobi 1981: 115f.); intertextual frames of reference, that is references to specific pretexts; stereotyped models of characters such as the picaro, the *miles gloriosus*, and the trickster; and last but not least the structure and norms established by the respective work itself." (98) The criteria used to evaluate if a narrator is unreliable or not is determined by the generic framework. Consequently, it is important to be aware that a narrator can be unreliable when he/she is judged based on terms taken from the reader's personal world view, but the same narrator can be seen as reliable if the conventions of a particular genre are taken into account (98-99).

Ultimately, Nünning argues for a synthesized approach by incorporating ideas and concepts from both rhetorical and cognitive approaches. He believes that this new approach can provide new insights regarding unreliable narration. By incorporating both textual data and the

reader's individual pedigree into an analysis, he sees it as the best concept for determining the reliability of the narrator (104-105).

# 4. Video Games and Narratology

Reading a book, watching a film, or playing a video game are different and unique experiences. The concepts of player agency and participation in video games are the most obvious and elemental differences when consuming video games in comparison to more traditional media. Whilst reading a book or watching a film are usually very passive acts, playing a video game is a conscious activity that requires an increased level of attention and active participation by the player. Video games can provide the player with an illusion of choice and influence. This is impossible for other media except for the experimental genre of interactive films (Rogers 132-139).

This uniqueness of video games opens up a multitude of possibilities for storytelling and the implementation and presentation of narratives. From its humble beginnings, video games and narration have been closely tied together. Even though the storytelling in those times can hardly be compared to modern standards of storytelling in regard to complexity and methods, the basic components and typical elements of narratives like actions, events, characters, and setting could already be found in early games like *Zork*, *Donkey Kong*, and others. The rise of video games as a mainstream media and entertainment product for the masses has also led to an increase in a critical and scholarly examination of the new medium. Amongst the debates around the medium video games was also the debate about whether video games can be seen as more than devices that satisfy the human need to play. Discussions in academia around storytelling in video games soon led to a separation in ludologists, who argue that video

games are primarily games, and narratologists, who consider video games to be a storytelling medium.

To be able to determine if and how the concept of the unreliable narrator is affected by the medium video games, it is important to explore and understand games as a storytelling medium. Therefore, this chapter will examine the discussion between ludologists and narratologists on whether video games are a storytelling medium. As a result, this chapter will provide an overview of the features that make video games and their implementation of narratives unique in comparison to other media.

## 4.1. Ludology and Video Games

### 4.1.1. Espen Aarseth

Espen Aarseth initially supports the claim that video games are a textual medium and therefore should be treated as such. In his study of video games, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, he attempts to expand the definition and understanding of textuality and text by including computer programs and databases (20). He states that video games are an ergodic medium, meaning that the reader/player is required to actively participate in experiencing the text (2). However, in later works, he changes his stance and claims that "games are not 'textual' or at least not primarily textual." ("Genre" 47) In his contribution to *First Person – New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, Aarseth (47-49) criticizes the use of established concepts and theories from various fields when discussing video games and warns against "academic colonialism" ("Genre" 49). Especially the fallback onto the field of narratology and the desire to define video games as texts is seen as problematic. As games consist of rules, a material/semiotic system (i.e. the gameworld), and gameplay, they can have context but no central text. This context is not important to the game because it does not change how the game is played. Furthermore, games are not intertextual either, because the knowledge of, for

example, the film *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* will not influence the player's skill at a game set in the Star Wars universe. Additionally, the meaning of a game is not to change when it is played on different systems, like it is possible when a piece of music is played on different instruments, because "the value system of a game is strictly internal, determined unambivalently by the rules." ("Genre" 48)

Another difference between games and stories is that of ambiguity, as for Aarseth games lack the quality of being open to more than one meaning. He adds to this notion by claiming that while novels are excellent for conveying characters' feelings, personalities, and inner lives, video games lack the ability to do that as well. They are more focused "on self-mastery and exploration of external worlds, not about interpersonal relationships (except for multiplayer games)." ("Genre" 50) However, he admits that even if games are not able to tell stories, they are capable of generating them, like when players experience situations in god-like games like *Black and White* or *The Sims*. Furthermore, he supports the notion that video games can have storylines, and he is willing to admit that the adventure game genre may also be called narrative ("Genre" 45-50).

Nevertheless, Aarseth insists that the rule-based structure of video games, whatever genre they adhere to, limits the freedom and creativity that real narratives need. Video games in general are about exploring gameworlds and mastering the gameplay system. They may improve aesthetically with advancing technological developments, but according to Aarseth the gameplay mechanics and stories stay the same ("Genre" 52). As a result, he defines video games as 'simulations':

> "Simulation is the hermeneutic Other of narratives: the alternative mode of discourse, bottom-up and emergent where stories are top-down and preplanned. In simulations, knowledge and experience is created by the player's actions and strategies, rather than recreated by a writer or moviemaker." ("Genre" 52)

### 4.1.2. Markku Eskelinen

Aarseth gets support by one of the sternest defenders of Ludology in Markku Eskelinen, who claims that video games are simply games and should only be studied as such. Eskelinen sees "story" as a non-essential feature that can be added to gameplay but is not necessary ("Gaming").

As Markku Eskelinen is one of the most outspoken proponents of ludology, and therefore an opponent of the trend to infiltrate the field of video game studies with theories and concepts from other fields, he advocates for an independent field of video game studies. For him, it is clear and obvious that video games are games and not (interactive or procedural) narratives. In his opinion, theories stating that video games are narratives are based on outdated concepts of and limited knowledge on narratology. He states: "if I throw a ball at you, I don't expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories." ("Gaming").

In his essay "Towards Computer Game Studies", Eskelinen bases his definition of narrative on Gerald Prince's and Gérard Genette's contributions to the field of literary theory. Narrowed down, narratives must have a temporal sequence of events and a narrative situation. The lack of the latter in video games, at least according to Eskelinen, is crucial in his argument that video games cannot be narratives. Video games can have a series of events, but they often do not form a story (like the game *Tetris*, for example). He continues to use games like *Tetris* for his argument that video games, on the one hand, lack characters (and without characters, they are just games and not narratives), and on the other hand, if video games have characters they are only used for functional purposes and lack the elements that define traditional narrators or characters in film or literature ("Towards" 36-37).

For Eskelinen, games are defined by the ability to manipulate or configurate temporal, spatial, causal and functional relations and properties in different registers. He describes video games as rule-based systems that need to be manipulated in order to progress. What makes them different from traditional texts is that in literature, film, and theatre the user's role is an

interpretive one, while in video games it is the configurative one. To be able to interpret a text it is necessary to see or read the complete presentation. In video games, however, it is not possible for the player to encounter and experience every possible event and action due to the multitude of possibilities of game mechanics and systems. For Eskelinen "stories are just uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings to games, and laying any emphasis on studying these kinds of marketing tools is just a waste of time and energy." ("Gaming") Because games consist of events and existents, which the player has to manipulate or configure to progress, it provides the player with goals he/she seeks to achieve. Therefore, video games, and ultimately the field of ludology, are defined by relations between actions and events, and not by story and discourse. ("Towards" 38-42)

## 4.2. Narratology and Video Games

In contrast to the arguments presented by ludologists, Janet Murray identifies four principal properties and environments that make computers unique for narrative creation. The first two digital environments are 'procedural' and 'participatory', which can be loosely described as interactivity. The other two digital environments, 'spatial' and 'encyclopedic', are explorable and extensive, which are crucial to creating immersion. Additionally, digital environments underly a series of rules and are, therefore, procedural. This is important for storytelling because the author/programmer can set the rules and make them recognizable as an interpretation of the world (71-74).

For Murray, interactivity is one of the most unique essential features of video games. Firstly, the possibility to make digital environments responsive to a player's input provides opportunities that go beyond TV, film, and literature. As responses in digital environments are dependent on technical limitations, the complexity and possibilities to insert scripts and rules are growing with technical improvements (74-79).

Another advantage of digital environments is “their power to represent navigable space” (79). The possibility for the player to move through space sets them apart from linear media such as books or films, which are limited to describing space through words or showing it through images. This active exploration of space, and the interactivity and participation that comes with it, makes video games unique for storytelling (79-83).

Lastly, digital environments are almost limitless regarding the number of information they can hold in comparison to other media. The storage capacity of electronic media is supported by its interconnectivity, which makes it possible to access, retrieve, or manipulate data all over the world. (Murray 83-90)

These factors—participation, navigation, exploration—are crucial in the quest to pierce the veil between the representational and the actual world and make virtual worlds immersive. Murray advocates for video games to “actively *create* belief” (110). She compares the immersive power of cyberspace with theatre performances or amusement parks, but instead of separating performers and non-performers through masks and costumes, players become performers (115-119).

Players as performers mean that players get to be active and participate within the immersive fictional world. When being active leads to tangible results, players experience what is called ‘sense of agency’. However, agency goes beyond participation and simply being active. For example, the possibility of navigation is typical of digital environments and an important form of agency. This can be used for narratives. Murray identifies two forms of environments that are used for movement and narratives in video games: the ‘solvable maze’ and the ‘tangled rhizome’. Murray compares the adventure maze with the classic fairy-tale in terms of being a narrative about problem-solving and overcoming danger and the unknown. As a game, the story is tied to the act of navigation. As the player moves through the maze towards a single solution, he/she experiences the narrative unfolding before him/her. However, this limiting of choices and paths is also seen as a downside as it cages the player’s desire for agency.

The second kind of environment, the tangled rhizome, is an interactive narrative that lacks closure and offers no solution (126-132).

Murray sees games as something that enables us to act out our human desires. Whilst our relationship with other media is relatively passive, games are unique because they let us be active. Murray states:

> "In games, therefore, we have a chance to enact our most basic relationship to the world – our desire to prevail over adversity, to survive our inevitable defeats, to shape our environment, to master complexity, and to make our lives fit together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Each move in a game is like a plot event in one of these simple but compelling stories." (143)

## 4.3. Looking for a Middle Ground

### 4.3.1. Mary-Laure Ryan

In recent years the discussion shifted away from the binary and opposite philosophies of ludologists and narratologists to a search for middle ground. Mary-Laure Ryan advocates in *Avatars of Story* for the medium to stop trying to rival literary classics but rather adapt narrative patterns to the unique properties of video games. As a prominent supporter of the narrative potential of video games, Marie-Laure Ryan states that the development of digital technology has had an impact on our society and life like few other revolutionary inventions. The effects range from changes in the fields of economy, social life, politics, or everyday life to far-reaching developments in the entertainment industry and visual arts (xvii-xviii).

In the case of storytelling, Ryan identifies four basic approaches to digital narratives: the 'practical', the 'metaphorical', the 'expansionist', and the 'traditionalist'. The practical approach does not see digital storytelling as problematic. Instead of opposing the development of new forms of narrative, the practical approach is concerned with the importance of stories in people's lives, and what role the computer plays in the distribution of personal stories. The metaphorical approach is not so much about telling stories per se, but rather about using narrative concepts to design and promote computer applications. For supporters of the

expansionist approach, narrative is a concept that changes and evolves constantly through technological innovations. These innovations may lead to new variations in plot structure and could challenge traditional ideas and concepts of narratives. Finally, the traditionalist approach sees narrative as a stable, unchangeable concept that is transcultural, transhistorical, and transmedial (xi-xvii).

Ryan herself is an advocate for finding a middle ground between all these different approaches. She proposes the following:

> 1. Narrative is a cognitive construct with an invariant nucleus of meaning, but this construct can take a variety of shapes, which we may call *avatars of story*, and it can be actualized to variable degrees, depending on how many of its core conditions are fulfilled.
> 2. As a type of meaning, narrative can be called to mind and can manifest itself pragmatically in a variety of ways. I call these multiple manifestations the *modes of narrativity*. The concept of mode, which will be further explained and illustrated in chapter 1, covers traditional literary critical concepts such as fictionality, or diegetic and mimetic presentation, but I propose to add to this list categories that have been overlooked by narratology, such as utilitarian, illustrative, indeterminate, and metaphorical. Many of these modes present special affinities for certain media, and as we will see, digital narrative is indeed tied to certain modes. I call them simulative, emergent, and participatory. (xviii-xix)

Ryan intends to change the discussion about narrative from the concept being exclusive to written literary fiction to something that is transmedial and transdisciplinary. The core understanding is, that not all stories can be represented in all media equally, and different media have different potential for telling stories. However, she is not denying that different media can be used for narratives. (3-4)

Consequently, Ryan criticizes Aarseth's and Eskelinen's rejection of the idea that video games can have narratives. She argues for a change of the classical concept of narratology to broaden the definition and concept to include new media and interactive digital texts. She lists four points that are unique to digital systems and are relevant for narrative and textuality at the same time:

- Interactive and reactive nature: the computer's ability to take in voluntary or involuntary user input and to adjust its behavior accordingly

- Volatile signs and variable display: what enables bits in memory to change value, causing pixels on the screen to change color. This property explains the unparalleled fluidity of digital images.
- Multiple sensory and semiotic channels: what makes the computer pass as synthesis of all other media.
- Networking capabilities: the possibility to connect computers across space, bringing their users together in virtual environments. (98)

However, in contrast to other scholars like Murray, Ryan does not include immersivity in her list of unique features of video games. Even though the digital medium has expanded and added depth to the concept of immersion, she argues that immersion is not exclusive to video games as it can be created by other media like literature, film, or painting (98).

For Ryan, interactivity is the most important of the unique features mentioned above. Not all digital texts are interactive, but interactive texts are exclusive to computers and could not be played by any other medium. The key concept of interactivity is user choice. Without choice, there is no interactivity. However, traditionally interactivity is seen as non-compatible with storytelling because narrative meaning requires "linearity and unidirectionality of time, logic, and causality." (99) Freedom of choice, on the other hand, is based on nonlinearity and a branching structure. Furthermore, narratives are created in a top-down process by the storyteller whilst interactivity is a bottom-up process requiring input by the user. As interactive narratives have the same building blocks as traditional narratives (time, space, characters, events), it is necessary to find ways to provide a top-down design without limiting the interactivity and freedom of user choice to unlock the storytelling potential of an interactive medium. (97-100)

Ryan states that video games differ from other games in its dependence on a computer and its "preference for organizing play as a manipulation of concrete objects in a concrete setting–in a fictional world rather than on a mere playfield." (182) Modern video games have all the components necessary for narratives. They have characters, events, settings, and a path from a beginning to an end state. In the early days of video games, when hardware and software were not capable enough, they used texts, pictures on packages, or booklets to provide a

narrative for the players. This has changed as technology progressed and made it possible to tell stories in-game. (181)

### 4.3.2. Henry Jenkins

Henry Jenkins is another scholar who argues for finding a middle ground between ludologists and narratologists. He proposes that games should be examined less as stories but rather as a medium full of narrative possibilities. Jenkins' arguments are based on the following assumptions. First, he accepts that not all games tell stories and the discussion of these games needs its own theory and language. Secondly, Jenkins recognizes the narrative aspirations of many games. Consequently, the knowledge and application of narrative theories when discussing video game narratives seem useful. Thirdly, Jenkins warns against a prescriptive narrative analysis of video games. Even though he recommends that game designers possess a basic understanding of narrative theory, the diversity of video games needs to be recognised. This goes hand in hand with the fourth assumption, namely that video games are more than stories and should be analysed accordingly. Therefore, scholars need to expand their critical vocabulary in order to talk about all the different aspects of video games. And finally, Jenkins argues that video games are a medium of its own and game scholars need to focus on the aspects that distinguish them from other narrative traditions. Instead of using old models, precise comparisons between other media and video games are required to understand the uniqueness of the latter. Ultimately, Jenkins sees game designers more as narrative architects and less as storytellers ("Game" 118-121)

Jenkins defines video games as created worlds through which game designers tell stories. Whenever a game comes to life, the first thing that is designed and established is the world and the space the player moves around, and for that, it does not matter if it is a simple text-based adventure game like *Zork*, complex simulations like *Civilization*, or first-person

shooters like *Quake*. He sees consoles and computers as tools to generate compelling spaces, and the narratives in video games at their core are always about exploring and conquering spaces. They are taking inspiration from traditional special narrative themes like the hero's odysseys, quest myths, or travel narratives. Jenkins compares this to literary or filmic genres like science fiction, fantasy, horror, or adventure, where world-building is often seen as more important and prevalent than character and plot development. In his opinion, video games excel especially at environmental storytelling because of their immersive potential and it opens up a multitude of narrational possibilities. As a result, spatial stories can fall back on pre-existing narrative associations; they can be used as for further narrative events; they can provide further narrative information, or they can be used as starting points for future narratives ("Transmedia" 121-123).

The first type of spatial design, 'evoked narratives', uses familiar worlds to enhance the player's sense of immersion or provide a new perspective to an already established world. The second type is called 'enacted stories'. As many game critics prefer video game stories to be tightly constructed so that every element fits together in a traditional, orderly fashion, Jenkins sees the episodic design of spatial stories as an advantage. Each episode or set piece is designed in a way to provide so-called 'micronarratives', which are emotionally engaging scenes and moments that are used to engage the player, change the rhythm of gameplay, or provide context to the overarching storyline. As the game's progress is determined by the player's actions, it is important for game designers to find an engaging balance between player freedom and story exposition. This exposition can be enacted through cut-scenes, where the player is heavily controlled by the author, or by more subtle techniques. One of these techniques is embedded storytelling, which provides exposition through discoverable clues throughout the game world. This is also the third type of spatial design, called 'embedded narratives'. The fourth type describes 'emergent narratives'. Here the designers provide the player with a game world and rules, and like with a sandbox, the player can define his/her own goals and experience their own

stories. For Jenkins, these four types of spatial designs for narratives are important to establish game designers as narrative architects instead of traditional storytellers. (“Transmedia” 123-129).

### 4.3.3. Jesper Juul

Jesper Juul, another supporter of the claim that video games can certainly contain narrative structures, sees video games as a medium made of real rules and fictional worlds. He argues, that the interaction between game rules and game fiction is what makes them so unique. According to Juul, players are given a choice “between imagining the world of the game and seeing the representation as a mere placeholder for information about the rules of the game.” (1-2) He sees computers as a gadget to play traditional games in new ways (1-2).

All games are based on rules, which are definite and there to provide challenges. To overcome these challenges, the player has to improve certain skills. Juul identifies two basic ways in which games are structured and provide challenges. ‘Emergence’ is the common structure. Here several rules are used to provide a large number of variations to challenge the player. This structure is used for card and board games, in sports, action, and strategy games. ‘Progression’ is a newer structure in which the player has to perform predefined actions. As a result, the game is heavily guided and sequential, and according to Juul, this is where most storytelling games can be found. (5)

Generally, Juul identifies five main types of games. ‘Abstract games’ are games in their purest form as they do not represent something else (e.g. *Tetris*). ‘Iconic games’ are games whose individual parts have iconic meaning (e.g. card games). ‘Incoherent world games’ are games that are incoherent or cannot be explained as part of the fictional world (e.g. *Donkey Kong*). In ‘Coherent world games’, the fictional world can be imagined in any detail (e.g. *Half-*

*Life*). And finally, 'Staged games' are special cases where "an abstract or somewhat representational game is played in a more elaborate world." (133)

These games use different ways to immerse the player and to create a fictional world. The most obvious ways to establish these worlds are graphics, sound, and text, which are quite similar to other visual media like film. However, video games have also many unique ways of creating game fiction. Cut-scenes are non-interactive[2] sequences used to provide story and background information. Game titles, box-arts, and manuals are unique ways for world building for video games. The use of haptic feedback of modern controllers can provide unique possibilities for world-building. Rules are also an important component when projecting the game world. The actions a player performs influence the game world and the time a player invests into a game is projected onto the fictional time of the game world. Finally, due to the time and skill players have to invest in video games, rumors about the game world are very common. (Juul 121-139)

Furthermore, Juul adds the notion of time to the discussion about the uniqueness of video games. Video games distinguish between 'real time' (i.e. time in the real world) and 'fictional world time'. As the player's actions in the real world have consequences in the fictional world the player experiences a duality of character. The player is him/herself in the real world and a character in the game world at the same time. Juul proposes the terms 'play time' to describe the time taken to play a game and 'fictional time' for the time of events in the game world. Generally, play time and fictional time correlate 1:1 in action games, but in different genres, like simulation games (e.g. *Sim City*), play time and fictional time are different. For example, two minutes of play time can translate into a year of fictional time in a video game. However, the 1:1 projection of game time and fictional time can be manipulated and

[2] At the publishing of Juul's book this was non-interactive cut-scenes were the standard, but nowadays interactive cut-scenes are often used as well

changed in different ways. Cut-scenes or loading screens can distort the 1:1 projection (141-156).

In the discussion about games and narratives, Juul sees one of the main problems in the expanding of the concept of the term narrative, as it blurs boundaries and muddles concepts. Because of the many different definitions of the term and the concept of narrative the answer to the question if games are narratives depends on which meaning of narrative is used. (Juul 156-162)

Ultimately, many researchers are sceptical of introducing other fields into game studies in fear of importing concepts that are unfit and detrimental for the study of video games. However, this does not mean that game studies and other fields cannot coexist, and the implementation of foreign concepts is not worthwhile. It simply means that the differences between video games and other media need to be accounted for when applying concepts from other fields and the potential limitations that come with it.

# 5. Dragon Age II

Developer: BioWare
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Genre: Action-RPG
Release: 2011

## 5.1. Synopsis

The Action Role-Playing Game *Dragon Age II* takes place in the world of Thedas. It is set in a medievalesque fantasy world inhabited by humans, elves, dwarfs, and other fantastical creatures. The main story starts shortly after the Battle of Ostagar, where the Archdemon (one of the powerful Old Gods manifested in a dragon) and its minions defeated the army of King Cailan. This battle started the ‘Fifth Blight’, consequently leading to civil war as an attempt to bring chaos and death to the lands of Ferelden.

## 5.2. Plot

The predecessor *Dragon Age: Origins* tells the story about the unification of the different races of Ferelden to fight and defeat the Darkspawn and the Archdemon after King Cailan's defeat at Ostagar. *Dragon Age II* starts shortly after the Battle of Ostagar and follows the main protagonist Hawke (who can be either male or female) and his/her family as they abandon their home to escape the darkspawn invasion. Hawke is accompanied by his/her two younger siblings and their mother. They are on the way to the city of Kirkwall, where Hawke's uncle lives in their family's estate. During their journey, they meet Aveline Vallen and her husband. Aveline loses her husband during a darkspawn attack and decides to join Hawke and his/her family on their way to Kirkwall.

As they arrive in Kirkwall, they discover that the city is not the safe haven they were hoping for. It is overrun with refugees and in the midst of a brewing political conflict between templars and mages. Additionally, a group of shipwrecked Qunari, a foreign, mysterious race that arrived in Thedas recently, is causing unease amongst the local population. Furthermore, Hawke's uncle Gamlen Amell lost the family fortune and estate. As a result, Hawke has to take on various shady job opportunities to clear the family name and reclaim their estate.

The first act of the main story is about Hawke's quest to provide for his/her family and reclaim their estate. To accomplish this, he/she teams up with the dwarf Varric and his brother Bartrand to organize a treasure-hunting expedition into the mysterious Deep Roads. With the help of the mage Anders, they venture into the Deep Roads to recover precious idols and trinkets. The expedition is a financial success and Hawke reacquires their family mansion.

In Act Two, the Viscount of Kirkwall asks Hawke, now a respected and wealthy citizen of Kirkwall, for help regarding the thriving political tension between the stranded Qunari and the people of Kirkwall. Eventually, Hawke discovers the reason for the Qunari's unwillingness to leave. An important idol was stolen by the rogue captain Isabela. After Isabela's decision to

flee the city with the artefact, the Qunari retaliate by attacking Kirkwall. Hawke and his/her companions are able to defeat them and resolve the situation. For his/her heroics, Hawke is named “Champion of Kirkwall”.

Act Three tells the escalation and resolution of the conflict between the Circle of the Magi and the Templar Order. After various incidents with blood mages, the Templars, whose task it is to watch over mages, have taken control over the city. They establish a police state in an attempt to regain control over the growing number of rogue mages. Hawke tries to intervene and solve the conflict between the two parties with the help of Grand Cleric Elthina, who is the head of the church. Originally, the Templars were part of the church, but it becomes obvious that the church has lost control over them. In an attempt to free all mages from the control of the Templars and the church, the mage Anders kills Grand Cleric Elthina. This leads to an open conflict between the Mages and the Templars all over the city. Ultimately, Hawke must decide which side to support. Hawke ends up killing the head of the mages, Orsino, and Meredith, the head of the Templars. Depending on his/her decision, Hawke is either elected Viscount, or he/she leaves Kirkwall as a hero to the mages all over Thedas.

## 5.3. Analysis

*Dragon Age II* establishes the unreliable narrator in multiple ways. This is achieved primarily through the use of the picaro character archetype and by the implementation of an early plot twist. Furthermore, various game design decisions like the use of gameplay mechanics, dialogue, visual and musical choices are used to support the potential unreliability established by the character archetype and plot twist. Furthermore, the uniqueness of interactivity and player agency in video games support the narrator’s already established untrustworthiness as well. The following analysis discusses the various elements in detail and provides some examples of their implementation.

The game itself sets up the dwarf Varric as the story's main narrator. In the frame narrative, Varric is questioned by Cassandra Pentaghast, a Seeker (i.e. a form of secret police for the church in the *Dragon Age* universe), in her search for the Champion of Kirkwall (i.e. Hawke/the player). The setting establishes Varric as a homodiegetic and intradiegetic narrator. However, even though he is a character in the events he recounts and is a part of the world the story is set in, the player does not experience the main story of Hawke through Varric's eyes.

The setting and the relationship between Varric, Cassandra, and Hawke are established by a short, ten-minute sequence of introductory cut-scene, tutorial, and another cut-scene. As the story is told as an intrusive narrative over the span of a decade, it is divided into a prologue, three acts, and an epilogue, each connected by similar cut-scenes depicting interactions between Varric and Cassandra. These cut-scenes are also used to indicate a jump in time, and therefore in the story. During this journey, the player gets to know the character of Varric in-depth as he is one of Hawke's main companions with a personal storyline, interactions, and quests throughout the game.

### 5.3.1. The 'Picaro' Archetype in *Dragon Age II*

Throughout the game, Varric's character and his role as an unreliable narrator are defined by the game's adherence to the character archetype of the 'picaro' or 'rogue'. This archetype is established not only through Varric's personality but also by how the character's gameplay is designed around this specific archetype.

Referring back to William Riggan's analysis of the unreliable narrator in literature when examining *Dragon Age II*, the concept of the 'picaro' archetype comes to mind. Riggan defines the picaro or rogue as a rebellious anti-hero who grew up in poverty and an unstable environment. He was usually raised and influenced by morally corrupt parents. He drifts through life without a specific goal or purpose, relying on his cunning and trickery nature to survive. (39-42).

By comparing Riggan's analysis of the picaro with Varric's history and character, a lot of similarities can be noticed. Varric's family was exiled from their home and his family has carried a stigma ever since. This trauma led his mother to search for comfort in liquor and other narcotics. The description of Varric on the official homepage of the game provides further insight into his character:

> Words are his trade, exaggeration his specialty—Varric can make or break a legend without lifting a finger. Born into a merchant guild, Varric never knew a dwarven homeland, and has never worked the Stone. He prefers a warm tavern fire, a mug that never empties, a willing audience, and an unwilling subject. He can spin a grand story of Ancestors and Paragons—or anything you like—but it's not out of reverence. Truth is just another commodity. History is written by the victors, but it can also be written by Varric, who then decides the victors. If you want profit, look to his brother, Bartrand, a scoundrel with a true head for business. But if you want to be remembered, Varric is your man. (Varric)

As can be extracted from this official lore provided by the development team, Varric's main forte is his storytelling. He is known throughout Kirkwall as a spinner of tales, and as someone who likes to bend the truth on occasion. He is portrayed as someone who likes the seedy and dirty streets of the district Lowtown more than the noble Hightown. It is no coincidence that he rents and stays at a room at 'The Hanged Man' inn in Lowtown in the game, even though he could have afforded better accommodations. Throughout the game, his general behaviour and actions on multiple occasions underline his cunning character and his knack for lying and misconception.

As this game is a role-playing game (RPG), characters and their game mechanics are created with specific character traits, classes, races, and occupations in mind. Varric's character is designed as a dwarven rogue. As it is the tradition in fantasy settings, tabletop games, and video games, rogues are known for their use of stealth, subterfuge, misconception, and trickery. This is true not only for assigned gameplay mechanics and skills the player can use when controlling a rogue character class but also for character traits and personality exhibited by the character in story moments and dialogues.

In *Dragon Age II,* Varric is specialised in long-range combat, using a signature crossbow named Bianca to attack from afar. Furthermore, throughout the game, the player can assign new talents and tricks to Varric's arsenal of abilities. These skills go hand in hand with his character archetype. For example, Varric can specialise in skills like Sabotage or Subterfuge, giving him the abilities to throw explosive flasks to confuse or blind enemies or to conceal himself from the eyes of his enemies in order to escape danger or to attack from the shadows. The design of the rogue class and the assignment of its skills, which rely heavily on stealth, distraction, deception, and cunning, compliments Varric's character and personality.

### 5.3.2. Audio and Visual Elements and the Plot Twist in *Dragon Age II*

Varrics' unreliability and untrustworthy character are established not only by modelling him after a specific archetype, but also by using visual and audio design concepts to support his character archetype.

As was mentioned before, Varric is introduced within the narrative frame of him being questioned by Cassandra Pentaghast as a result of her quest to find the Champion of Kirkwall (Hawke/the player). A short cinematic cut-scene shows a captured Varric who is, rather forcefully, interrogated by Cassandra. By using a flashback sequence as a prologue, the game then shifts into the tutorial part teaching the player the basic controls and mechanics whilst he/she fights an overwhelming force of Darkspawn. This tutorial in the earliest parts of the game is not only used to familiarise the player with the game's controls but it also introduces the idea of Varric's unreliability through the excessive use of exaggerated art and character design and visual effects.

Gameplaywise, the combat during this tutorial is very action-oriented. The player's abilities range from leaping and acrobatic physical attacks to a wide-ranging and bombastic use of magical skills. This alone may raise a certain amount of suspicion among many players

familiar with the predecessor *Dragon Age: Origins* and Computer-RPGs in general. *Dragon Age: Origins'* combat is slower and a lot less action-oriented, as the game is based on more traditional computer role-playing games (CRPG). Traditionally, combat and actions are decided by numbers and dice rolls, and these actions are commonly portrayed in a slower and more realistic art style in these type of video games. Contrarily, *Dragon Age II* uses exaggerated, more direct, fast-paced, and action-oriented animations and gameplay elements, raising questions about the happenings during the tutorial

The unusual gameplay mechanics are supported by an exaggerated character and art design. Hawke has access to all of his/her abilities and skills from the beginning, contradicting the established norms of the traditional 'Hero's Journey', which often starts with an unskilled protagonist who acquires powerful skills and traits by progressing through the game. Additionally, Hawke is clad in full-fledged, high-tier armour and equipment during the tutorial sequence—again, which is uncommon for a character starting a role-playing game (see fig. 1 and 2). The player uses these advanced skills and equipment to defeat his/her foes with ease. The fights are visually exaggerated by the use of excessive splatter and gore effects. Furthermore, if the player chooses to play as one of the non-mage classes, Hawke is accompanied by his/her sister Bethany during this tutorial. Her appearance in this sequence is characterized by the exaggerated size of her breasts and cleavage (see fig. 1 and 2).

Figure 1

The exaggerated Bethany (left) and Hawke (right) during the tutorial


Source: BioWare. Dragon Age II. Electronic Arts Inc., 2011.

Figure 2

The actual Bethany (right) and Hawke (middle)


Source: BioWare. Dragon Age II. Electronic Arts Inc., 2011.

Furthermore, *Dragon Age II* utilizes voice acting and music to influence the player's perception of characters. In the case of Varric, these audio elements are used to support the notion of him being a liar and a notorious (unreliable) storyteller.

Throughout the game the player has the possibility to engage with other characters or listen to short conversations between various non-player characters. In *Dragon Age II* all these conversations are voice-acted. They can be experienced either by actively engaging with other characters by pressing a button/key or by randomly triggering a scripted sequence when traversing the game world. As we can see in the examples provided below (see table 1), Varric openly admits that he is a liar and someone who is known to bend the truth on occasion.

Table 1

Examples of dialogue between Varric and other NPCs

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Aveline**: Why are you still here, Varric?<br>**Varric**: Starkhaven's too pretentious for me and Cumberland's too boring.<br>**Aveline**: You always say you hate commitment, but here you are, six years later, still at Hawke's side.<br>**Varric**: Aveline, I thought you'd have noticed by now: I lie a lot. | **Aveline**: You know the Tethras family businesses are registered in your cousin Elmand's name?<br>**Varric**: You don't say?<br>**Aveline**: But I can't find any record of you having a cousin Elmand.<br>**Varric**: I'll introduce you some time. He's a little on the shy side.<br>**Aveline**: Varric. He's imaginary.<br>**Varric**: Which makes him a much better head of the household than I am. He never misses the Merchants Guild meetings, for one. | **Merrill**: You remind me of Hahren Paivel, Varric. Only younger. And shorter. And not as serious.<br>**Varric**: So it's a close resemblance, then.<br>**Merrill**: Well, he tells stories. And you tell stories. Although none of his begin, "No shit, there I was."<br>**Varric**: I'll have to give him some better stories, then. | **Merrill**: Am I in your stories, Varric?<br>**Varric**: Daisy, everyone is fair game for my stories.<br>**Merrill**: I never hear any stories with me in them! What sorts of things do I do?<br>**Varric**: Well, you get lost a lot. You wind up in the middle of a dog racing track in Darktown. Or in the viscount's bathing room.<br>**Merrill**: So they're true stories?<br>**Varric**: Daisy, I could never make that stuff up. Nobody would believe it. |

Source: BioWare. Dragon Age II. Electronic Arts Inc., 2011.

Furthermore, the developers included the song "I'm Not Calling You a Liar", performed by the band Florence and the Machine, in the end credits. Officially, the song is also called "Varric's theme" in the game. It opens with the words "I'm not calling you a liar, just don't lie to me", which is clearly directed at Varric in the context of the game and his role as an untrustworthy

storyteller. This is an additional, and final, attempt to hint at the narrator's potential unreliable recounting of the happenings during the game.

The game's tutorial section is interrupted by a cutscene in which Cassandra calls Varric out on his inaccurate recount of the story, providing the player with an explanation for the unusual and exaggerated gameplay and design decisions. By using the narrative technique of a plot twist to reveal Varric's tendency to manipulate and lie, the game establishes him as an overtly unreliable narrator very early on. Cassandra then commands Varric to start again and he reluctantly complies, which leads to the beginning of Act One. However, it remains unclear if the subsequent recount of Hawk's story is the truth or simply another lie. Nevertheless, regardless of how the player perceives Varric's credibility throughout the game, the plot twist plays a pivotal role in establishing Varric's character and personality and his role as an unreliable narrator.

However, because *Dragon Age II* is a game with multiple branching storylines and dialogues, which result in a relatively open-world design, it requires the player to seek out and discover all these audio and visual hints. Furthermore, the multiple possibilities that come with branching storylines and player choice make it difficult to determine if Varric finally tells the truth in his second attempt to present the whole story. How the game combines the concepts of player agency and unreliability will be discussed next.

### 5.3.3. The Role of Player Agency in *Dragon Age II*

As we have seen, the developers immediately establish Varric as the main, overtly unreliable narrator. This explicit unreliability is further strengthened by the uniqueness of branching storylines, the narrative impact of player choice, and the concept of player agency in video games. Especially in genres that are built around choices, individuality, and freedom in regard to stories and experiences, the player can create a unique, highly personalised narrative.

As it is tradition with RPGs (i.e. role-playing games)—may it be tabletop RPGs (TRPG), computer RPGs (CRPG), or live-action RPGs (LARP)—core game mechanics and philosophies include choices and decisions within the rules; a storyline; and setting provided by the author, a gamemaster, or the developer (Grouling 6). In *Dragon Age II*, the player can influence the story, the outcome of quests, his/her character's standing in the world, and the player's character relationship with NPCs (i.e. non-player characters) and companions through the choices he/she makes throughout the game. These choices can be made through the player's conscious decision to either taking on side quests, which are non-obligatory for the story and the game to progress or by choosing one of the various options during conversations. The choices are very often binary, as the player decides between two states or outcomes. For example, the player can decide to accept or refuse a side quest. These side quests can tell either a short standalone story or a story that is connected to specific main characters or the main quest and storyline. They often provide unique quest rewards, or they may even influence the state of certain characters, as the player may have the option to decide the fate of non-player characters. In some instances, the player can affect the state of characters or the game world through progressing multiple quests that are linked together. These linked quests are commonly called quest chains.

In *Dragon Age II* the player can influence the fate of his/her companions through decisions made during such quest chains and during personal conversations with them. The dialogue system in *Dragon Age II* is built upon the player choosing answers linked to personality types and tone, which form the character of Hawke, and consequently the relationship to his/her companions and other NPCs. Companions and important NPCs possess unique personalities themselves, and the player can influence those characters depending on his/her choices and tone during conversations. Hawke can answer either in a diplomatic/helpful, humorous/charming, or aggressive/direct way. By choosing similar options multiple times they stack, resulting in an individual and consistent player character voice throughout the game.

Furthermore, special dialogue options (like flirting, asking for one of the companion's personal input, pay/bribing, or lying) are available during conversations on occasion. All these different options can lead to different outcomes, such as forming friendships or rivalries with companions (which lead to special skills or bonus attributes for the companions to use), losing companions permanently, getting different rewards, the death or survival of NPCs, or different story outcomes.

The game also allows the player to import decisions made in the predecessor *Dragon Age: Origins*, which influences various background information and story bits as well. The important link to the topic of unreliability is that all these variables consequently result in potentially multiple storylines and therefore different experiences for different players. The question is, if every player may experience an individual, unique story and narrative, can this be defined as unreliable narration due to an unreliable narrator? Furthermore, the question arises about who functions as the narrator in such a setting? Is it Varric, as he functions as the third person homodiegetic narrator who tells the story of the rise of the Champion of Kirkwall and his/her companions in retrospect? Or is it the player who experiences a unique version of the story by making all the different choices and driving it forward through his/her agency? And what kind of unreliable narrator are they?

Generally, a story is a controlled, linear experience, and the events described in the story always occur in the same order. This clashes with the fundamental idea of games, which are nonlinear in nature. They are a controlled and regulated system, but the player expects at least the illusion of freedom. Developers walk a fine line in their effort to construct a system that allows the player the illusion of freedom and agency while guiding the player within the linearity a story demands (Costikyan 5-9)[3].

[3] Greg Costikyan – Games, Storytelling, and Breaking the String; In: Second Person 2007; 5-9

The concept of multiple storylines and changing variables and details work very well to help to create an immersive setting. It also supports Varric's position as the narrator of this particular story within the game world, his personality, and his character traits associated with being a rogue. The individual story strands are always brought back together at fixed plot points, providing the illusion of freedom and choice while telling a linear story. However, taking Olson's definitions of the unreliable narrator into account, it is unclear if this makes Varric a fallible or an untrustworthy narrator. According to Greta Olson, fallible narrators "do not reliably report on narrative events because they are mistaken about their judgements or perceptions or are biased" (101). The untrustworthy narrator, on the other hand, is unreliable because of his/her personality and character (102). In the case of Varric, it can be argued that he is not fallible because of the lack of information he may possess. As a result of the player's freedom to decide who accompanies him/her on his/her adventures, Varric may not have the first-hand experiences necessary to provide an accurate recount of Hawke's story but it is possible that recount the information he possesses accurately. Referring back to Olson, homodiegetic narrators cannot be deemed unreliable because of a lack of information as long as they report with factual accuracy (101). However, it can also be argued that Varric is a fallible narrator because he may be biased in his recounting. As mentioned before, the player/Hawke can develop a close friendship or rivalry with Varric throughout the game, and this may influence Varric's reliability when telling the story. On the other hand, Varric can also be perceived as an untrustworthy narrator because of the situation he is in as part of the frame narrative. Olsen states that the "inconsistencies these narrators demonstrate appear to be caused by ingrained behavioral traits or some current self-interest." (102) It is plausible that Varric is lying because he is being held captive and interrogated under the threat of violence, a situation in which it is not unreasonable to assume that people bend the truth to avoid torture and to satisfy their captors. As we see, because of the combination of player agency and the branching game design both interpretations are actually valid.

The question remains if the player can assume the role of the (unreliable) narrator. Gretchen Papazian argues that the "player becomes the narrator because the story experience is channeled–or focalized-through the player's experience." (455) Especially RPGs, through the freedom of choice and control, are predestined to expand the narrative perspective "beyond the conventionally crafted 'you' of second person" (456). The character and the story narrator become a "we", and the point of view is fourth person (455-456). On the one hand, *Dragon Age II* explicitly establishes Varric as the narrator of the story from its beginning, but on the other hand, it is the player who assumes the role of the narrator due to the decisions, choices, and actions he/she takes. The latter part makes it more difficult for the player to embrace the concept of unreliability if he/she is defined as the narrator because he/she is directly responsible for the actions and their consequences. But to what extent can the player actually be unreliable?

This depends on if the player character is 'teller' or a 'reflector' character. These terms come from narrative theory and were introduced by Franz Stanzel. A teller character reports the story to somebody. The reflector character only experiences the story. The latter is less likely to be considered unreliable because they do not mislead intentionally (Arjonta 706-707). These narrator types can also be used for video games. In the case of *Dragon Age II,* Varric is a teller character who tells the frame narrative to an audience. The player character Hawke is a reflector character who only experiences the embedded stories and is, therefore, less likely to be an unreliable narrator.

To summarize, in *Dragon Age II* two main factors can be determined which are used to establish the unreliable narrator. The first factor is the use of a character archetype which is associated with unreliability in literary studies. In narratology, the picaro or rogue is described as an anti-hero and trickster who relies on his cunning nature to get by in life. *Dragon Age II's* Varric, who is established as the main narrator right from the start of the game, embodies many of these typical characteristics and traits. The second factor is the use of an early plot twist to show the player that the narrator is unreliable. Furthermore, elements and factors which are

unique to the medium of video games are used to support the two main factors. Firstly, the game relies on a combination of visual and audio markers, and gameplay design to assist the characterization of Varric. Visual elements during the tutorial, conversations between him and other characters, and musical choices reinforce the notion of him being a perpetual liar and storyteller. Secondly, the fact that video games allow the player to influence the narrative through the unique elements of interactivity and choices, and create multiple individual storylines as a result, supports the notion of Varric being a potentially untrustworthy narrator. All these factors support each other to create and establish an unreliable narrator, enhancing the effectiveness of each individual element.

# 6. Spec Ops: The Line

Developer: Yager Development
Publisher: 2K Games
Genre: Third-person shooter
Release: 2012

## 6.1 Synopsis

*Spec Ops: The Line* is a third-person military shooter developed by the German studio *Yager Development* and was released in 2012. The game takes place in the city of Dubai, which had been hit by a series of devastating sandstorms a few weeks prior to the game's events. These sandstorms led to a humanitarian crisis as Dubai was cut off from outside aid. In this situation of need decorated Colonel John Konrad and his "Damned 33rd" Infantry Battalion of the United States Army volunteered to support the relief efforts. As the situation got worse, Konrad declared martial law in Dubai in order to keep the rioting civilians in check. The CIA then sent a black ops squad to investigate and to train a local militia to counter the increasingly violent 33rd Battalion. This conflict ended in a ceasefire and the 33rd was publicly disavowed for

treason. Two weeks before the start of the game the U.S. military sends an elite Delta Force squad to carry out reconnaissance, to determine if there are any survivors, and to call for extraction.

## 6.2 Plot

The game begins with the Delta Force squad flying in a helicopter through Dubai and being chased by other helicopters. The player takes the role of Captain Martin Walker, as an out of control helicopter crashes into the squad and their helicopter going down. The story then jumps back to Delta Squad's arrival on the outskirts of Dubai. Walker is accompanied by First Lieutenant Alphonso Adams and Staff Sergeant John Lugo. The city itself is mostly buried in sand and looks deserted. As the squad tries to find survivors, it receives the broadcasts of the "Radioman", a former journalist speaking for the 33rd. As they realize the devastation and seeing the atrocities committed by the 33rd, Walker decides to disobey orders and to find Konrad instead. During their journey through the city, Delta Squad encounter CIA agent Gould, who helps them escape a trap. As they arrive at an encampment by the 33rd, Walker decides to employ white phosphorus to fight their way past them. Soon thereafter they realize that the use of white phosphorus cost the lives of 47 civilians, who had been moved to the encampment for shelter by the 33rd. Walker blames Konrad and the 33rd for their deaths and vows revenge. Walker and Konrad establish direct communication through a radio found by Walker among an executed command team. Konrad uses this radio to comment on Walker's actions, challenge the morality of his decisions, and eventually manipulate him into choosing between whether to execute an Emirati survivor or a soldier of the 33rd.

Delta Squad continues with their search for answers and encounters CIA agent Jeff Riggs, who tries to secure Dubai's last water reserves. Walker and his team decide to help him. However, Riggs ends up destroying the water reserves, and as a result, dooming the remaining

population in an attempt to cover up the war crimes committed by the 33rd. Riggs fears that the revelation of their crimes would lead to a war against the United States the US could not win. Delta's last hope is to reach the still active radio tower and organize an evacuation. They kill the Radioman, hijack a helicopter, and destroy the radio tower during their escape. This leads to the chase scene from the beginning of the game. The helicopter crashes and Walker and Adams are forced to witness the death of Lugo, as he is lynched by an angry mob of civilians.

Walker and Adams continue to push towards Konrad's hideout, battling the remaining 33rd soldiers, and Adams sacrifices himself so that Walker can confront Konrad. As Walker meets his adversary it becomes clear that Konrad had committed suicide long ago, and Walker's communication with him has been only a hallucination and a result of the trauma caused by the consequences of the white phosphorus strike Walker had ordered earlier.

In the end, the imagination of Konrad forces Walker to decide who is to blame for his actions in Dubai, and his decision can lead to four different endings. If Walker decides to kill himself the game ends, showing both the corpses of Konrad and Walker side by side and a camera shot of the burning Dubai. If Walker blames Konrad and kills the hallucination, Walker uses Konrad's radio to request extraction. In the following post-credits scene, the player has two choices. As a patrol approaches him for extraction, he can decide to relinquish his weapon and go home, or he can decide to fight the patrol. If Walker decides to fight, a conversation between Walker and Konrad during their time together in Afghanistan is shown. If Walker kills the extraction team, he uses the radio, wearing Konrad's uniform and says "Gentleman, welcome to Dubai", which are the same words Konrad used to welcome Walker and his team to Dubai.

## 6.3. Analysis

The third-person shooter *Spec Ops: The Line* uses the 'madman' archetype to establish its unreliable narrator. Like the game *Dragon Age II*, this game relies heavily on audio and visual markers to support the characterization of the mad narrator. Furthermore, the implementation of a plot twist is used to reveal the unreliability of the narrator. However, in contrast to *Dragon Age II, Spec Ops: The Line* applies the plot twist at the end of the game. As a result, the game utilizes the element of player agency, in combination with audio and visual cues, to raise suspicion and uncertainty towards the narrator's reliability before the plot twist. Additionally, this analysis will examine how the madman archetype in *Spec Ops: The Line* is used for social critique, as the game subverts the tropes of military-based action games and addresses themes like post-traumatic stress disorder, morality, the role of military shooters in general as well as the insanity of war.

*Spec Ops: The Line* presents and tells its story mainly through a mix of pre-rendered cutscenes, real-time cutscenes, and in-game dialogue and commentary. Additionally, the player has the option to gather further information about characters and the happenings in Dubai by finding and gathering intel files throughout the game. The story itself is told by an overt homodiegetic first-person narrator. It is portrayed and experienced solely through the eyes of Captain Martin Walker. Because the events and narrated situations are presented by only one point of view, the narrative in *Spec Ops: The Line* uses a fixed internal focalization. Furthermore, the story is divided into two acts. Act One (chapters one to twelve) includes the initial introductory sequence, which is followed by a flashback recounting the main protagonists' experiences and events that had led to the squad's helicopter crash. The second act (chapters thirteen to fifteen) tells the story of Walker and his team after they got shot down during the initial action sequence.

### 6.3.1. The Plot Twist in *Spec Ops: The Line*

The setting, Walker's role, and his relationship with the game's alleged villain Joseph Konrad are established by an initial expository cutscene. This introduction shows Konrad in an apartment in Dubai and uses a voice-over by Walker to explain the current situation in Dubai and Konrad's involvement. Furthermore, it reveals that Konrad had saved Walker's life on a prior mission, setting up the personal and special relationship between those two characters. Walker himself is depicted as a calm and collected, battle-hardened soldier who is committed to fulfilling his duty. However, as the player progresses and leads Walker through his quest to find Konrad, the game provides hints and clues that Walker is not as mentally stable as it might seem. Even if the player does not pick up on these hidden clues, the use of a plot twist at the end of the game reveals that Konrad had been dead for a long time. Consequently, Walker's communication with Konrad throughout the game and his quest for revenge have been a result of mental instability and madness, and this late plot twist clearly exposes and positions Walker as an unreliable narrator.

### 6.3.2. The 'Madman' Archetype in *Spec Ops: The Line*

William Riggan lists the madman as an archetype of unreliable narrators in literature, and parallels between how this archetype is used in literature and *Spec Ops: The Line* can be found when examining the game more closely. For example, Riggan states that these madman types of narrators can have a variety of social, economic, and intellectual backgrounds (142). In our case, Walker is a simple soldier who gets caught in the middle of a crisis whilst trying to perform his duties. Riggan also points out that the theme of isolation is typical for mad narrators (142). In accordance with this statement, Walt Williams, the lead writer of *Spec Ops: The Line*, admitted in interviews that the developers deliberately used the idea of mental instability to evoke the feeling of loneliness, isolation, and being lost (W. Williams 2). The game tries to

capture the feeling of isolation by using a cut-off, destroyed version of the city of Dubai as the setting for the interactive game world. Walker, and therefore the player, is surrounded by walls of sand and desert, accompanied only by two squadmates, alone among hostile soldiers and civilians, which further enhances the perception of loneliness and desolation. Furthermore, Riggan suggests that the madman is often used as a vehicle for social critique (141-142). *Spec Ops: The Line* provides a social commentary on the horrors of war, the humans' capacity for cruelty, and on video game culture and tropes. How the game uses insanity and unreliability for exactly these purposes will be discussed in chapter 6.3.5 in more detail.

### 6.3.3 Audio and Visual Elements and Player Agency in *Spec Ops: The Line*

First, let us examine how the game uses audio and visual elements to establish the idea of Walker being a potentially unreliable narrator and how these markers are used to foreshadow the plot twist at the end of the game. Generally, the implementation of audial and visual hints and clues are designed to portray gradual changes throughout the game, which makes it necessary for the player to observe and recognise these changes.

The first detail to catch the player's eye can be found in the main menu right after he/she launches the game. The main menu shows the American flag upside down (see fig. 3). This particular use of the flag signals "distress" according to the United States flag code (U.S. Government). It is also noteworthy that the menu is musically accompanied by a version of "The Star-Spangled Banner" performed by Jimi Hendrix at the Woodstock-festival 1969. As the game progresses the flag gets increasingly worn down (see fig. 4), and Hendrix's music becomes more erratic and distorted, symbolising the escalation of the situation in the game and the progressing deterioration of Walker's mind.

Figure 3

The American flag and a soldier in front of Dubai at the beginning of a playthrough


Source: Yager Development. *Spec Ops: The Line*. 2K Games, 2012.

Figure 4

The American flag tattered and the dead body of a soldier in front of the burning city of Dubai at the end of a playthrough


Source: Yager Development. *Spec Ops: The Line*. 2K Games, 2012.

In chapter two the player can see graffiti on the wall with the word “lies” written in different languages potentially warning the observant player to treat the narrator and his recounting of the events with caution. In chapter five a large picture of John Konrad can be seen on a banner on the exterior wall of a skyscraper (see fig. 5). When the player examines the banner again from a different angle a few minutes later the face of Konrad is gone (see fig. 6).

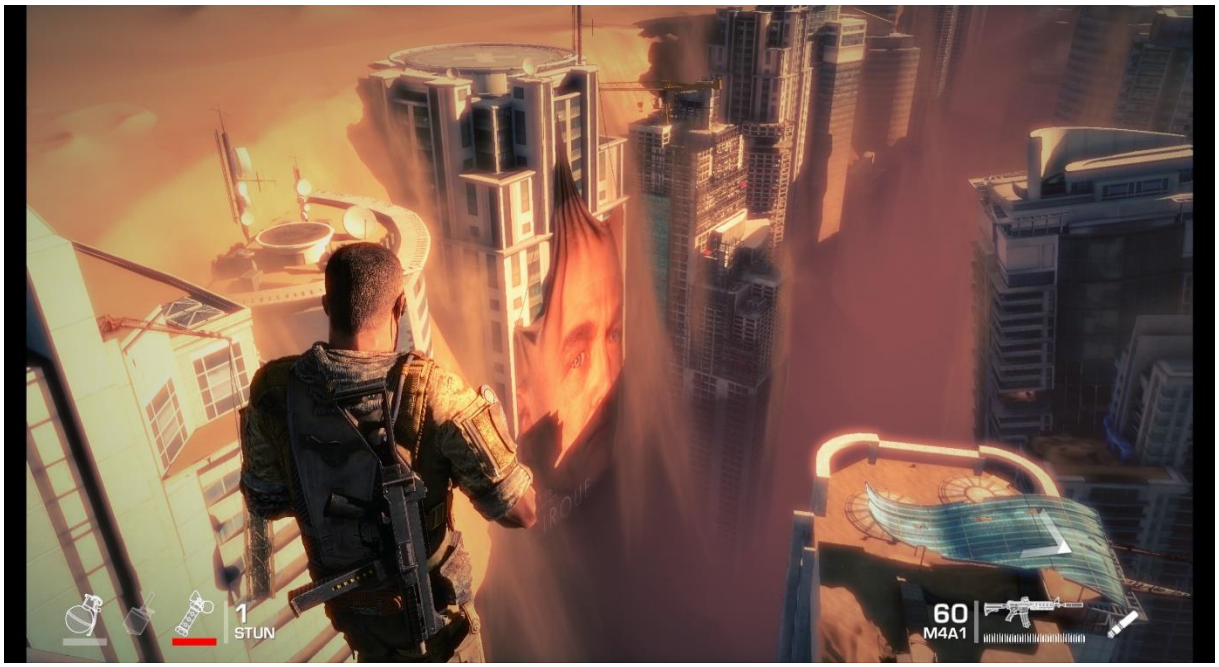
In chapter seven, as the squad makes its way towards a highway, the lampposts on the highway look like regular lampposts and appear empty, but as the team arrives at the highway dead bodies appear hanging from poles. In chapter eight Walker passes a healthy, blooming tree full of green leaves, but if the player turns around after passing the tree it is dead (see fig. 7 and 8).

In chapter nine the player can examine a memorial wall with the names of fallen soldiers on it. Walker’s squadmates Lugo and Adams, who are still ‘alive’ at this point in the game, can be spotted amongst them. This further suggests that the world the player is experiencing may not be real. Furthermore, the player can spot a hanged man in the reflection of a window in place where Lugo is supposed to be, foreshadowing Lugo’s death later in the game.

In chapter eleven the player has the choice to leave or to shoot CIA Agent Riggs, who is trapped under a burning truck. Depending on the player’s decision, the environment changes in the following scenes. If the player executes Riggs, a graffiti of a human body being shot in the head, and two statues with one pointing a finger gun at the head of the other, can be seen. If the decision was to leave Riggs trapped under the burning truck, the graffiti changes to a burning face and the statues are formed of molten rock. This environmental change in accordance with Walker’s choice can be interpreted as a subconscious manifestation of his guilt. Furthermore, the fact that the same scene can have multiple outcomes in different renditions of the same story (i.e. different playthroughs) can be seen as another indicator of the narrator’s insanity and unreliability.

Figure 5

Walker's hallucination of Konrad on a banner in the background.




Source: Yager Development. *Spec Ops: The Line*. 2K Games, 2012.

Figure 6

The same banner as in fig. 5 seen from another angle later in the game – now without Konrad


Source: Yager Development. *Spec Ops: The Line*. 2K Games, 2012.

Figure 7

Walker looking at a healthy tree


Source: Yager Development. *Spec Ops: The Line*. 2K Games, 2012.

Figure 8

The same tree as in fig. 7 appears dead after passing it


Source: Yager Development. *Spec Ops: The Line*. 2K Games, 2012.

In chapter twelve Walker assaults an enemy who is questioning Walker's actions. The game portrays the face of Adams on the enemy soldier's head. An enraged Walker smashes his face in, resulting in the real Adams and Lugo reacting shocked by Walker's brutality. In the same chapter the player relives and re-enacts the initial helicopter sequence, and this time even Walker gets suspicious, crying out in shock: "Wait. Wait, this isn't right! […] Nah… I mean… we did this already!" (Yager), seemingly becoming self-aware of the hallucination he is trapped in for a brief moment. However, he shrugs it off and continues with his quest for revenge.

In chapter fourteen the player witnesses Lugo getting lynched by a rioting mob and later seemingly reappearing as a heavy armoured enemy, clearly a product of Walker's imagination. If the player dies during the fight with the imagined Lugo, Walker faces a standard heavy enemy character instead of his former squadmate after reloading the game, underlining Walker's mental state. It becomes increasingly clear that Walker is suffering from hallucinations. By applying real-world knowledge, the player probably recognises them as another sign of madness and therefore potential unreliability.

The deterioration of Walker's mind can also be observed by a change in his reactions towards his squadmates and his enemies throughout the game. In the beginning, Walker is jovial and professional, joking with Lugo and Adams, while he maintains efficiency and clearness in his orders and commands. However, as the game progresses his behaviour, comments, and voice lines change towards a more emotional, erratic and aggressive personality. This underlines his gradual shift into psychosis. The emotional and mental decline is further demonstrated by Walker's visual deterioration, as his look changes from tidy and clean to barely recognisable. His uniform becomes more tattered and covered by sand and blood as the game progresses. Furthermore, Walker's personality transitions from someone who incapacitates wounded enemies in melee combat by rendering them unconscious to a brutal killer, who executes them without hesitation and remorse. This change is visualized by increasingly brutal and detailed killing animations.

Another interesting feature the development team designed and implemented for the observant player, is the use of visual effects during transitions from gameplay to cutscenes and vice versa. These different transitions are deliberate cues to indicate whether the following scene is a hallucination or not. According to lead writer Walt Williams, the team used black transitions to indicate normalcy as opposed to white colour fades for Walker's hallucinations. Because the screen fade is white during the transition from the helicopter chase in the prologue to the beginning of the game, and in combination with Walker's lines during experiencing the initial helicopter sequence again in chapter twelve, a common theory is that Walker dies in an actual helicopter crash and that the following events are a hallucination and Walker's personal purgatory or hell (Orland 2012).

These are only some examples of a multitude of visual and auditory indicators used by the developers to establish and support the archetype of the madman in *Spec Ops: The Line*. The inconspicuous nature of many of those markers also demonstrates the important role that falls to the player in discovering these indicators and clues. Furthermore, this possibility of player agency and the influence it can have on a narrative underline the uniqueness of video games in comparison to other media like literature or film.

Generally, *Spec Ops: The Line* offers a very linear storytelling and gameplay experience. The restrictive structure and level design of such a "pre-established type of narrative" (Picucci 106) give the developers a high level of narrative control. However, at the same time, these pre-established narrative structures in video games limit the possibilities for the player to explore and discover additional background information or engage in interactive dialogues with NPCs (Picucci 106-107). Nevertheless, *Spec Ops: The Line* still provides the player with options and opportunities to make choices and decisions which can influence the player's perception and interpretation of events and characters. Actions like turning around and discovering that a tree is actually dead or exploring the space within the restrictive levels to spot the names of Walker's companions among a memorial wall are conscious decisions by the player. However, these

types of information, hints, and clues might be discovered by some players but can be easily missed or overlooked by others. This demonstrates how important and crucial player agency can be for the establishment of an unreliable narrator.

### 6.3.4. The Purpose of the Unreliable Narrator in *Spec Ops: The Line*

After analysing the factors that are used to establish the unreliable narrator in *Spec Ops: The Line*, let us use examine why and for what purpose the developers chose the concept of unreliable narrator for their game. As was mentioned earlier, Riggan stated that the archetype of the madman, in particular, is often used in literature as a tool for social critique (142). But is it used for the same purpose in a video game too?

*Spec Ops: The Line* entered the gaming world in a time when the market was dominated by the genre of military shooters. Franchises like *Call of Duty* by *Activision*, *Battlefield* by *Electronic Arts*, or *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon* by *Ubisoft* regularly dominated the sale charts and generated billions of dollars in revenue (Gough; Battlefield). Therefore, it was no surprise that other companies tried to break into the market and wanted to profit by following successful trends. But to do so, these companies had to present something original and different to grab the attention of consumers and critics and to be able to compete with the major franchises that invested between one-hundred to two-hundred million dollars (Superannuation) to develop and market a single game. This was an investment that was not affordable for smaller companies and studios like *Yager*. Consequently, the German developers decided to use the genre dominance by *Activision* and *Electronic Arts*, and the genre standards they had established with their immensely successful and popular games, to their advantage. The studio's goal was to create a game that deliberately subverts expectations regarding genre standards, tropes, and storytelling of military shooters in order to stand out. Therefore, the developers decided to challenge the morality of military shooters and the players' decisions while also addressing

topics like ‘Post Traumatic Stress Disorder’ (PTSD) and the insanity of war. To reach this goal, the studio’s writers draw inspiration from important and popular fictional works that deal with similar themes, like the novella *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad or the film *Apocalypse Now* by Francis Ford Coppola. (Pitts).

*Spec Ops: The Line*’*s* setting, characters, and gameplay elements have often been described and perceived as generic and mediocre by many critics because the game is using all the established mechanics and standards expected from a shooter game without making improvements or adding unique features to the genre (Spec Ops: The Line). The gameplay is linear and action-oriented. The player progresses from one checkpoint to another while shooting waves of mildly intelligent and challenging computer-controlled enemies. The level design is based on a corridor-shooter philosophy, meaning that the player is funnelled through a narrow pass or limited space in order to traverse from point A to point B. Furthermore, encounters with enemies, environmental changes, and narrative moments are heavily scripted. This means that each encounter and moment is predetermined and happens as soon as the player reaches a certain point in a level and triggers the programmed script. Additionally, the gameplay is lacking any variety in terms of puzzles or confronting the player with activities other than walking and shooting. The game provides the player with a standard selection of rifles, shotguns, and handguns to choose from. Even though the player has the option to eliminate enemies at close range with a takedown mechanic by pressing a button, *Spec Ops: The Line* is a so-called ‘cover shooter’ at heart. The player is expected to use a cover system and hide behind purposefully placed objects in the digital environment to hide from danger and gunfire and to avoid taking damage. However, in comparison to genre leaders, *Spec Ops: The Line’s* shooting and cover mechanics are often described as mediocre and solid at best. In addition to the average gameplay, the portrayal of the main characters is criticised as generic by using bland, military stereotypes. For example, Walker’s character is limited to be the prototypical serious, stoic, hard-nosed Captain. His smart-mouthed side-kicks Adams and Lugo face every situation with

sarcastic and light-hearted comments on their lips. They personify the idea of stereotypical American heroism in displaying bravery, friendship, and coolness to save the day, thus providing the notion of *Spec Ops: The Line* being like so many other shooters in the genre (Schmitz; Schütz; Watters).

Even if *Spec Ops: The Line* does not depart from established genre formulas in terms of gameplay and characterization, it sets itself apart by using the aforementioned standards and formulas to play with the expectations of the player base. Together with the narrative concept of the unreliable narrator, the game aims at discussing a variety of difficult social topics and contemporary problems.

As Walker descends into madness and starts embracing his brutality, the player probably starts to question the morality behind his/her own actions and may feel increasingly uncomfortable. According to the development team, the player is supposed to question Walker's actions, which in the end are the result of the player's actions (W. Williams 2012). To further this self-questioning, the game breaks the fourth wall by using the game's loading screens to address the player directly. Conventionally, loading screens in video games are used to provide hints, tips, tricks, or story summaries, which is partially done by *Spec Ops: The Line* as well. However, the game also uses them to gradually address Walker's mental state and the player's morality and decisions (see table 2).

Table 2

Examples of loading screen texts

| |
|---|
| • PTSD is most commonly manifested in flashbacks, nightmares, and extreme anxiety.<br>• Cognitive dissonance is an uncomfortable feeling caused by holding two conflicting ideas simultaneously.<br>• You are still a good person.<br>• The US military does not condone the killing of unarmed combatants. But this isn't real, so why should you care?<br>• If Lugo were still alive, he would likely suffer from PTSD. So, really, he's the lucky one.<br>• Can you even remember why you came here?<br>• This is all your fault.<br>• Do you feel like a hero yet?<br>• How many Americans have you killed today? |

- It's time for you to wake up.
- If you were a better person, you wouldn't be here.
- To kill for yourself is murder. To kill for your government is heroic. To kill for entertainment is harmless.
- There is no difference between what is right and what is necessary.
- You can't go home.
- Kill a man, and you are a murderer. Kill everyone, and you are a god.
- This is not the time for weakness.

Source: Yager Development. *Spec Ops: The Line*. 2K Games, 2012.

The player may start to question Walker's behaviour and decisions, while the game mirrors the same sentiment of self-reflection towards the player. As the player is an extension of Walker, he/she continues being it only by choice because he/she is free to stop playing and exit the game any time. Naturally, the player may object that the purpose of this game can only be obtained if the player continues playing. Ultimately, shooting and killing are what he/she is supposed to do because this lies within the nature of this particular video game genre. Like Walker, the player may feel that he/she has no other choice if he/she wants to reach the end. However, as Lugo tells Walker before his decision to go through with the ill-fated white phosphorous attack in chapter eight—"There is always a choice." (Yager)— the game repeatedly tells the player that he/she has a choice as well. This is done implicitly through the use of voice lines, texts (see table 2), or by implementing interactive moments in gameplay where the player can make decisions throughout the game (e.g. in chapter seven the player is confronted with the decision to either rescue a captured CIA agent or to help civilian hostages).

Again, the game plays with established conventions of the military shooter genre, which is usually perceived as very linear and void of choices. The player is essentially echoing Walker's fate of committing to a mission without a reasonable way out. The only way to redemption is to quit and to step away. Walker himself is never offered anything remotely similar to a path to redemption. On the contrary, his condition becomes worse the longer he is exposed to war. The player witnesses first-hand the crumbling of a human being who loses all its intrinsic values of morality and decency, ultimately morphing into his enemy and alter-ego

Konrad. The main goal and core mission were to provide humanitarian aid, to which Walker becomes entirely oblivious. Not only is the positive pull of a humanitarian mission entirely eliminated, but also do the malign, inescapable pull of war and combat far outweigh it.

In the end, the characters Konrad and Walker in *Spec Ops: The Line* are prime examples of being corrupt and rotten beyond the point of salvation. Contrarily, the player is offered to act with reason and step away from this madness. By choosing to use the madman archetype for their unreliable narrator, the developers created not only a commentary on the morals of war but also challenged genre tropes, the concept of playing a wargame, and the player's core relationship to games.

The unreliable narrator in *Spec Ops: The Line* is established by utilizing three main factors: the madman character archetype; the plot twist; and auditive and visual elements. Contrarily to *Dragon Age II*, this game does not reveal the character archetype early in the game. It rather relies on audio and visual design elements to gradually hint at the idea of Walker being insane before he is finally exposed by a plot twist towards the end of the game. As a result of the late twist, player agency in combination with audial and visual markers plays a vital role in uncovering the unreliable narrator. In the end, *Spec Ops: The Line* tells its story in a way that leaves no doubt that the main protagonist and narrator, namely Walker, is mentally unstable and on the brink of insanity, and therefore unreliable. The fixed internal focalization provides the player with a recount of situations and events from only the narrator's point of view, which ties the player's understanding of said events and situations to Walker's own limited understanding. However, the uniqueness of video games provides the possibility for the player to go beyond this limited point of view if he/she desires it. Even if the player ignores or is not able to grasp all the little hints and signs of unreliability throughout the game, the ending makes it obvious with what kind of a narrator the player has dealt with throughout the game. This has the potential to lead the player to question his/her decisions and actions. Furthermore, this video game uses unreliability, coming in the form of insanity and madness, to address the topic of

morality in humanity in general and the player specifically, and this conversation between the game and the player is seen and felt through intentional choices in game design.

# 7. Portal

Developer: Valve Corporation
Publisher: Valve Corporation
Genre: Puzzle-platform game
Release: 2007

## 7.1. Synopsis

*Portal* is a puzzle-platform game created by developer *Valve* and taking place in Valve's own successful *Half-Life* universe. The *Half-Life* universe is set in a contemporary world and tells the story of a science project gone wrong. *Portal* is a stand-alone game set in this fictional universe. The player guides the silent protagonist Chell through a testing facility, solving puzzles presented to her by an artificial intelligence named GLaDOS. To solve these puzzles, Chell uses an experimental gun to create portals that are used to travel between two points.

## 7.2. Plot

*Portal* begins with the protagonist Chell waking up from stasis alone in a small cell. She is greeted by the voice of GLaDOS, an artificial intelligence that informs Chell about her role in a series of upcoming tests. Each test takes place on different levels of the science facility and involves the use of a portal gun. This gun enables Chell to place two connected portals on almost any surface within the test chambers. Her task is to use these portals to solve puzzles by using cubes, pressing buttons, transferring energy balls, or reaching inaccessible places (see fig. 9). GLaDOS is monitoring her progress through the different test chambers by watching Chell through multiple cameras and commenting on her successes or failures. In order to proceed and

reach the end of her test run, Chell must clear nineteen test chambers each increasing in difficulty and complexity. As an incentive to finish her tests GLaDOS promises rewards in the form of cake and grief counselling at the end. However, after completing the last test chamber Chell is lured into a trap, as GLaDOS tries to kill her with an incinerator. Chell can escape and searches for her way out of the facility using the maintenance areas. The lack of any surveillance devices provides Chell with opportunities to traverse the test complex without alerting the AI. Within these backstage areas, Chell finds signs and hints that she is not the first test subject being tricked by GLaDOS and trying to escape. Finally, Chell reaches the main chamber where her artificial antagonist's hardware is stored. In order to kill Chell once and for all GLaDOS floods the chamber with a neurotoxin gas. In a final confrontation, Chell successfully dismantles GLaDOS and destroys its vital components, namely her personality cores, by using portals, energy balls, and an incinerator. The vanilla/original game version ends with an explosion and Chell waking up on the surface amidst the debris. However, this ending was slightly altered with the release of the sequel *Portal 2* in 2011. In this new ending, Chell wakes up on the surface after the explosion and is dragged away from the scene by an unidentified being while it is talking to her in a robotic voice. Both versions end with a final cutscene, in which a first-person camera is flying through shafts and hallways of the facility until it reaches a room full of shelves with inactive personality cores, a cake, and the Weighted Companion Cube. As the cores begin to light up one by one a robotic arm descends and extinguishes the candle on top of the cake. The room goes dark and the credits roll. The credits are accompanied by GLaDOS singing the song "Still Alive".

## 7.3 Analysis

The game *Portal* utilizes multiple narrators to tell its story. This analysis examines how the developers use the concept of environmental storytelling as a method to gradually reveal the

unreliability of the narrators GLaDOS and Doug Rattman. Furthermore, it illustrates how environmental storytelling in *Portal* relies heavily on audio and visual elements like sound effects or graffiti to support the idea of dealing with an unreliable narrator and to set up a plot twist. Additionally, environmental storytelling in *Portal* utilizes the concept of transmedia storytelling to provide background information about the story and the reliability of the narrators. The role of player agency for environmental storytelling in order to successfully establish the unreliability of the game's narrators will be discussed as well.

*Portal* is a first-person puzzle game based around the core mechanics of portals. The player uses a gun to create an entry and an exit point on almost any surface within the game to move between two points. This core gameplay mechanic is used to overcome obstacles and to reach the exit point of a level. Each level increases in complexity and difficulty. *Portal* is an interesting game not only because of its unique game mechanics but also because of the possibility of identifying multiple potential narrators. On a discourse level, *Portal* does not establish an obvious and overt narrator like it is done in *Dragon Age II* and *Spec Ops: The Line*. Consequently, the player is one potential narrator, as he/she can be identified as the narrator of the story in a video game based on the necessity of the player's agency to drive the plot forward. Another potential candidate in *Portal* is GLaDOS, the artificial intelligence accompanying and guiding the player through the Aperture Science testing facility. The third possibility for the role of a narrator is the character Doug Rattman, who can be identified through discovering environmental and transmedia storytelling elements hidden throughout the game, which underlines the uniqueness of a video game's storytelling potential.

### 7.3.1. The Player as the Narrator in *Portal*

Let us start with the obvious choice of the narrator in a video game, namely the player. As it was established in previous analyses ((see chapters 5.3.3. and 8.3.1.), the player can perform

the role of the narrator because his/her actions drive the story forward, which is commonly told through his/her perspective. The same applies to *Portal*, where the player sees and navigates the environment through the first-person perspective of Chell. The player is in full control for the entirety of the game except during a short cut-scene at the end of the game. He/she can jump, run or walk, and look around freely. The protagonist remains silent throughout the game, giving the player the possibility to form an individual voice in his/her head. The game does not address the Chell/player by name, and without inadvertently spotting the character through cleverly placed portals (see fig. 9) or consulting official sources the player would not know who he/she is within the game.

Figure 9

Only in very rare cases the player gets to see the main protagonist

Source: Valve Corporation. *Portal*. Valve Corporation, 2007.

Consequently, the player is the focal character and acts as a central consciousness through which the situations and events are perceived. Even though the player only represents the character Chell, the use of fixed internal focalization creates the illusion of the player actually

being mentally and physically present within the game world. Teun Dubbelman calls this type of immersive game “presentological” (39-40).

Furthermore, the player starts with a complete lack of knowledge about the setting, the time and the world in which this adventure takes place. This is the result of the game forgoing any introductory world-building and exposition in any form, which is quite unusual but mysterious and unnerving at the same time. It is also unclear if the character Chell possesses more knowledge about this world and what is happening to her than the player itself. As a result, the player has to discover the story and the world through observation and deduction. However, even though the player initially lacks important facts and knowledge, it is unlikely that he/she or Chell is unreliable. There are simply no hints or signs provided by the game that the main protagonist is under the influence of experience altering substances or devices, embodies a certain character archetype prone to lying and misrepresenting the truth, and is, therefore, the unreliable teller of this tale.

### 7.3.2. Voice Acting and the Unreliable Narrator in *Portal*

This is a completely different case with the second narrator in Portal, namely the artificial intelligence GLaDOS. As the player wakes up in an isolated cell, he/she is greeted by a female computerized voice. The voice welcomes the protagonist to the Aperture Science Laboratories Computer-Aided Enrichment Centre. This setting establishes the idea that the player is a test subject for experiments. Although the player does not encounter a physical form of GLaDOS until the very end, her presence is ubiquitous, as she watches the player through multiple cameras and comments on his/her progress constantly. GLaDOS functions as the narrative guide that helps the player to understand the world he/she is part of and drives the events forward. However, the implementation of GLaDOS as the character who helps the player to

drive the plot forward, and how she is integrated into the world, was the result of the feedback by play testers during development and not the idea from the get-go.

The first *Portal* prototype was designed by students as their final game project and part of their curriculum at the DigiPen Institute of Technology. The project, originally called *Narbacular Drop*, already featured all the core game mechanics of *Portal* when professional game developing studio *Valve* approached the students and proposed to support the development of their game under their guidance. *Valve* themselves had been a household name in the video game community since their breakthrough with the critically acclaimed first-person shooter *Half-Life* (Barnett et al.).

During the following development of *Portal*, the team observed that playtesters reacted poorly to the initial builds of the game. Despite their praise for the interesting game mechanics, the testers expressed boredom and showed a lack of engagement and interest over longer play sessions. In the developer's efforts to add incentives and more entertainment to their game, they turned to *Valve* staff writer Erik Wolpaw for advice regarding the creation of an engaging narrative. *Valve* had already had considerable experience using the environments within a game for storytelling purposes with their ground-breaking *Half-Life* games. They had done this by using NPCs, scripted sequences, sound design, and visual cues to tell a story and establishing characters. They had refrained from using expository cut-scenes because it would take control away from the player and break immersion. Due to limited resources, the *Portal* developers needed a story and characters that could be presented and told without the use of visible extra characters, which would have required a large amount of complex animation work. As a result, the development team and Wolpaw decided to use assets from *Valve's Half-Life* games and its universe, providing them with an already established setting and story background (Barnett et al.).

Additionally, Wolpaw designed an invisible character to function as a guide for the player, giving it a distinctive voice by using a text-to-speech program and letting it interact with

the player through a series of announcements in the game. As a result, the team observed increased levels of general engagement, immersion, and a unique attachment to this computer voice with its play-testers. By giving this virtual guide, named GLaDOS, further personality traits like sarcasm and irony combined with a soothing calmness, the team hoped that players would get to know her better than any other main adversary in video game history. Furthermore, the expectation was that this peculiar dynamic between the player and GLaDOS may lead to a satisfying pay-off towards the end, as the AI becomes more desperate and antagonistic and the player gets the opportunity to oppose her in multiple ways (Barnett et al.).

As we can see, the game and the character of GLaDOS are designed with the intention that the player becomes aware of her unreliability only gradually. This gradual reveal of her untrustworthiness is achieved by placing and portraying subtle visual and auditory markers and signals within the game's virtual environment. The following section will present a few examples of how auditive elements are used to establish the character of GLaDOS and her unreliability (for the discussion of visual markers see ch. 7.3.3.)

In the game's introduction of GLaDOS, she stresses that the forthcoming tests are meant to be fun and based on the opportunity to learn, but also reminds the player that serious injuries can occur. Nevertheless, as unique and strange the setting and task may be, the sterile look of the environment in combination with the computerized voice provides the player with a feeling of normalcy and routine. The first subtle signs of potential problems are provided early on by GLaDOS herself. During her initial monologue, a glitch in her system seems to occur, rendering her voice unintelligible for a short moment. This is supported visually by flickering lights and flying sparks. However, this malfunction is not acknowledged by GLaDOS in any way. These auditory and visual glitches repeat themselves multiple times during the player's journey, indicating that something might be awry.

The feeling of scepticism towards GLaDOS is increased by her personality and how it changes throughout the game. The game relies heavily on her monologues and Ellen McLane's

voice acting to convey these changes. In the beginning, GLaDOS acts and behaves professionally, displaying an aura of routine and normalcy. She is very encouraging and sometimes outright amicable towards the player throughout the first few test chambers, praising his/her progress and ingenuity for solving the puzzles and challenges. In test chamber nine the player experiences the first obvious clue that GLaDOS is capable of human characteristics by displaying sarcasm and irony in her comments. She also lies to the player as she declares this test chamber to be unsolvable and encourages the player to give up and quit multiple times. This is also the first time GLaDOS mentions a cake as a reward for the player, which she repeats multiple times throughout the game, and which is also used to set up the plot twist in the middle of the game. After the player passes the test, GLaDOS praises the player's determination and resourcefulness in an environment of extreme pessimism, conveying the idea that she deliberately discouraged and lied to the player as a test. In chamber thirteen GLaDOS states: "As part of the previously mentioned test protocol we can no longer lie to you. You will be…missed." (Valve, *Portal*) reinforcing the notion of her being a liar. Consequently, the player can no longer be certain which comments of GLaDOS can be taken seriously or not. In chamber eighteen she announces that "you will be baked and then there will be cake" (Valve *Portal*), which sounds like a harmless joke in isolation but becomes reality later on through foreshadowing. GLaDOS attempts to murder the player via incineration at the end of the final test chamber. This functions as the big plot twist to reveal the AI's true intentions and to leave no doubt in the player's mind that she is unreliable and untrustworthy.

The escape of this trap marks the ending of Act One and the beginning of Act Two. Now the player is fully aware that GLaDOS cannot be trusted. As a result, the player leaves behind the role of the passive, obedient guinea pig controlled and manipulated by a murderous AI. He/she begins to move through the maintenance halls and shafts of the facility, hidden from GLaDOS' all-observant gaze, looking for a way out. This loss of control and lack of knowledge frightens GLaDOS, which is noticeable in the change of her tone and voice. Before the player's

escape, she communicated in a monotone voice, but after the escape, the voice becomes more expressive and cycles through a wide range of emotions. She expresses her frustration, anger, sadness, and fear towards the player with increasing frequency. Additionally, she shows signs of psychopathic, erratic behaviour fuelled by multiple personalities, hinting at the probability of her being unpredictable and unreliable. Furthermore, during the final battle against the player, GLaDOS admits that she has killed all personnel, cementing the suspicion of dealing with an AI gone rogue. Consequently, her behaviour marks her as a representative of the madman archetype in accordance to Riggan's definition (109-143).

These are only some examples of how the voice acting and sound design in *Portal* can influence the portrayal and personality of the character. Of course, an impactful character is the result of not only a strong voice acting performance but also depends on good writing and character design. For their performance, voice actress Ellen McLain and the developer *Valve* received the award for "Outstanding Character Performance" at the 2008 D.I.C.E Awards, which is arranged annually by the Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences (Outstanding").

How the concept of environmental storytelling, which is heavily dependent on visual markers, is used to establish the unreliability of GLaDOS and the character of Doug Rattman will be discussed next.

### 7.3.3. Environmental Storytelling in *Portal*

Environmental storytelling in video games describes the use of the game's digital space to provide narrative context. Henry Jenkins borrows models and theories from film studies to describe the use and the effects of embedded narratives and environmental storytelling. He states that in film studies "narrative comprehension is an active process by which viewers assemble and make hypotheses about likely narrative developments on the basis of information drawn from textual cues and clues." (Game Design 126) He describes how video games can

have two kinds of narratives. One is “relatively unstructured and controlled by the player as they explore the game space and unlock its secrets” (Game Design 126). The other narrative is “prestructured but embedded within the mise-en-scene awaiting discovery.” (Game Design 126.) This environmental storytelling can come in the forms of physical objects like texts, books, pictures or paintings but can also include visual or auditory effects like mist or a variety of sounds. Often this information is hidden from the obvious gaze of the player and therefore can be overlooked rather easily. Environmental storytelling provides the player with sources of information and it depends on the player to find and make sense of them. (Game Design 126-128).

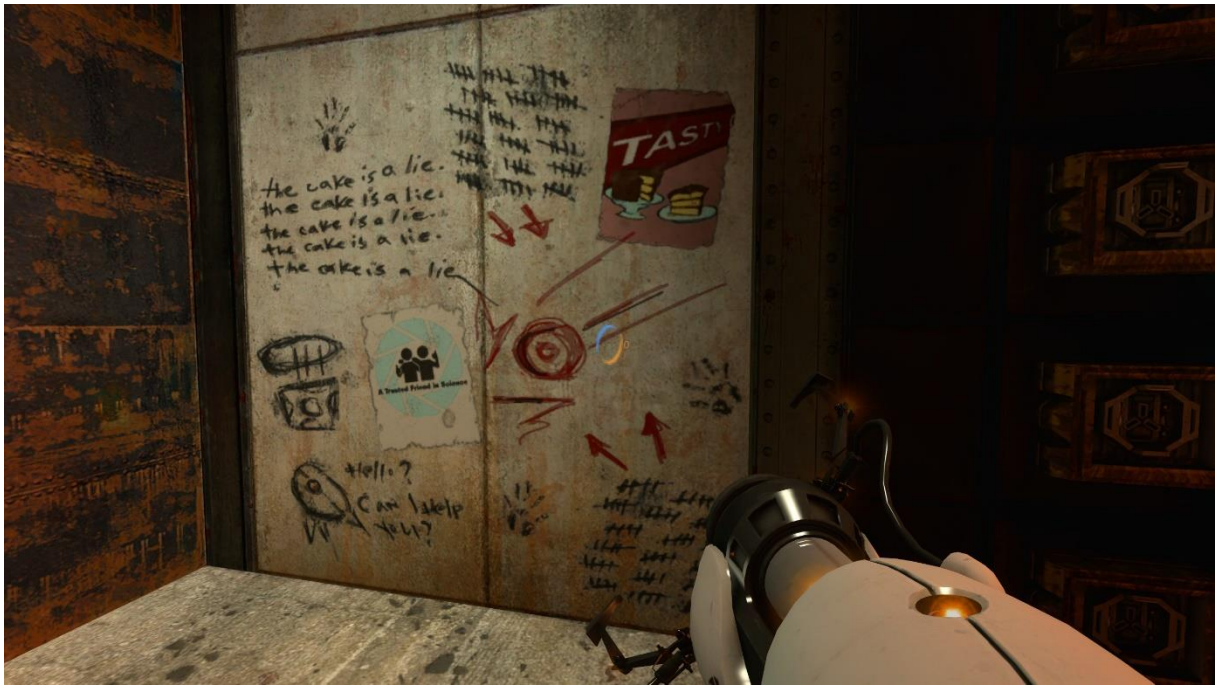
As mentioned before, *Valve* had been quite successful with environmental storytelling in previous games, and their influence is felt in *Portal* as well. Important parts of the story in *Portal* are told through environmental storytelling, especially through visual cues like pictures and graffiti, which can be found in hidden rooms and other difficult to reach parts of the facility. However, initially, it is unclear if the provided these cues and their information are the creation of one single character or if they are a culmination of multiple characters. Further information about that is only provided by sources outside of the game (in this case a comic book that links the story of the original *Portal* with its sequel). Additionally, the possibility of players missing these clues and information makes it difficult to identify this unique storytelling as a method to introduce a potential narrator who tells the story of Chell and her escape from the science facility. Nevertheless, the hidden clues in *Portal* lead to an absent narrator who helps to shed a light on what has been going on with GLaDOS and the testing facility.

The additional information comes in the form of hidden messages found in secret rooms behind wall panels, which tell the story of a character not featured directly in the game. The first encounter with these messages happens during the exploration of chamber sixteen and it supports the suspicion that something sinister is happening in this facility that goes beyond the simple testing of subjects (see fig. 10). There the player can find handprints and the word “help”

smeared on walls with what looks like blood. Furthermore, the line “the cake is a lie” covers the walls, and the player can find sleeping bags and cans as additional signs of people living behind the panels in hidden rooms. However, the player does not know who has been hiding behind the walls and if they are still alive. Nevertheless, these signs can help the player to understand that GLaDOS should not be trusted. At the same time, the way the hidden messages are presented may invoke the feeling of dealing with the results of people showing signs of insanity, and the further into the laboratory the player progresses the more disturbing and deranged the messages become, which adds potential unreliability to them and their creators.

Figure 10

Doug Rattman’s ingame warning that the cake is a lie




Source: Valve Corporation. *Portal*. Valve Corporation, 2007.

Ultimately, the story behind these messages and writings is not revealed in the game itself but is told in the comic book spin-off “Lab Rat” published before the release of *Portal 2* to bridge the stories of *Portal* and its sequel. It tells the story of Doug Rattman, a paranoid schizophrenic under medication and a former employee at Aperature Science Labs. As a leading scientist, he

was the creative mind behind the portal gun used by Chell in the games. He was one of the few to survive the neurotoxin attack by GLaDOS and ultimately was forced to hide in the maintenance shafts behind the walls of the lab. In an attempt to regain control over the facility Rattman found files on the potential test subject Chell. The files attested her an unusual stubbornness and a high level of resiliency. Rattman was convinced that Chell could make a difference and defeat GLaDOS, and he marked her as a high priority test subject for the AI. However, without access to his medication, he went increasingly insane over time. His only friend became a companion cube, a physical object in the shape of a cube with hearts drawn on its sides, reinforcing the notion of him as a madman archetype. He lamented the death of his colleagues and the eventual loss of his companion cube by smearing the walls with writings and calls for help. He also covered the walls of his hiding spots with photos of his co-workers and replacing their heads with pictures of his companion cube (see fig. 11). As Chell explores more of the lab in the game, she encounters these increasingly disturbing signs of Rattman's insanity. The signs and markings left behind by Doug Rattman stop near the end of the game, leaving his fate unclear. However, the story of his fate can be uncovered in the sequel *Portal 2*.

This method of expanding a fictional universe through other sources is called transmedia storytelling. Henry Jenkins defines it as "a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story." (*Transmedia*) Because transmedia stories are the result of the longing for more expansive fictional universes, it is seen as a counterpart to classically constructed narratives, which are defined by a sense of closure, as classically constructed narratives provide all the necessary information to make sense of the story (*Transmedia*).

Figure 11

Doug Rattman's graffiti ingame honour of his deceased colleagues and companion cube


Source: Valve Corporation. *Portal*. Valve Corporation, 2007.

In the case of *Portal*, the comic book spin-off is not the only source outside the game that added new pieces of information to an already existing universe. This can be achieved in many different ways. An example of a different approach is the existence of Easter eggs[4] in the game. The player can discover the username and password to a website accessible in real life in the first Rattman hideout. At the time of writing this website shows camera footage of a companion cube wearing a Santa hat in a room decorated for Christmas. However, the website originally featured a login command. By using the details provided by the game, the user could access a database with further bits of information. For example, the user could access old video footage of the cell the player wakes up at the beginning of the game. Furthermore, a message by a former employee of Aperture Science expressing concerns about the intentions of his employer could be found (SuperHorrorBro). But who wrote the instructions and messages? Are they the

[4] In computer software and media, an Easter egg is an intentional inside joke, hidden message or image, or secret feature of a work ("Easter egg")

creation of Doug Rattman or another employee? These and other questions are up to the interpretation of the player. Nevertheless, both methods of transmedia storytelling add to the mystery surrounding the world of *Portal*, further questioning the reliability of the involved characters. However, environmental storytelling can only be effective if the player is willing and able to discover the hidden messages, hints and secrets in the game itself and outside of it. Therefore, player agency is an important factor for the success of the concept of environmental storytelling in video games.

The game *Portal* utilizes multiple narrators to tell its story, namely the player him/herself, the game's antagonist GLaDOS, and the former Aperture scientist Doug Rattman. Whilst the player experiences the story in the present tense through real-time exploration and communication with GLaDOS in the game, Rattman's contributions to the narrative are a glimpse into the past through hidden messages in the game and additional information provided by external sources. In regards to reliability, the main protagonist Chell functions as the most reliable source. Even though the setting invokes the feeling of uneasiness and confusion in the player, the game does not provide any hints or clues of Chell's and the player's experiences being untrustworthy. GLaDOS and Rattman, on the other hand, are revealed to be highly unreliable and untrustworthy throughout the game. This unreliability is established through the concept of environmental storytelling, visual and auditory elements, and a plot twist in the middle of the game. GLaDOS herself exposes her unreliability mainly through her verbal interactions with Chell. The character of Doug Rattman functions as an absent narrator, who raises suspicions against GLaDOS by hidden messages and visual clues throughout the facility. However, the way how these messages are presented, together with the revelations brought forward by external sources through transmedia storytelling, establishes Rattman as unreliable himself. Generally, the game relies heavily on player agency to uncover and establish the unreliability of the potential narrators GLaDOS and Doug Rattman.

# 8. Mass Effect 1-3

Developers: BioWare et al.
Publishers: Microsoft Game Studios (2007)
Electronic Arts (2008-present)
Genre: Third-Person-Shooter/Action Role-Playing Game
Release: 2007-2012

## 8.1. Synopsis

The universe of the *Mass Effect* trilogy is placed in a fictional version of the Milky Way at the end of the 22nd century. Mankind was able to advance its technological progress significantly after discovering artefacts on the planet Mars in 2148. Those artefacts left behind by an extinct advanced alien race called Protheans allowed humans to expand throughout the galaxy and eventually encounter other species. Many of these species are part of a galactic community that is ruled by the Citadel Council, an organisation similar to the United Nations on Earth. The Council is led by the Asari, a monogendered, long-living race; the Turians, a raptor-like humanoid race who live in a highly hierarchical militaristic society; and the Salarians, a short-lived amphibious species with technological prowess. Additional species include the reptilian, aggressive Krogan; the nomadic Quarians; and a race of artificial intelligences called the Geth. In this universe, humanity is seen as the newcomer who still must earn the trust and respect from the other species.

## 8.2. Plot

Throughout the trilogy, the story follows Commander Shepard, a special forces soldier for the human System Alliance. In *Mass Effect 1,* Shepard and a team are sent to recover an unearthed Prothean artefact at the human colony on Eden Prime. The Protheans were a technologically advanced race that went extinct fifty-thousand years ago, whose recovered artefacts have been responsible for technological leaps for many species throughout the galaxy. During this

recovery mission, Eden Prime is attacked by the hostile Geth. As Shepard reaches and interacts with the artefact, he/she triggers a vision of war and death. Back on the Citadel Station, the seat of the Galactic Council, Shepard teams up with the Krogan Wrex, the Turian Garrus, and the Quarian Tali, who all are in possession of evidence that the Turian Spectre Saren Arterius is behind the attack on Eden Prime in a ploy to bring back the Reapers. The Reapers are a mythical advanced machine race that supposedly eradicates all organic life every fifty-thousand years. Spectres (Special Tactics and Reconnaissance) are agents under the direct authority of the Galactic Council with the task to serve and protect the galaxy. Shepard becomes the first human Spectre and is given full authority and the command over his/her own crew and a ship, the Normandy, to hunt down Saren. In Shepard's pursuit of Saren, the crew of the Normandy unravels the motives behind Saren's and the Reapers' sinister plans. Usually, the Reapers return to the Milky Way every fifty-thousand years to harvest all organic life when they reach the peak of their development. However, in the present cycle, the Reapers have not been able to open their usual gateways through the Mass Effect portals to the Milky Way. These gates are triggered by the Citadel and a Reaper scout. As a result of the Reaper's inability to open them in the current cycle, they need the help of Saren and the Geth to return. Saren is aware of these plans and wants to use the Reapers' mind-manipulation technology to prevent that from happening. However, due to the long exposure to Sovereign, the sole Reaper left behind in the Milky Way to serve as a scout and initiator of their return, Saren is gradually indoctrinated, and ultimately becomes a servant to the Reapers. Finally, Saren and Shepard race to the Citadel to reach the main controls for the Mass Effect portals in order to either aid or prevent the Reapers from reaching the Milky Way. In the end, Shepard defeats Saren, and with the help of the Alliance, he is able to take down Sovereign and prevent the invasion by the Reapers. As a result, humanity becomes part of the Galactic Council and assumes a leading role in the galaxy.

*Mass Effect 2* starts shortly after the events of the first game. Commander Shepard and his/her crew are on a recon mission when they are attacked by an unknown vessel. The

Normandy takes heavy damage and the crew must abandon the ship. During the evacuation, Shepard is blasted into space and is pulled into the orbit of a nearby planet. The remains of his body are recovered by the humans-first paramilitary group Cerberus, led by the mysterious Illusive Man. Through massive technological and financial investments, Shepard is brought back to life. The Illusive Man reveals to Shepard that multiple human colonies have been raided by a mysterious insectoid enemy called the Collectors. They are working for the Reapers and searching for ways to bring them back from dark space, where they have been in hibernation and waiting for the last fifty-thousand years. Shepard's goal is to reach the Collector's main base beyond the inactive Omega-4 Relay. To accomplish this, Cerberus provides Shepard with a new ship and resources to assemble a new team. Throughout the quest to find a way beyond the Omega-4 Relay, Shepard and his/her team discover that the Collectors were originally Protheans, and now they serve as slaves for the Reapers. Shepard is able to find a way to activate the Omega-4 Relay and infiltrate the Collectors' main base. There he/she discovers that the Collectors have been abducting humans to use their genetic material to build a humanoid Reaper. Shepard destroys the Reaper prototype and escapes the base. The game ends with the Reapers awakening in dark space and descending upon the galaxy.

*Mass Effect 3* tells the story of the Reapers' invasion of the Milky Way. The Reapers have finally reached Earth, and during their fight for survival, Shepard learns of the discovery of plans for a Prothean superweapon, the Crucible. The Protheans had not been able to finish that device during the Reapers' attack in the previous cycle, but they were able to hide the plans for future generations. While the human Alliance begins constructing the superweapon, Shepard is ordered to garner support from other species for a final battle. The Turians, Asari, Salarian, Quarian, and Krogan are all suffering under the Reaper attacks themselves, but they are willing to support the Alliance if Shepard is willing to help them with various matters in return. In the meantime, Cerberus has gone completely rogue and the Illusive Man is using all his resources to find ways to adapt the Reapers' mind control technologies for himself in an

attempt to save the galaxy by controlling the Reapers. On Thessia, the Asari homeworld, Shepard discovers the Catalyst, an essential component of the Crucible. As it turns out, this Catalyst is the Citadel, the massive space station that is functioning as the seat and heart of the Galactic Council. Unfortunately, the Citadel is already under the control of the indoctrinated Illusive Man, and therefore the Reapers. In the final battle for Earth, the Crucible, and the Citadel, a gravely wounded Shepard is able to reach the heart of the Citadel. There he/she is confronted by an artificial intelligence in the form of a human child. This AI reveals to be the Catalyst and the creator of the Reapers, and it confronts Shepard with four final options. By activating the Crucible Shepard can a) destroy the Reapers and all synthetic life; b) control the Reapers by merging him/herself with a new A.I.; c) synthesize all organic life with synthetic life and vice versa, leading to peace between organics and synthetics; or d) refuse all options, leading to the extinction of all organic life and a continuing the cycle of the Reapers destroying all organic life every fifty-thousand years.

## 8.3. Analysis

This chapter discusses the implementation and the use of the unreliable narrator in the video game trilogy *Mass Effect 1-3* by examining different characters regarding the possibility of being the narrator as a starting point. Possible narrators range from the player/Shepard to companions or to a heterodiegetic narrator who is revealed only through a narrative twist in the game's epilogue. However, in contrast to the other games discussed in this work, where the narrator is sooner or later deliberately exposed to be unreliable, the potential unreliability of the narrator Shepard has been proposed by fans as a result of their dissatisfaction with the trilogy's conclusion. We will discuss how visual and audio design elements, together with multiple potential developmental oversights and inconsistencies throughout the trilogy, are used to support the fan theory of indoctrination and lead to an alternative view on the narrator's

(un)reliability. Furthermore, by using Nünning's contributions to the cognitivist approach, which sees a narrator's unreliability based on the reader's interpretation, we delve into a critical deconstruction and examination of the game's controversial endings. Most importantly, Nünning's approach in combination with the example of the fans' interpretation of the *Mass Effect* trilogy is used to propose adding the player and his/her individual interpretation as another decisive factor to establish an unreliable narrator in video games.

### 8.3.1. The Narrator in *Mass Effect 1-3*

As we have established in prior analyses, because of the uniqueness of the medium video games it is sometimes difficult to determine who the actual narrator of the tale is. Similar to *Dragon Age II*, and role-playing games in general, the *Mass Effect* trilogy is a game that is designed around the idea of player choices and consequences. Throughout the game, the player constantly gets confronted with dialogue choices and decisions regarding the outcome of quests. Not only do many of these decisions influence quests and the relationships to different characters in a single instalment, but they also carry over from one game to the next. Consequently, decisions made in *Mass Effect 1* influence certain aspects (e.g. characters being alive or dead; how quests are resolved; relationships with teammates or non-player characters; etc.) in the later games.

Furthermore, the player can decide how many of the numerous side quests and embedded narratives he/she wants to take on and finish. This also means that the main storyline is narrated by providing the player with a mix of linearity and freedom of choice. The beginning and the end of each game are quite linear, as the player has to fulfil a fixed sequence of main missions and quests, which function as an introduction and a conclusion to the game. In the middle part of each game, the story branches out and provides the player with the freedom to choose when and in which sequence to do several main quests. By fulfilling these main quests, new side quests are made available to the player. Certain main missions function as triggers to

advance the main storyline, providing the player with a feeling of progression. In the endgame, the player triggers a point of no return in the form of a specific quest, which ties all the different storylines and quests together. This is followed by a series of linear missions leading up to the finale.

Because the *Mass Effect* games are about choices, decisions, a multitude of possibilities, and sometimes even deadly consequences, a variety of different characters have the potential to function as the narrator of this tale. Furthermore, the lack of a frame narrative that establishes an overt narrator at the start of the trilogy increases the uncertainty about who is functioning as the narrator. Is it Commander Shepard him/herself? Is it one of his/her many companions, like Admiral David Anderson, Flight Lieutenant Jeff "Joker" Moreau, Shepard's love interest? Or is it even an uninvolved bystander? All the different variables based on the player's choices and decisions determine who survives or dies throughout the game, and in the end, this may exclude potential narrators for different players.

However, the different endings of the game establish multiple potential narrators. The most obvious choice as a narrator from a traditional storytelling standpoint is the so-called 'Stargazer', who appears in a post-credits scene of *Mass Effect 3*. An approximately one minute ten seconds long scene sets up the frame narrative of a male or female person (depending on the player's former choices) telling the tales of Commander Shepard and his/her crew to a young child (see fig. 12):

> Child: "Did that all really happen?"
> Stargazer: "Yes, but some of the details have been lost in time. It all happened so very long ago."
> Child: "When can I go to the stars?"
> Stargazer: "One day, my sweet."
> Child: "What will be there?"
> Stargazer: "Anything you can imagine. Our galaxy has billions of stars. Each of those stars could have many worlds. Every world could be home to a different form of life. And every life is a special story of its own.'
> Child: 'Tell me another story about the Shepard."
> Stargazer: "It's getting late but, okay…one more story." (BioWare *Mass Effect 3*)

Figure 12

The Stargazer recounting the tale of Commander Shepard

Source: BioWare et al. *Mass Effect 3.* Electronic Arts Inc., 2012.

This short scene, which is the same for the vanilla and the extended cut version of the game, establishes the frame narrative that the story of Commander Shepard and the Reapers is told in retrospect by a highly covert heterodiegetic narrator. This plot twist establishes a certain amount of uncertainty regarding the reliability of the narrator as well, as the Stargazer admits that details have been lost over time. This gives the story an almost mythical background and the aura of a folk tale. However, because of the late introduction of the Stargazer and his/her limited appearance in the game, it is impossible to determine if the Stargazer is reliable but simply lacks the information to recount the true story of Commander Shepard, or if he/she is an untrustworthy narrator because of character traits that lead him/her to be unreliable (see Olson 101-102). Even though Greta Olson discusses the concept of unreliability only in combination with homodiegetic narrators, it is reasonable to assume that heterodiegetic narrators can be (un)reliable because of the same reasons. Therefore, the Stargazer can be seen as either reliable

or unreliable, depending on the player's individual interpretation of the situation, setting, and character.

Another possibility for a potential narrator was added with the extended cut version of the game. This extended cut of the ending sequence added narrational voice-overs to the final cut-scenes. Depending on the player's final choice, and by expanding the possible endings from the original three to four, a different narrator comments on the aftermath of the final battle. These possible narrators include (1) Admiral Hackett; (2) EDI, the artificial intelligence and a squadmate of Shepard; (3) Shepard him/herself; or (4) the former companion and potential love interest Liara T'Soni for the newly added fourth ending. Even though they are homodiegetic narrators, they are not omniscient as the games depict multiple scenes and events without these protagonists being present, which makes it nearly impossible for them to know about the detailed happenings during these scenes. This leads to the same conundrum as with the Stargazer. The lack of information does not necessarily result in them being unreliable. However, because of their roles as homodiegetic narrators, and their close relationship, it possible that can be deemed untrustworthy because of their biasedness.

These potential narrators are choices in the traditional, literal sense and definition of the narrator. In narratology a narrator is defined as agent who reports acts and events (Margolin 3). However, video games are unique and different in terms of storytelling and narrative potential. As we have seen in the previous analyses, video games have the potential for the player becoming the narrator due to his/her function as an actor and the required agency. Gameplay is often used as a substitute or amplifier to the prescribed narrative:

> 'In most cases, narrative is told through the eyes of the protagonist in terms of the forces acting on him or her, but it is also ''performed'' by a human player, who determines how specific challenges in the form of levels, guardians, puzzles, and so on, are overcome during play, thus drawing attention to the role of the player as narrator.' (Ip 237)

Huaxin Wei discusses the possibility of the narrator presenting the main narrative as a "dual agent" (248). This agent is "combining an external narrator (an agent who is outside the

storyworld), presenting the pre-generated narrative, with the player, presenting (via playing) the emergent narrative." (248) In the case of *Mass Effect*, the external narrator would be the Stargazer. Obviously, these viewpoints are not shared by everyone. For example, Ludologist Markku Eskelinen does not see video games as narratives because they lack narrative components like a narrator (37).

To add to previous discussions in this work, another view on the narrator in video games identifies even the game designers as narrators, as they integrate the story and the order of the events into the game world. Here the players, as the intended audience, assume the function of the narratee. The narration is the collaboration between the game designers and players, as the former combines the story content with the interactivity of the game and the latter is responsible for triggering the events through his/her actions (Picucci 101-102).

How the role of the player as narrator and the concept of unreliability being a reader-centric factor has led to a re-interpretation of the *Mass Effect* trilogy will be discussed next.

### 8.3.2. The *Indoctrination Theory* – Individual Interpretation and *Mass Effect*

Taking the ideas and concepts of the player or game designers as narrators into account, the ending of *Mass Effect 3* is an interesting case study on how the individual interpretations of players can change the meaning and perception of a video game and its narrator.

Since the release of the original *Mass Effect* in 2007, the franchise has become a household name that was not only a financial (D'Angelo) but also a critical success ("Mass Effect", *Metacritic*). It has become one of the most recognisable and influential franchises in gaming history (Polygon; Williams; Munkittrick) with an avid fan base. This passion for the franchise could be observed after the release of *Mass Effect 3*, the final instalment in the original trilogy, when many gamers expressed their disappointment over the controversial ending. Primarily, they criticised the lack of consequences the personal choices they had made

throughout the game had on the ending. They complained that after the emotional investment coming with nearly one hundred hours of world-building and gameplay, players got to choose between three endings and end sequences which differ only in the colour scheme and minor details (Clarkson; Thier). The limited number of endings and variations was declared as unacceptable for a game that had the concept of choices and consequences as a core gameplay feature. Not only did the game fail to value its core promise, but it also alienated a large portion of the fanbase in the process. The outrage was so substantial that the developer *BioWare* released an Extended Cut DLC (i.e. Downloadable Content) a few months later, adding new cinematics and epilogue scenes in an attempt to provide a more satisfactory closure for their hardcore fans ("Mass Effect 3: Extended Cut").

Consequently, the controversy led to many discussions within the *Mass Effect* community about plot holes and story inconsistencies. Software engineer and writer Shamus Young published an in-depth analysis of the *Mass Effect* series, dissecting how the philosophy of the company *BioWare* changed after being bought by publisher *Electronic Arts*. In his blog he illustrates how a change in writers and lead developers, commercial success, and the following of recent trends in the gaming industry led to controversial changes in gameplay, and how the storytelling and world-building shifted from a detail first to a drama first approach (1). Others tried to come up with explanations for the lacklustre ending and incongruities by searching for reasons established by the games themselves. Different interpretations of the story based on the existing lore, the established *Mass Effect* universe, the story and dialogue, artistic choices and even gameplay and game mechanics were suggested.

One of those interpretations is *The Indoctrination Theory*, which was established first in a collection of internet postings (Unhibited) and it ignited many discussions within the community. For example, some of the most thorough and detailed summaries of the theory and its arguments were delivered by Julian "CleverNoob" Kluk, who produced three extensive video documentaries called "The Indoctrination Theory – A Documentary". Each video is over

90 minutes long and discusses all the different arguments brought forward by the community, the counter-arguments provided by critics of the theory, and the changes implemented by the Extended Cut as well (T. Hansen).

In general, the *Indoctrination Theory* is based on the assumption that Commander Shepard is a victim of the Reapers' mind manipulation technology. It argues that the entire ending sequence is only occurring in the protagonist's mind in a last attempt to bend Shepard to their will and seduce him/her into helping their cause. The final choice made by the player reflects Shepard's decision to either accept or refuse to succumb to the Reapers' influence (Hansen). The *Indoctrination Theory* uses auditory and visual elements, and story incongruities to support its arguments. Some examples and topics of discussion brought forward by the Indoctrination Theory and how they relate to the unreliable narrator will be presented next.

In the game, Shepard's final assault on the Citadel is an attempt to reach the control room for Crucible. This leads to him/her getting hit and rendered unconscious by a giant laser beam emitted by a Reaper guarding the entrance to the Citadel. The *Indoctrination Theory* argues that this action is the last effort by the Reapers to finally take control over Shepard's mind. Everything happening after Shepard being hit by the beam and waking up is just an imagination and the Reapers attempt at drawing from Shepard's memories to build a realistic world to coerce him into doing their bidding (Hansen).

However, observant players discovered incongruities in the world, like missing or strange textures and assets, after Shepard being hit by the beam. For example, after regaining consciousness Shepard is surrounded by piles of bodies. The textures on these piles are of very low resolution. This effect resembles assets in a dream, which are often hard to focus on and to distinguish. The bodies are compiled of two different textures and they look similar to the armours worn by squadmates Kaiden Alenko and Ashley Williams during their first encounter with Shepard back in *Mass Effect 1* (see fig. 13).

Figure 13

Low-texture bodies resembling Shepard's squadmates can be found as Shepard tries to reach the Citadel

Source: BioWare et al. *Mass Effect 3.* Electronic Arts Inc., 2012.

At the end of *Mass Effect 1,* Shepard had to decide between rescuing either Ashley or Kaiden, resulting in the death of one squadmate. This decision has had a deep emotional impact on Shepard during the series, and it is speculated that the Reapers try to weaken Shepard's resolve by reminding him/her of his/her guilt through implementing the bodies of Ashley and Kaiden in the final 'dream' (Hansen).

Furthermore, it is also noticeable that Shepard wears a different set of armour before and after being hit by the beam. Throughout the trilogy, Shepard can choose between various equipment, and many armours differ in colour, form, and shape. However, regardless of which armour the player has equipped prior to the incident with the beam, Shepard always wears a default armour model afterward (see fig. 13). The dream sequence also changes established laws, lore, and gameplay of the *Mass Effect* universe. For example, the HUD (i.e. Heads-up

display) is no longer visible, and Shepard suddenly possesses infinite ammunition without the need to reload his/her weapons (Hansen).

Additionally, fans discovered that during the 'dream' sequence certain musical cues (like a distinguishable humming or growling noise) are hidden within the usual ambience sounds. Furthermore, some cut-scenes during this sequence use visual effects similar to oily shadows or smears surrounding and reaching out to Shepard (see fig. 14). These sounds and visuals are associated with indoctrination within the game world. The effects and indicators are mentioned in in-game codex entries, dialogues, and also in books based on the *Mass Effect* games when indoctrination is described (Hansen).

Figure 14

Black shadows and smears reaching out to Shepard (left), indicating indoctrination

Source: BioWare et al. *Mass Effect 3.* Electronic Arts Inc., 2012.

These are just a few examples that indicate that Shepard's experiences during the final hours of the trilogy might not be real and support the *Indoctrination Theory*. Of course, it is very much possible that many of the arguments suggested by the theory are just a result of

oversights, technical limitations, or a lack of development time and resources. However, the fact that the developers of *BioWare* have not come out to either confirm or deny any of the theories and speculations surrounding the trilogy, leaves it open for discussion and interpretation.

This ongoing discussion goes hand in hand with Ansgar Nünning's position on unreliability. He claims that unreliability is not solely a textual problem but depends on the reader and his/her interpretation. Nünning positions himself against an exclusive use and analysis of the concept of the implied author when talking about the unreliable narrator, as he feels that the implied author provides only one correct interpretation. But as the reader interacts with a text, unreliability becomes a subjective judgement, which means a narrator who is unreliable to some might be reliable to others. He accepts the importance of authorial intent and the influence textual signals can have on the reader to determine the reliability of the narrator. As a result, he advocates for the synthesis of both approaches. (91-97).

Applying Nünning's position to the discussion of *Mass Effect 3* and its ending, we can see how 'textual' features in video games like visual (e.g. textures, oily shadows) or auditive (e.g. sound effects) elements can influence the perception and interpretation of the player. Even though it is unknown if these markers were included intentionally to establish narratorial unreliability, they clearly have altered the perception of the game in regard to (un)reliability for some fans.

Furthermore, taking into account that in *Mass Effect* the protagonist Shepard/the player is a likely candidate for functioning as the narrator, as was established earlier, Nünning's position on unreliability provides an explanation for the discussion around the controversial ending. Although people may argue in support of the *Indoctrination Theory* only because of their personal disappointment over the ending, it nonetheless shows how the reader of a text can determine the unreliability of a narration and a narrator. Even if it is unclear if Shepard's unreliability is intentional or based on authorial oversights or simply an unexpectedly valid

interpretation, the discussion surrounding it supports my decision to add the player and his/her individual understanding and interpretation as another important and decisive factor for establishing an unreliable narrator in video games.

To summarize, the *Mass Effect* trilogy establishes multiple narrators by using a twist to introduce different frame narratives in the epilogue of *Mass Effect 3*. The Stargazer is a heterodiegetic narrator that tells the story of Commander Shepard to a little child. The Stargazer's (un)reliability as a narrator is difficult to determine because of the limited amount of information the game provides about him/her. Other homodiegetic narrators were introduced by the developers through an extended cut DLC, which added multiple scenes to the end sequence of the game. These scenes were narrated by different protagonists, namely Admiral Hackett, Shepard him/herself, EDI, or Dr. Liara T'Soni, depending on the final choice made by the player. The (un)reliability of Shepard's companions is debatable as well. On the one hand, their role as eyewitnesses increases their reliability, but on the other hand, they are potentially biased, which may influence their account. The final possibility for the role of the narrator is the protagonist Shepard, or rather the player him/herself, as the uniqueness of video games allows the player to become the main protagonist. Shepard's potential unreliability was proposed by the fan theory *Indoctrination Theory*. Fans argue that later portions of the game are only a dream or a hallucination because of Shepard's indoctrination by his/her enemies. To support their arguments, they relied mainly on visual and auditory elements. In accordance to Nünning's approach, which points out the importance of the reader's role in determining an unreliable narrator, the existence of the *Indoctrination Theory* supports the decision to suggest the individual player's interpretation as another decisive factor in establishing an unreliable narrator in video games.

# 9. Conclusion

By using definitions and theory from literary and video game studies as a basis, this thesis has outlined six factors which are used to establish the unreliable narrator in video games.

Video games are a relatively young medium and art form in comparison to arts like literature, film, or music. For a long time, video games had been seen as a manifestation of the human drive to play. As a result, video games had been treated as mere games, a medium that is not capable of transcending its status and be more than just something to satisfy human instinct. However, technological progress and increased commercial success brought forward the potential of video games as an art form. The medium has become something that is able to evoke emotions, portray messages, carry meaning *and* entertain at the same time. With this emancipation comes the need to break down video games into their components, analyse and interpret them, and examine how these components work together. This desire led to a rise of the field of Computer Game Studies.

Many scholars have already discussed the narrative potential of video games. Chapter four of this work described why the potential of video games for storytelling has been a source of controversy for a long time. However, during my research it also became apparent that many topics that are already established in the field of narratology have not been discussed in combination with video games. As an avid gamer, I have been following the progress and emancipation of the medium video games over the last twenty-five years. I am aware of the developments and changes that have happened, especially in how video games increasingly blended the gaming aspects with storytelling concepts. However, during my studies I recognised that the unreliable narrator had been covered extensively in literature studies but has been rather ignored for video games. Therefore, I became interested in how modern video games use the concept of the unreliable narrator. More precisely, with this thesis I attempted to find answers to the following questions:

- How is the unreliable narrator established in video games?
- What methods/tools do game developers use to establish unreliable narrators in video games?

In order to find answers to these questions a basic understanding of how the unreliable narrator is handled in literature, and what differentiates video games from other media when it comes to storytelling, was needed. Chapter three examined the findings in the field of literary studies regarding the unreliable narrator. Chapter four provided an overview of the discussion between ludologists vs. narratologists regarding if video games can tell stories and how they are unique in their approach to storytelling.

By using the insights provided by the fields of literary and game studies, and by analysing the video games *Dragon Age II; Spec Ops: The Line; Portal; Mass Effect 1-3,* which focus on, and are praised for, their storytelling, I propose six factors which are used to establish an unreliable narrator in video games:

- The use of character archetypes
- The use of visual and audio design
- Player agency
- (Plot) Twists
- Environmental storytelling
- Player Interpretation

During the analysis it became clear, that video games rely on a combination of these factors and each factor is used to support and strengthen the effectiveness of other factors. Generally, it is not necessary that all six factors need to be used to establish the unreliable narrator in a video game. However, it was also apparent that no game relied on only one single factor, and the research showed that multiple factors are commonly detectable in games using the unreliable narrator.

It notable that character archetypes are a popular and often used method to portray the narrator as unreliable in video games. As we have seen, especially with the games *Dragon Age II* and *Spec Ops: The Line*, narrators are designed and portrayed similarly to the archetypes

described by William Riggan in his analysis of unreliable narrator in literature. In our examples, the picaro and the madman archetypes incorporate many of the elements and characteristics which mark them as unreliable in accordance to Riggan's definitions. In this respect, video games use the unreliable narrator similarly to the norms established in literature and literary studies.

However, what makes video games stand out in comparison to literature and film in general, are the unique uses of audio and visual elements in combination with a video game's reliance on player agency. This is no different when it comes to the use of unreliable narrators in video games. As can be seen in all the examples used in this work, visual and audio design are often used to gradually induce doubt and suspicion into the player. Subtle hints throughout a game instil the player with a feeling of unease with the goal to heighten the player's awareness and draw his/her attention to the fact that the narrator might not be entirely reliable.

The effectiveness of using auditive and visual elements to hint at a narrator's unreliability in video games is heavily dependent on player agency. As we have seen, agency is a key component of video games and game designers rely on the player's curiosity, inner drive to explore and progress for narrative purposes. In the case of the unreliable narrator, the examples showed that video games often plant hints and clues that the narrator might not be trustworthy throughout the virtual world. These hints come in audio or visual form and are often subtle and easy to miss. Video games provide the player with a sense of freedom of choice and it is up to the player to decide in what way and how much he/she wants to engage with the game world, and therefore explore the (un-)reliability of the narrator.

Furthermore, the used examples have also shown that video game narratives often rely on a narrative twist to expose the unreliability of their narrators. These twists may come early (*Dragon Age II*), in the middle (*Portal*) or right at the end (*Spec Ops: The Line*) of a game. What they have in common is, that at some point the game uses the concept of a twist to explicitly expose the unreliability of the narrator, leaving little to no doubt that the narrator

cannot be trusted. As a result, in games that use an explicit reveal, every player becomes aware of the unreliability, regardless if he/she embraced the chances provided by hints and clues beforehand to expose the nature of the narrator.

We have also seen that video games rely on environmental storytelling to provide further information on the unreliability of the narrator. These methods once again make use of the player's initiative to explore and learn more about the world, its lore, and its characters. The ability to hide information within the virtual world (and sometimes the real world using other media and transmedia storytelling) for the player to discover, gives game designers the potential to play with the player's perception of the narrator. This can lead to re-evaluating the reliability of characters and the narrator, as it is the case with the game *Portal*, for example.

Finally, as with all art, individual interpretation plays an important role. With our examples we have seen that many games explicitly establish and portray an overt unreliable narrator when they use one. However, we have also seen that it is possible as well to change the reliability of the narrator depending on the player's interpretation. This goes hand in hand with the cognitivist approach in literary studies, which supports the notion that the unreliability of a narrator depends on the individual reader. Similarly, in video games the unreliable narrator is not always an intentionally placed and used entity in a virtual universe. Sometimes a narrator becomes unreliable despite the intentions of the developers through a player's individual interpretation, as is the case with the *Mass Effect* trilogy.

It is important to emphasise that, when looking at the analysed games in this work, it becomes obvious that they do not rely on only one factor to establish an unreliable narrator. Video games use a combination of the described methods that also utilise the full unique range of the medium. The possibility to use audio and visual design, gameplay elements, player agency and player participation is what makes video games unique in general as well as when it comes to the manifestation of the unreliable narrator.

I am aware that this work is only a preliminary work with the intention to establish the unreliable narrator in the discussion about the narratology and video games. Because it has not been done before, this work attempted to provide a basic concept of how the unreliable narrator manifests itself in video games. The next steps would be to increase the number of examined games in order to verify the findings. Furthermore, a closer cross-examination of games from different genres and eras could provide insights into if the use of the unreliable narrator differs between genres and if, and how, it has changed over time.

# 10. Appendix

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## 10.2. Abstract

This thesis discusses how the concept of the unreliable narrator is established in video games. To answer this question, I examined the narrative-driven video games *Dragon Age II, Spec Ops: The Line, Portal,* and *Mass Effect 1-3* to analyse how the unreliable narrator is established and utilised in video games. These analyses were based on the concept of the unreliable narrator as it is defined in literary theory. Furthermore, narratological concepts from the field of game studies were used to support my analysis. As the result of my research I determined six factors that are used by video games to establish the unreliable narrator: 1) the use of character archetypes that are associated with unreliability in literary theory; 2) the importance of audio and visual elements; 3) player agency; 4) the plot twist; 5) environmental storytelling and the use of game space; and 6) the impact of the player and his/her interpretation. Furthermore, my research shows that these factors rely on and support each other to establish the unreliable narrator in video games. This thesis intends to contribute to a discussion that has been a part of other media studies but has been largely ignored for the medium of video games.

## 10.3. Zusammenfassung

Diese Diplomarbeit behandelt die Verwendung des/der unzuverlässigen Erzähler/in in Videospielen. Das Prinzip des/der unzuverlässige/n Erzähler/in ist ein in der Literaturwissenschaft umfassend erforschtes und diskutiertes Konzept. Die Forschung beschäftigt sich dabei mit der Zuverlässigkeit des Erzählers oder der Erzählerin und dessen/deren Berichte. Dabei werden die Diskrepanzen und Widersprüche in der Erzählung und deren Auswirkungen auf den/die Leser/in untersucht. Die Erforschung des/der unzuverlässigen Erzähler/in und dessen/deren Benutzung und Einfluss wurde in den letzten Jahrzehnten vermehrt auch in anderen Medien wie Filmen, Fernsehen oder Radio untersucht. Jedoch wurde das bisher jüngste Medium, nämlich Videospiele, in Bezug auf den/die unzuverlässige/n Erzähler/in in der Spielwissenschaft ignoriert.

Durch die Analyse von sechs Videospielen mit einem starken narrativen Fokus (*Dragon Age II*; *Spec Ops: The Line; Portal; Mass Effect 1-3*) versucht diese Arbeit Antworten auf folgende Forschungsfragen zu finden:

- Wie wird der/die unzuverlässige Erzähler/in in Videospielen etabliert?
- Welche Methoden verwenden Entwickler um den/die unzuverlässige Erzähler/in in Videospielen zu etablieren?

Um dies zu erreichen werden im theoretischen Teil der Arbeit die Grundkonzepte aus den Bereichen der Erzähltheorie im Zusammenhang mit dem Konzept des/der unzuverlässigen Erzähler/in erarbeitet. Zusätzlich wird auch die Grundsatzdebatte ob Videospiele ein narratives Medium sind genauer betrachtet. Der praktische Teil dieser Arbeit legt dar wie Videospiele sechs grundlegende Faktoren für die Etablierung des/der unzuverlässigen Erzähler/in nutzen.

Der erste Faktor umfasst die Verwendung von Charakter Archetypen. William Riggan etablierte in der Literaturwissenschaft vier unterschiedliche Archetypen (der/die Schurke/in; der/die Narr/Närrin; der/die Verrückte; der Naivling) als häufig unzuverlässige Erzähler/innen. Diese Archetypen werden auch in Videospielen herangezogen um eine/n Erzähler/in als

potenziell unzuverlässig darzustellen. Der zweite Faktor veranschaulicht die Verwendung von auditiven und visuellen Elementen in Videospielen um den/die unzuverlässige/n Erzähler/in zu etablieren oder deren Etablierung durch andere Faktoren zu unterstützen. Die dritte Möglichkeit beschreibt wie Videospiele die für dieses Medium einzigartigen Elemente wie Entscheidungsfreiheit, Bewegungsfreiheit, Partizipation, und Interaktivität dazu nutzen um den/die Erzähler/in als unzuverlässig aufzuzeigen. Als vierte Möglichkeit nutzen Videospiele häufig eine überraschende Wende in der Handlung um den/die Erzähler/in als nicht vertrauenswürdig zu enthüllen. Der fünfte Faktor erläutert wie Videospiele mittels transmedialen Erzählens und Environmental Storytelling den/die unzuverlässige/n Erzähler/in etablieren können. Unter transmediales Erzählen versteht man bestimmte Inhalte unter Mithilfe von mehreren unterschiedlichen Medienformen zu erzählen. Environmental Storytelling in Videospielen beschreibt die Nutzung der Spielewelt um Informationen an den/die Spieler/in zu übermitteln. Der sechste Faktor unterstreicht die Bedeutung der individuellen Interpretation durch den/der Spieler/in für die Etablierung des/der unzuverlässigen Erzähler/in in Videospielen.

Während der Analyse der verwendeten Videospiele und der Erarbeitung dieser Faktoren kristallisierte sich heraus, dass Videospiele sich nicht nur auf einen dieser Faktoren verlassen um den/die unzuverlässige/n Erzähler/in zu etablieren. Die untersuchten Videospiele setzen vor allem auf eine Kombination dieser unterschiedlichen Faktoren wobei offensichtlich wird, dass jeder einzelne Faktor dabei die jeweiligen anderen Faktoren unterstützt und umgekehrt.