INTERACTIVE NARRATIVES

Can “interactivity” be seamlessly added to traditional structures or does it impact more pervasively on the structural design and meaning-making dynamics of narratives? Can it act as vector for complexity? Does interactivity make a narrative more familiar (as we are used to interact in everyday exchanges) or does it have a defamiliarizing effect? Does it make sense to think of interactivity as a transmedial practice or mode, or does each medium implement the concept in its own specific ways and through specific strategies?

Addressing the question of interactive narrative across different media (films, video games, digital comics) and from a number of angles, this workshop aims to foster a lively discussion on this topic and to give doctoral and early-career researchers an opportunity to share their work in progress, exchange views and gather fruitful feedback from their peers and experts on the subject.

Respondents:
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ABSTRACTS
MARIE-LUISE MEIER (University of Tartu)
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Title: The influence of default choices on gender representation in video games

Abstract: This presentation aims to explore the psychology behind default choices and the so called “intuitive design” in video games. Default choices are a well-researched topic in different academic fields such as social science and political science. They are known to have a cognitive effect on customers by altering their understanding of what action is desired, recommended or simply best for their own means, as well as changing meaning and moral implications of an action, e.g. making organ donation after death the default choice in a country makes actively denying the harvesting of organs after death morally deficient. In video games, they do not only influence the player by pushing them in the direction game designers see as more beneficial, but they can also include complex messages about morality and representation inside the game world. I want to explore the implications of default choices, especially regarding gender and gender representation. By combining it with Hall’s preferred reading to a form of preferred playing, I want to show in which way narratives and readings are altered by presenting one option as the default choice.

Biographical note: Marie-Luise Meier is a German PhD student under the tutelage of professor Railli Marling. Her PhD project aims to create a methodology for analyzing gender in video games. As a media and literary scholar by trade, she has been working as a lecturer at the Christian-Albrechts University of Kiel and is now working as a DAAD lecturer at the University of Tartu. Next to gender, film and game theory, her research focus lies on transmedia dystopian fiction as well as works of speculative fiction and fantasy theory after 1900.
Title: Narrative complexity in video games

Abstract: As a starting point for my research, I analyse three types of complexity (systemic, formal and of response, taking Grishakova and Poulaki 2019 as a starting point) and what they might mean and imply in the construction, organization, interactive presentation, and understanding of video games narratives. With the support of some examples, I investigate whether we can claim that the three types of complexity are correlated and/or interdependent, and whether their presence and relation might cause differences in the reception of games by the larger audience. I also aim to evaluate what my findings might entail for the definition of the concept of expressive complexity, which I’m trying to outline. During my presentation, I will focus on the analysis of the different strategies employed in the organization and presentation of the narratives of two particularly exemplificatory games. These are Halo 3 and Halo 3 ODST, both developed by Bungie and published by Microsoft Game Studios. Despite being part of the same series and having very similar titles, the two games feature a very different developers’ behaviour towards their narratives. On the basis of crowdsourced data, I will also provide a few thoughts about the apparent implications of the two different narrative constructions on the reception – or at least on the reviews – of the two games.

Biographical note: Mattia Bellini is a doctoral researcher in the research group on Narrative, Culture, and Cognition (dir. by professor Grishakova) at the University of Tartu and a Management Committee Substitute in the COST Action INDCOR. His previous research topics included videogame storytelling, humanistic Human-Computer Interaction and Procedural Content Generation via Machine Learning. His current research focus on complexity, interactive narratives, and narratology in video games.

Title: Interactivity and Film Dramaturgy

Abstract: With the recent upsurge in interactive narratives in film and television, there comes an increased need to understand the effect this interactivity has on traditional film dramaturgy. Here I present an overview of my artistic research so far, which has emerged in the form of a medium-length interactive film, The Limits of Consent (heading into production in February 2021). I discuss the writing process, from step-outline to finished screenplay and how the introduction of interactive elements effected the construction of the narrative. Special focus is given the problems and opportunities that arise from the meeting of dramaturgy and interactivity such as the changes that can be made to dramatic devices such as planting and pay-off or dramatic irony — parts of which can be made use of more systematically within an interactive film.

Biographical note: Michael Keerdo-Dawson is a junior researcher and second year PhD Student at the Baltic Film and Media School in Tallinn University. He worked in the British film and television industry for ten years before moving to Estonia and has taught courses such as Storytelling, Screenwriting, Writing for Transmedia, and Creative Writing as a guest lecturer.

Title: The limits of interactivity: digital comics’ affordances and their position in the media system

Abstract: “Digital comics” is an umbrella term that covers different forms: digitized comics, skeuomorphic digital ones, guided view comics, and the ones that more clearly leverage on the possibilities of their medium. The latter category, close to what Batinić calls “enhanced webcomics” (2016), encompasses motion comics (Smith 2013), what Goodbrey calls “game comics” (2015) and what the French author Balak calls turbo media. Several of these, and notably game comics, feature (or, at the very least, claim) a certain level of interactivity. Groensteen notes nonetheless that game comics often limit themselves to a disappointing “surface playability” (2013: 54), and game studies remind us that the key characteristic of the choices made by users is that they have to be “dramatically interesting” (Crawford 2003), or ergodic (Aarseth 1997). Furthermore, while digital comics run after interactive features, they risk losing something along the way. In fact, if it is true that reading (paper) comics – an act based
on the principle of closure (Gardner 2012; Ahmed 2016) between the gaps – is an intrinsically interactive activity, what happens when digital comics do not show the same patchy structure?

My paper will discuss a small corpus of digital comics in the light of Ryan’s categorization of interactivity (2011), ranging from “peripheral interactivity” to “real-time story generation”, and making references to theories of hypertextuality (Ryan 2004; Bell 2010; Murray 2016) as well as reflections on interactive storytelling (Crawford 2003) and playability (Aarseth 1997). It will try to position digital comics prototypically in the larger category of comics, and highlights similarities and differences with other media products (especially videogames).

**Biographical note:** Giorgio Busi Rizzi is a BOF post-doctoral fellow at Ghent University, with a project focusing on digital comics. He holds a PhD in Literary and Cultural Studies with a joint supervision by the Universities of Bologna and Leuven, focused on nostalgia in graphic novels. He is interested in comics studies, narratology, digital humanities, humour theory and translation.