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Author/Developer, Reader/Player: games in experimental fiction and experimental fiction in games

Abstract:

In the twentieth century many writers experimented with the form of the novel, from the Modernists James Joyce and Virginia Woolf; to the Oulipo group of Raymond Queneau, Italo Calvino and Georges Perec; to contemporary writers such as Jennifer Egan, Mark Z. Danielewski and Robert Coover. Despite their attempts the overall shape of fiction narrative does not appear to have been significantly altered in the popular consciousness. Meanwhile, an entirely new and extremely popular medium for narrative has emerged in recent decades – that present in interactive digital entertainment, or video games – whose writers and developers are grappling with many of the experimental narrative techniques previously attempted by many of these fiction writers. In this paper I compare the works of B.S. Johnson’s *The Unfortunates* and Raymond Queneau’s *Exercises in Style* to the games *Everybody’s Gone to the Rapture* and *The Stanley Parable*, and argue that there are significant parallels in their use of randomness and narrative repetition and revision. I conclude that significant narrative experimentation is being played out now in the minds of many game writers and designers around the world, and suggest that a popular revolution in narrative form anticipated by writers such as Queneau and Johnson might not take place in the novel at all, but in games.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

B.S. Johnson – Raymond Queneau – digital narrative – experimental fiction – video game writing

Introduction

The English writer B.S. Johnson – famous for, among other works, a book of unbound pages in a box that could be read in any order – argued in 1973 that the novel was exhausted (Johnson 1999). Modernists such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Samuel Beckett had injected new life by using a variety of devices to represent the modern world in a more authentically haphazard way, but, Johnson claimed, the lightning strike of Modernist literature had since fallen flat on a generation for whom the ‘what happens next’ storytelling of serial television shows like *Coronation Street* was enough. Many of Johnson’s international contemporaries believed that something new and exciting was around the corner. Just before the dawn of popular computing, writers like Johnson, Julio Cortázar, Italo Calvino, Georges Perec and Raymond Queneau tried a number of ways to break with the traditional novel. They incorporated elements like reader choice, randomness, branching paths, repetition and constraints. To some, like the Oulipo trio of Calvino, Perec and Queneau, constraints allowed their imagination to flourish, and helped them work through the writer’s block they had been experiencing (Gallix 2013).

However, experimental fiction of this nature has hardly become the norm, even considering our hyper-connected world. Robert Coover may have predicted that the rise of the internet and hypertext would change the way fiction was read (Coover 1992), resulting in a fundamental shift in the shape of fiction itself, but this clearly has not occurred in any meaningful way. While the commerce of publishing is constantly decried as under threat, the traditional form of the novel remains largely intact. While electronic reading devices, social media, online feeds and streaming video have changed our reading and consumption habits, the form of fiction has not greatly changed. The exceptions – works like Mark Z. Danielewski’s fragmented *House of Leaves* (2000), which uses a number of different typesetting techniques for a host of narrative effects, or Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), which features an extraordinary chapter in the form of a PowerPoint slide – remain rare. Were they alive today the likes of Queneau, Calvino, Perec and Johnson might consider that their approaches and editorialising had not led to much change at all.

However, that would be doing a disservice to our present moment and their legacy – a legacy, I argue, that can increasingly be found in digital narratives, and more specifically, video games. In this paper I compare the structure of two experimental novels by B.S. Johnson and Raymond Queneau to two popular contemporary video games with narrative at their core, *Everybody’s Gone to the Rapture* and *The Stanley Parable*. I argue that narrative experimentation similar to that demonstrated by Johnson and Queneau is occurring, knowingly or otherwise, in the output of successful video game writers and narrative designers today. In doing so I hope to show that while the novel is certainly not doomed by the advent of immersive digital forms, a new type of immersive storytelling has emerged and is now maturing, taking experimental narrative techniques pioneered decades earlier to a wider public consciousness.

Introducing the experimental novels by Johnson and Queneau

Johnson’s experimental work of fiction *The Unfortunates* (Johnson 1969) is a touching and melancholy work about loss and memory. In it, the narrator, ostensibly Johnson himself, attends a soccer game in Norwich as a journalist. He’s recently attended the funeral of a close

friend, and, as he travels to the stadium, attends the match and leaves, he runs through memories of his deceased friend. What adds dimension to the narrative is its form. *The Unfortunates* comes as a series of loose-leaf pages presented in a small box. With the exception of the first and the last pages, the pages can be read in any order. Indeed, Johnson suggests the reader shuffle the pages before beginning. What unfolds is a fragmented narrative removed from the linear demands of time. We don't really know when in the day a particular page of writing is set - is the narrator going to the game, or leaving it? As a reader this can be both frustrating and liberating. We find ourselves displaced and uncertain. According to Eva Zsizsmann, 'The random order of (*The Unfortunates*) evokes the unpredictable workings of the mind' (Zsizsmann 2006: 178). Much like Modernists such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, it was Johnson's hope that his novel would approach something closer to life than most novels – that its structure more accurately reflected our experience of time as disjointed and flooded with memories of the past. Johnson claimed that by introducing randomness the novel was as close to an accurate depiction of the day as he could achieve: 'This is the way the mind works, my mind anyway, and ... the novel was to be as nearly as possible a re-created transcript of how my mind worked during eight hours on a particular Saturday' (Johnson 1999: para. 49).

In the experimental novel *Exercises in Style* (2009), Raymond Queneau writes about the same incident ninety-nine times, each time using a different style or technique. The incident itself is innocuous: the narrator sees a man get on a bus and have an altercation with another man. The narrator sees the same man sometime later talking to a friend at the gare Saint-Lazare. That's the end of the story. It's so mundane as to almost be not worth writing about – but that was no doubt the intention. Queneau focuses his attention on different – often comedic – ways of telling the same story. After the traditional first person prose technique ('Notation') come another ninety-eight re-tellings, which employ different tones ('Surprise!' and 'Passive'); forms (a comedy script, reportage, a letter, a blurb); and mathematical and language games ('Permutations' and 'Anagrams'). By focusing on a single dull incident, Queneau reflects on the way we tell ordinary stories and the enormous variations that can arise from differences in style and composition.

Johnson and Queneau died before household computing became ubiquitous, as did many of their contemporaries, such as Borges, Cortázar, Calvino and Perec. None of them had to grapple seriously with the possibilities of digital forms. Those fiction writers who since have, and attempted serious digital narratives – such as Robert Coover and Dennis Cooper – remain outliers, and have done so without commercial success for their experiments. In the meantime, however, the creators of video games have employed what many novelists might deem experimental narrative techniques including branching narratives, reader/player choice, repetition and randomness, and have carved out an entirely new form of storytelling – though not without its codex precursors – in a few decades.

Introducing narrative video games: *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* and *The Stanley Parable*

In this paper I wish to consider two narratively-focused video games in terms of their use of the narrative strategies of randomness and repetition/revision previously employed by Johnson and Queneau. By 'narratively-focused' I mean games designed with an emphasis on

narratology over ludology, or story over gameplay. There is a lack of research around the narrative structure of video games. One notable exception is in the work of Espen Aarseth, who proposes an analytical model for video game narrative and player involvement he calls The Variable Model (Aarseth 2012).

The Variable Model is the outcome of research by Aarseth to build a narrative theory of games, arguing that the focus of games research on ludology over narratology has displaced critical discourse around whether games can be considered stories. He provides a set of criteria against which game narratives can be meaningfully compared. These criteria include where the game sits on an ontic, narrative versus ludological level, how open or linear the gameworld is, whether objects in the gameworld are static or usable, whether characters are deep or without individual identity, and whether events in the game are fully plotted, have satellites or kernels of story, or have no story at all.

This model is not necessarily designed to compare novels with video game narratives, but does provide a framework for determining whether a video game is narratively-focused. The two games I consider in this paper are ones that sit firmly in the narrative end of Aarseth's model but retain ludological elements – and so demonstrate some of the techniques of experimental fiction.

In *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (The Chinese Room 2015), the player begins in an idyllic but abandoned English village. As s/he explores, entering houses, pubs and churches, s/he encounters balls of light. Approaching these balls of light activates a snippet of story. What unfolds is a multi-voiced narrative with a cast of recurring characters that explains what has happened to the village. Because the player autonomously explores the environment in order to progress the story, the snippets of narrative are encountered in a more-or-less random or changeable order, and may even be missed altogether. The narrative is thus fragmented and the story snippets deliberately ambiguous in order not to contradict information that came before, or is yet to come.

On the surface, *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe 2013) appears initially to be a more linear experience than *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, with little room for exploration. The player begins in an enclosed office as a character named Stanley, with a narrator explaining that Stanley works in that office. The narrator proceeds to tell Stanley's initially mundane story as the player leaves their office (or doesn't). The narrator comments on many of the player's actions, in some cases foreshadowing what he expects Stanley to do next. For instance, early in the game the player may arrive – for the play is not predetermined – at a room with two doors. The narrator says, 'When Stanley came to a set of two open doors, he entered the door on his left.' The player may choose to do what the narrator suggests, or not. If the player refuses the command and goes through the right door, the narrator responds with, 'This was not the correct way to the meeting room, and Stanley knew it perfectly well. Perhaps he wanted to stop by the employee lounge first, just to admire it.' The game becomes a comedic tug-of-war between the player's own agency and the narrator's drive to explain the 'real story'. *The Stanley Parable* has many endings, each of which can be achieved in a short playthrough.

As is undoubtedly apparent, there are interesting parallels between the structure of these games and that of the novels of Johnson and Queneau, particularly when it comes to narrative strategies of randomness and repetition/revision, which I will use the remainder of this paper

to tease out.

Randomness

Randomness in narrative is not entirely unusual or unexplored, but it is apparent that some structure may be necessary for a sensible narrative to arise. Hayles and Montfort (2015) reference Marc Saporta's *Composition No. 1, roman* (Saporta, Plascencia & Uglow 2011), a work not unlike *The Unfortunates* in design but offering no instructions or guidelines, '(creating) a storyworld so fragmentary that, although many have heard of this work, almost no one has succeeded in putting it together into a coherent narrative' (454).

On the other hand, of Johnson's *The Unfortunates*, they state:

The randomness of the sequences works in part because the opening and closing segments set up and conclude the storyworld, and in part because they mimic the ways in which memories of the past can intrude upon the present ... (454).

Similarly, *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* requires a framework around which to anchor its randomness. While it encourages exploration and the encountering of story snippets in any order, the game frames its narrative on an act structure – a series of 'chapters' that focus on key characters.

Within their respective narrative structures, *The Unfortunates* and *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* use significant elements of randomness. Both tell their stories in fragmented ways and require some degree of reader/player agency. In each case the control the reader/player has over the narrative is tantamount to picking a card from a deck – s/he has no ability to consciously shape the narrative in a particular direction; rather, s/he is dealt a story. The agency of the reader/player in both cases is therefore not particularly high despite appearances. Both narratives however use this randomness for a purpose. In Johnson's case, according to Michael Sheehan:

Johnson gives the same experience of being flooded with randomly ordered sense impressions and memories so that the reader can more effectively experience the emotional aspect as Johnson did, with the novel maintaining a rigorous adherence to his conviction that 'all is nothing, that sense does not exist.' Johnson is after both a more faithful and natural recreation of the experience he is narrating than that found in a traditional, re-ordered, linear narrative and also a more rigorous artistic representation of life itself, where the form of the novel can better achieve the randomness of life lived (Sheehan 2006).

Similarly, *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* uses dialogue fragments of multiple characters to build a picture of a small village undergoing a crisis. In allowing the player to miss dialogue and encounter story fragments in a different order, developers The Chinese Room aspired to 'break the stranglehold (in games) that every player has to understand everything' (McMullan 2014).

A randomised approach to narrative, while granting minor freedom to the reader/player, significantly constrains the author. In particular it removes their ability to establish the precise chronology of the narrative. As a result, other aspects of story can or must be explored in more depth to compensate. In the case of both *The Unfortunates* and *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, by introducing randomness the author/developers focus more on

character than plot – in Johnson’s case by exploring the disjointed nature of his own memory; in *The Chinese Room*’s case by exploring through dialogue the disjointed, gossipy and overlapping relationships of a chorus of people in a small town.

For the reader/player, these randomly ordered narratives draw attention to themselves – in Johnson’s case because of the physical novelty value, and in *The Chinese Room*’s case because of the unusualness of a game that tells a story in dialogue fragments against a backdrop of an idyllic English village. It is, I argue, in this unusualness that both narratives do their best work – were *The Unfortunates* to be presented as a traditional novel it would perhaps be unremarkable, and if *Everybody’s Gone to the Rapture* presented players with targets to shoot it would push the narrative even further into fantasy and offer no real insight or chance for player reflection.

When the reader/player is experiencing either narrative s/he is likely to be fully immersed and unlikely to pay attention to the impact they’ve had. Beforehand, however, they will notice the unbound paper and wonder what to do with it all; they will find themselves in a village without any clear direction and wonder whether they should go to the pub, the bus stop, or the church. Afterwards they may wonder what difference it would have made if page twenty-three had occurred after page forty-seven, or if they’d gone to the bridge before the lake. In each case the disordered presentation of the narrative itself has the potential to add a layer of meaning.

In both narratives, the introduction of narrative randomness has also necessitated a loss of story fidelity. Despite definitive endings, these narratives float ambiguously for much of their duration. As Johnson hoped, perhaps they may be getting closer to a representation of what life is like.

Revision and repetition

From *Super Mario Bros.* to *Dark Souls* to *Spelunky*, video games are often built with repetition in mind: play, die, come back to life, play again, die again. The aim of these sorts of games is for the player to repeat the same activity, again and again, until they get it right. Some players relish this sort of challenge. The *Dark Souls* series is one that inspires an almost fanatic devotion, and requires players to face seemingly insurmountable odds, die, then do it again until they become skilled enough in the game mechanics that the challenges become surmountable. An entire genre of video games, known as rogue-likes, is devoted to hard, repetitive games – although these games generally focus more on ludological elements than narrative.

Narrative revision – that is, restarting a story from the same place but encountering a markedly different outcome – is less commonly explored. The more distinct paths a game is required to traverse the more complicated its development becomes. Where significant narrative revision is used effectively in games, it is generally in brief experiences with limited user interactions. This approach is used to great effect in a game like *The Stanley Parable*. The game actively encourages restarts by quickly bringing about conclusions to each story path and placing the player back at the start with the promise of a new, unexplored possibility. The story is told in its revisions and its inevitable restarts. For example, after a certain number of attempts the game presents Stanley’s once pristine empty office

environment as disordered, full of paper on the floor, or the game's narrator may present a slightly different commentary on something Stanley has seen several times before. Additionally, each playthrough of Stanley's story is very brief, lasting perhaps five to ten minutes at most, and each new playthrough done slightly differently reveals entirely different locations and outcomes.

Raymond Queneau demonstrated the use of narrative revision decades earlier in his novel *Exercises in Style*. Employing both brevity of story – similar to *The Stanley Parable* – and focusing only on stylistic changes to the narrative, Queneau demonstrated that, used carefully, repetition and revision can be a useful device to reflect on storytelling itself. In Queneau's playful work the incident related is almost irrelevant – the story is really about the ninety-nine ways he chooses to tell it. The reader, faced with all of these frequently bizarre re-tellings, is forced to consider the composition of the book more than its content. It is no coincidence that Queneau was one of the founding members of the Oulipo group who, along with Calvino and Perec and others, thought about writing in terms of constraints, mathematics, and, indeed, games, long before video games were in the popular consciousness (Elkin & Esposito 2013).

In both *The Stanley Parable* and *Exercises in Style* each reading/playing experience is enjoyable and humorous but it can be argued that they lose coherence in their entirety. Each revision might change the way we view the characters slightly, but as there is no one definitive version the reader/player is unlikely to gain much insight into the meaning of the narratives by the end. There is less a loss of story fidelity than no true story at all. More so than *The Unfortunates* and *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, however, it is in the experimentation with established form and the changes wrought by each revision where meaning can be found. In Queneau's case, it may be that

... it makes, or implies, some radical claims about the relationship between form and content, not least that the former isn't simply a vehicle for the latter, but rather the way in which it is constituted (O'Connell 2011: para. 9).

In the case of *The Stanley Parable*, the narrator's reactions to the player's passivity or refusal to follow directions form the basis for every restart and revision, and the game '... can be seen as an allegory of illusory agency' (Einsslin 2015: 52).

Both works thus reflect on the nature of storytelling in their mediums in very different ways, but use narrative revision similarly to make their increasingly absurd entertainment, and their points.

Conclusion

The purposes of these narratives are often quite different. The means of their construction varies greatly – each novel was written by an author, but each video game required artwork, gameplay design, and programming as well as writing, and often required the creative input of more than one person. The mediums themselves are generally dissimilar in intent. Video games rarely allow for quiet reflection, and novels rarely require the reader find an interesting way to destroy a Panzer tank. Despite these differences, I argue there is more of an overlap between video games and fiction than many believe, and that understanding this overlap will prove vital, both to writers and readers in coming to terms with new media, but also to video

game designers in creating compelling and meaningful story.

Despite the works of the Modernists, and more lately Johnson, the Oulipo, Coover and others, the popular form of the novel is not altogether different from that of novels written before the First World War. If anything, it is the business of books that has changed – the traditional linear narrative remains the dominant form of novel writing. In recent decades, however, a new medium of immersive storytelling has emerged to compete with film, music and literature for its audience. Storytelling seems to be both staying the same and evolving. Perhaps the revolution of form that writers such as Johnson and Queneau envisaged will not occur in the novel, but in the interactive digital stories of game developers and writers. Perhaps the next great literary movement may not involve novels at all.

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