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The primary aim of this paper is to better understand the nature of narrative in games. In order to carry out such objective it was decided to use a methodology inspired by humanist approaches but not exclusively limited to them. Mayra (2009) points out that humanists and social scientists, approach game studies in different ways and that there is in fact a 'methodological' divide between the formal and informal methods adopted and a divergence in their conception of the role of the player when applied to game studies. According to Aarseth (2007) as quoted in Mayra (2009); a humanist game scholar sees the player as a 'necessary but uncontrollable part of the process of creating ludic meaning a function that is created by gameplay as well as co creator of it', whilst the social scientist views the player as a 'historical, situated and flesh and blood' entity.

At this stage of the discussion it is only fair to provide some form of justification for choosing to attempt a narratorial analysis of a video game. It should be pointed out that representational content in games has become so rich that it deserves to be studied on its own merits. In this regard Dovey and Kennedy (2006, p.88) point out that considering all this; it would be senseless for an emergent discipline trying to establish its methodological portfolio, to ignore such a dominant and contemporary trend or to try to eliminate it from academic research.

This study aligns itself to the narratologists' school of thought and as such aims to map the narrative element of this game series. Methodologically speaking this study will rely on informal methods (close-reading) or as have been defined by Mayra (2009, p.318); case-study-based approaches. Mayra (2008) points out that a structuralist position applied to the academic study of videogames should focus on the exploration of 'signifying potentials', in such a way as to identify the most important signs, describing how these combine into larger structures and ultimately interpreting how meaning is produced within the context of the sign system. In such cases Mayra points out that games are treated as texts. Textual analysis as applied to games involves:

...discussing games as texts, or in textual terms as complex and multimodal signs that are constituted by other signs. When called discourse analysis the emphasis is on uncovering how conventions...make certain ways of representing or thinking to appear as self evident and natural, even if they carry certain power relations within them. (Mayra 2008, p.157)

Because of their episodic nature (a game consist of a number of levels) most video games tell their stories in bits and pieces, with every level disclosing a new piece of information to the player. According to Dovey and Kennedy (2006, p.97) this spatialisation of narrative and the conceptualisation of characters as avatars suggest a return to more primitive forms of storytelling such as the folktale and the hero's

journey. Such an assertion will be put to test by comparing the narrative structure found in these games with Campbell's monomyth (hero's journey).

The Awful (or Is It?) Truth About Narratorial Analysis in Videogame Research

Before proceeding with this discussion it is important to point out a critical but painful truth about videogame studies: analysing a videogame from a fictional perspective is not always a good idea, mainly because there are games which have no story or whose plot is as thick as an A4 paper. Still, today there are very few video game genres which do not use some form of explicit fictional framework (Nielsen et al. 2008, p.170). In fact as technology developed so did the story telling capabilities of video games. Games like *God of War* and its sequels are a testimony of this. Developers are now able to offer to the player more complete and emotional experiences, akin to those of television and cinema. The narrative analysis presented here will be entirely concerned with the plot of a series of three games developed over a span of six years and two generations of consoles (PS2 and PS3). The games under examination are *God of War 1, 2 and 3*.

The model chosen to undertake this analysis was inspired by Joseph Campbell's 'Hero's Journey' as adapted, interpreted and formulated by Christopher Vogler in his book 'The Writer's Journey'. Vogler's adaptation of the model was used since it provides a more simplistic and up-to-date¹ version of the Hero's Journey. Campbell and subsequently Vogler believed that the Hero's Journey:

...is a recognition of a beautiful design, a set of principles that govern the conduct of life and the world of storytelling the way physics and chemistry govern the physical world...It's difficult to avoid the sensation that the Hero's Journey exists somewhere, as an eternal reality, a Platonic ideal form, a divine model (Vogler 2007, p.XIII)

According to Vogler (2007) videogame designers have been using such a model in their products and marketing efforts for quite some time;

...the Hero's Journey lends itself extremely well to the world of computer games and interactive experiences. (Vogler 2007, p.XXIII)

Due to the universality of the heroic narrative and the way most games are structured, that is, in a series of levels or stages, this paper aims to put to the test to what extent the above statement is true. In reality games are frequently criticised for their poor fictional component, mostly regurgitated plots and stereotypical characters but nonetheless developers still persist in attaching a narratorial component to their games. The result of which is more often than not a mixed bag with only few titles shining in this regard.

Why the God of War (GOW) Series?

The *GOW* trilogy is a hack and slash action adventure (which also involves some platforming and puzzle solving sections) game featuring a Spartan warrior (demi-god)

called Kratos. This trilogy was chosen primarily for the relative complexity of the story relative to other brawlers/ beat 'em ups on the market and also due to the fact that the actual story spans three titles enriching considerably the narrative arch to be analysed. Secondly the choice fell on this series because of the underlying mature themes tackled: including but not only: revenge, ambition, family, redemption etc. In this regard *GOW* proved to be an adequate choice, particularly in the light of what David Jaffe (Thompson 2010) game director on the first *GOW* said about the game: 'a creation which is both a work of adolescent wonder and adult seriousness'. Another reason for such a choice is the fact that all three games are considered amongst the best the industry has to offer and sales figures are there to prove it. The trilogy has sold more than 11.5 million units as of today.

Protocols Utilised During Analysis

The three games under examination were played twice under the same difficulty level normal. No cheats were used and no help from outside sources (online or not) was sought since such behaviour might have hindered the process of how the game was meant to be played and the story understood. All games were played on the PS3 console over a period of six weeks. A period of two weeks was allocated per game to allow enough time for the detailed note taking process to take place.

Note Taking Process

As already indicated above the games under examination were played twice. Since the games are pretty long, completing each game took more than one session. It was noted that the first play-through took considerably more time than the second one. This was mostly due to the fact that during the second run the solution to the puzzles was already known and the enemies easier to defeat (due to practice).

Title	Play through No.1	Play through No.2
GOW1	13hours	8hours
GOW2	12hours	9hours
GOW3	11hours	10hours

During each game session various notes were taken. All the data was inputted into a huge excel sheet under the following labels:

- *Level*- name of level as indicated by the game
- *Cinematics*- a detailed description of what goes on in the various cinematics used by the developers to move the story forward
- *In-game activity*- a description of the player's doings during a particular segment of the game in between cinematics
- *Timeline*- when is the action/cinematic taking place in the universe time-line

- *Characters met*- the characters met by the player during a specific segment of the game
- *Enemies encountered*- a list of all the enemies fought by the player according to level
- *Environment* – a description of the environment being navigated by the player
- *Bosses*- end of level bosses or minor bosses fought by the player over the course of the game

Once a game was completed twice, the data from the two sessions was merged together to come up with one final version of the notes. These were then compared with a walkthrough downloaded from www.ign.com to check for inaccuracies or missed information in the compilation of the notes.

Second Phase of the Analysis

Once this process was over, the second phase of the analysis was initiated. During this phase an attempt was made to fit the game's plot; as told by the game various cutscenes and gameplay scenarios, into Vogler's model. The twelve stages of the Writer's Journey (Vogler 2007, p.8) are:

1. Ordinary World
2. Call to Adventure
3. Refusal of Call
4. Meeting with the Mentor
5. Crossing the first threshold
6. Tests, Allies, Enemies
7. Approach to the inmost cave
8. Ordeal
9. Reward
10. The Road back
11. Resurrection
12. Return with the Elixir

These twelve sections can be grouped into three distinct acts:

- Act 1 – Departure/Separation
- Act 2 – Descent, Initiation, Penetration
- Act 3 – Return

It was noticed that each one of the three games follows Vogler's model. Even when considered as one unit, the narrative arc covering the three titles fits nicely within the parameters of the model. It can be assumed that the developers were truthful in their assertions that the *GOW* trilogy was always meant to be structured in such a way. Although each title can be played on its own, the story can only be appreciated in its full potential as a trilogy. One could easily compare the *GOW* series to the *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy or the *Star Wars* movies (originals and prequels).

The three games are one continuous and controlled journey towards a resolution very similar to an action adventure movie. The developers control over the narration

is a very tight one highlighting particularly emotive moments with great visuals and dramatic music. The player has no choice whatsoever as to where the story goes/ends, nor can any liberty be taken with how the events will unfold. As a matter of fact the player is simply there for the ride. The story as it is told will always be the same no matter how many times the game is played.

The 3-Act Structure and the Relationship Between Narrative and Gameplay

As noted above, the storyline of each entry in the series when considered on its own merits respects the most important notion of Aristotelian poetics; that is involving a definite beginning, a well developed middle section and a satisfying conclusion. The same can be said when one looks at the trilogy as one overarching tale which starts out in *GOW1*, develops in *GOW2* and finds a dramatic conclusion in *GOW3*.

The three-act restorative structure model has an introductory phase in which a conflict is enunciated (usually involving some form of moral dilemma), followed by a recount of the effects and implications of such conflict (in this phase the dilemma is apparently solved), and a third act in which equilibrium is usually restored by resorting to morality (Lindley 2005). Furthermore Lindley (2005) argues that Campbell's model manifests itself recursively, that is the structure is repeated innumerable times. The three act structure dominates the over-arching narrative of the game however it is also present in the individual episodes/levels making up the game. In the case of the *GOW* series, the three act structure can be observed on three different levels:

1. *in-game level*: i.e. the episodes/levels/rounds making up each individual game
2. *title level*: each game has an introductory conflict, a false resolution and an ending
3. *across the three titles*: i.e. the first title can be considered as the set-up introducing characters and conflicts, a second one further developing the conflict introduced in the first title and offering some form of retribution and a third and final act where redemption and closure is achieved.

At the in-game level the player is faced with the same cycle every time a level is conquered.

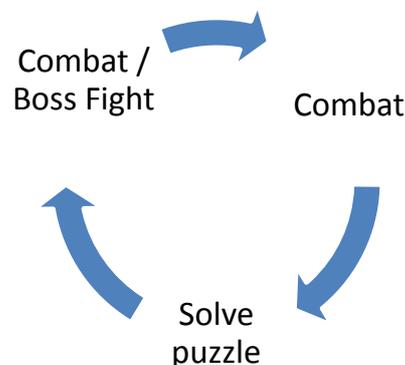


Figure 1

The Boss fight at the end of most levels is but a false second act resolution which leads to a reinitiation of the process until the final boss is defeated. While the three-part act within each level of the game is an interactive process, the one over-arching the whole game (series of games) is composed mainly of non-interactive content. The story as it is told in cutscenes is more similar to a movie than to a game, but nonetheless it also follows the same structure as the interactive one. According to Lindley (2005) gameplay in most cases has no effect on the story being told 'the story is for the most part a structure imposed on top of, and different from gameplay'.

In *GOW* its developers tried to close the gap between story and gameplay by reflecting changes/events which take place in cutscenes on the actual gameplay mechanics and vice versa.² With the exception of limited intrusions of ludic elements such as quick time events (QTEs) during specific cutscenes, narrative exposition is beyond the player's control. An excellent example of those QTEs in action can be observed in the highly cinematographical action sequences of *GOW2* and *GOW3*. Here the player is required to input a limited number of commands within a time limit. It should be pointed out that while QTEs keep the player in control during otherwise passive sections; their role is severely limited in altering the narrative. QTEs keep the player on the alert and focused on the task at hand. In other words, they are far more an exercise in skills and reflexes than in innovative narratorial creation.

GOW like other action games keeps story and gameplay on parallel rails. Indeed, in their analysis of interactive narratives Mallon and Webb (2005, p.2) point out that there seems to be a tension, if not outright conflict between traditional forms of narrative and the interactive capabilities of the medium. In fact, interactivity can sometimes weaken the story's impact, thus the relationship between storytelling and interactivity is undeniably paradoxical. In order to maintain dramatic tension, the games in question situate important events and plot-devices away from the player's interference thus maintaining the same degree of irreversibility as that found in film and novel. The only kind of 'drama' which the player partakes in, is that which is generated during gameplay, that is, the one arising from the increasingly difficult scenarios encountered by the player.

During the analysis it was noted that practically all the games under observation invite the player to engage and experiment with the game mechanics, however, the same cannot be affirmed for the narrative component. Without a doubt, developers are afraid of leaving too much control in the player's hands, particularly when it comes to the storyline. Once a cutscene is triggered due to some scripted event, the player forfeits any form of control. The difficult relationship between interactivity and narrativity is perhaps best observed in those long gameplay sequences where the player is totally immersed in some ludic act (mauling enemies to death).

In reality, the player's actions rarely carry any narrative significance beyond the fact that they allow the player to be able to watch the next piece of narrative exposition. While the player's actions make sense within the parameters set by the plot, they do not contribute in any meaningful way to the actual narrative. As it happens, during extended gameplay sequences the story arc loses completely focus. The gameplay is normally so exhilarating that what limited narrative there is, fades into insignificance.

This is further accentuated by the fact that players are restricted to few gameplay mechanics (brawling, platforming) and thus everything offered by the narrative of the respective game can only be reacted to through a severely limited palette of actions. Action games such as *GOW* lack the level of sophistication present in movies where a character can interact with the surrounding world in a wide variety of ways. The only instances when the player's actions matter are during boss-fights. Here the player's actions are very relevant to the story because they carry weight and dramatic impetus. In *GOW3* the act of killing Zeus is far more influential on the story than the hundreds of generic enemies killed up to that point during the course of the game.

From this perspective, boss-fights are particularly interesting because they successfully blend the narratorial with the ludic, without jeopardising any of the elements. The fact that boss(es) are amongst the very few characters (excluding the hero and the antagonist) who are somewhat fleshed out, combined with the higher level of difficulty characterising these fights, makes boss-encounters one of the few instances during gameplay where the player's actions not only carry emotional weight but really matter in terms of story development.

The Player's Experience of Story: Close Reading the Game

Analysing *GOW* required primarily two sorts of skills, those related to gameplay (playing skilfully) and those required to understand and follow its narratorial component. In order to understand how game narratives function, Nielsen et al. (2008 p.184) suggest a close reading type of analysis which can help to explain how narrative and gameplay come together to determine the player's experience. Effectively a close reading of any game requires an analysis of both the cultural (film, literary etc) and gameplay contexts since it is upon these which the player will base his interpretation of what it is being experienced.

Nielsen et al. (2008) suggest a set of tools which a game student can use to dig deeper into the game. In particular they focus their analysis on the literary repertoire surrounding the game. Their understanding of literary repertoire implicates what the player already knows about the game, that is, reference to previous titles, staples of the genre or any other cultural connotations related to it. According to them, understanding the repertoire "is a matter of competence and it can affect both content and form" (Nielsen et al. 2008, p.185). They argue that the repertoire brings context into discussion without 'opening the door to excessively subjective interpretations'. Such 'repertoire' is initiated from within the game (content found in the text/game) and once triggered it summons all the player knows about that particular genre. From the first chapter in *GOW*, the game immediately summons to mind the fantasy genre, sword and sandals movies (ex: *Clash of the Titans*, *Gladiator*, *Spartacus* etc.) and the world of ancient myths and larger than life heroes.

In reality the act of the player of using previous knowledge or experiences when engaging in activities such as playing or reading is something essential to the process since if the player or reader accesses the wrong registry the activity would not be as pleasurable as intended by the authors or developers. By referring to a mental registry and thus using such constructs in the act of reading, the player is able

to fill in the gaps in the plot left out intentionally or casually by the author. In games this activity has even greater implications because it is concurrently done with the act of playing. According to Nielsen et al. (2008, p.186), players not only interpret plot in games, but they also engage at the same time in solving the game.

Thus our mind is busy with the story level and the action level at the same time. The first one can be narrated afterwards and makes sense as a story; the second is about solving action problems, and if narrated it would be 'a walkthrough'.

During playtime the player experiences those two levels in an intermingled way; still the act of playing is much more complicated than the summation of those two activities alone. Nielsen et al. state that:

...the act of playing is informed by: our cognitive, and often unconscious filling in the story gaps, our sense of what we think that we have to do within the game and the eye-hand coordination that us our playing ability. (2008, p.187)

The act of playing a game is so complex that it can only be described as a process of trial and error where the player redoes the same section until the right sequence as intended by the developer is finally completed. Throughout the hours spent playing *GOW* there were various instances where sections of the game were repeated many times.³ In particular during boss fights (ex: Kraken in *GOW2* or Zeus in *GOW3*) multiple attempts were necessary since the player has to identify the right sequence of attacks in order to be able to defeat the enemy in question. Each boss-fight is essentially an action-oriented puzzle which needs to be solved by the player. In the next section, this discussion will proceed by looking at the genre and the gameplay mechanics which characterize the game. Following that the discussion will centre on the underlying elements which sustain and keep both gameplay and narrative bound together.

Genre and Associated Gameplay Mechanics

The *GOW* series respects most of the norms of the third person action adventure genre. The three games have a lot of action sequences, but also some quieter moments involving puzzle solving. With regards to this genre Nielsen et al. (2008, pp.181-183) argue that action and adventure games lack the same emotional curve found in classic literature or cinema since the experience is segmented in a number of chapters in order to make it more digestible for the player. In the case of *GOW*, although the series still contains the same staples as any other action/adventure title, however the whole experience is orchestrated in such a way as to make sense from a narratorial perspective. For instance the traps and puzzles found in the temple of Pandora (*GOW1*) or the platform sections found in Hades (*GOW1/2*) all make sense within the context of the game narrative since they are representations of the challenges Kratos has to overcome in order to reach his goal. Murray (1997, p.139) argues:

the puzzles are most satisfying when the actions have a dramatic appropriateness, when they serve as a way of increasing our belief in the solidity and consistency of the illusory world.

Whether the player is fighting a monstrous creature, solving a puzzle, or jumping over rotating blades, such tasks are always part of a larger narratorial framework and as such the same motivational dynamics apply. Nonetheless, it should be pointed out that the *GOW* titles remain games of progression, whereas unless the player completes a certain sequence of actions, in order to unfold a pre-established set of scripted events, the game cannot move forward. In this sense the player has very limited freedom since all the events in the game are pre-established.

The game is mostly played through a third person perspective; even though in the third title there are some very brief moments which involve a first person perspective. These moments are short and far between but nevertheless full of pathos. For few moments the player looks at the world from Kratos' eyes. According to Tavinor (2009, p.75) the virtual camera chosen by developers for a game is 'essentially the embodiment of the player-character spatial position within the fictional world'. It represents a virtual point of view, placing the character within the fictional world and thus providing with an access into the world where they are about to act. During the game the player has to skilfully navigate the environment avoiding traps and or other hazardous and completing the test, trials and mazes the game puts forward.

The game/s also involve/s mini-games in the form of quick time events where the player has to quickly press a series of buttons on the game-pad in order to make Kratos carry out a specific task. These tasks include dealing the death/final blow to enemies or bosses, solving puzzles and even making love to women. The games also motivate the player to explore thoroughly the environment. This exploration is rewarded with in game tokens (phoenix feather, Minotaur horns) which improve Kratos' stats making the character more powerful. Other gameplay mechanics include the collection of a variety of coloured orbs, whenever Kratos kills something or someone. Before they disappear from the screen corpses leave red, green or blue orbs for the player to collect. These orbs are similar to experience points and allow Kratos to increase his life and magic bar, improve his weapons and increase the number of moves he can perform.

Like in many similar third person action adventure games, Kratos has at his disposition a number of weapons which he uses to dispose of his enemies. These weapons improve over the course of the game and some of them are present in all the three titles. While certainly the ludic component in *GOW* is important and most certainly defines the game experience, it is when this is observed in tandem with the narratorial component that the game truly shines.

Reading *GOW*: The Tragic Story That Is Kratos' Saga

Even a superficial reading of the *GOW* series would immediately bring to surface how closely the story respects the notions of Aristotelian poetics, for the simple fact that it tells the story of an epic tragedy in the same spirit of the classical representations which took place during the sacred religious festival in honour of the god Dionysus in ancient Greece. In *GOW* it is immediately evident that there is no room for a happy ending. From the first cutscene up until the last one, the player moves from one tragic setup to the next until the final inescapable resolution takes place.

GOW follows in the same footsteps of Greek tragic myths in the sense that it celebrates the 'mystery of dismemberment' both metaphorically and figuratively. Kratos as a character is a harbinger of death, pain and sorrow, as it is evidenced by both gameplay and cutscenes. According to Campbell (1993, p.25) tragedy, more than any other poetic form represents the world (and life) as we know it, since in real life there can only be one ending: death. In *GOW* death is the sole companion of Kratos and ultimately the player. Suffering; an essential element of tragedy also embraces the narration and is never too far away.

Following the first cutscene in *GOW1* the player learns that Kratos is a broken man ready to end his life. The pain he inflicts on his victims is but a reflection of the one he experiences within his soul. The cutscenes do an excellent job in depicting the guilt Kratos feels whenever he remembers the tragic faith of his family (dead by his own hands). The player's role in this game is very much bound to Kratos' faith, which is centred around helping the main character achieve 'catharsis' (the purgation of the emotions by the spectator). Being very much bound to the classic formula of Greek tragedies, catharsis plays a key role in the narrative and is ultimately the most important objective worth exploring. Throughout the game, Kratos seeks 'purgation' for his past sins and that's exactly what his journey is all about. The player is both a spectator and enactor in his search for purification and redemption.

In Campbell's (1993, p.27) own words tragedy shifts the spectator's attention to the:

...the universal life that throbs and celebrates its victory in the very kiss of our own annihilation, this amor fati, "love of the fate that is inevitably death, constitutes the experience of the tragic art: therein the joy of it, the redeeming ecstasy...

The developers behind *GOW* tried to distinguish themselves from similar games by attempting to mimic the structure, themes, pathos and characterisation found in the tragic genre and ultimately transferring it to the videogame medium. Another very important theme found in *GOW* which is very much synonymous with tragedy is the concept of change/metamorphosis. Over the course of the three titles, Kratos changes in various ways; particularly in his status from man to god and back again to being human. Once again either incidentally or on purpose *GOW* manages to deliver both aspects of the mythological journey of the hero; that is the external/superficial one where the hero will physically travel from one place to the next and the internal one, where the hero will have to battle the demons which reside within his soul.

The passage of the mythological hero maybe over ground, incidentally; fundamentally it is inward-into depths where obscure resistances are overcome, and long lost, forgotten powers are revived, to be made available for the transfiguration of the world. (Campbell 1993, p.29)

Being an action game, Kratos search for redemption is intrinsically bound with the violent acts he performs. Indeed, the next section will explore the nature of such violence and the reasons why it is such a defining feature of the *GOW* experience.

The Glorification of Violence- The Key to Understand GOW?

The *GOW* titles are mostly renown for being amongst the most violent and goriest games ever created. Thompson (2010) in his analysis of *GOW3* says that 'writing about conflict will never go out of fashion because we (mankind) are governed by pride and fear and envy'. He explains that it is very difficult not to feel like the embodiment of those sentiments when playing *GOW3*. Thompson's idea of playing *GOW* is very much a cathartic experience which purges the soul (by enabling it) of the player from an innate urge for violence and power. Furthermore he states that 'the microscopic level of evisceration set against the gigantic tableau recreates a fantasy world where our most primordial and reptilian selves get to toss around giant metal blades'.

The game also allows the player to experience in a highly detailed way the effects of such a violent behaviour. Disembowelling a centaur and ripping a god's head off his chest are but two examples of such a gory spectacle. All these activities are actually carried out by the player following specific prompts. In this regard Thompson (2010) argues that very few games have 'forcefully shown the cruelty of the violence it demands for progress.' In *GOW* the player is engaged in a meta-game where progression is intrinsically linked with brutality and murder. This makes *GOW*, the action game archetype par excellence.

Notwithstanding the cathartic dimension of *GOW*, Thompson (2010) believes that as a character Kratos has effectively crossed the line between being a cool character which players enjoy embodying to being a homicidal beast. In the player's hands Kratos becomes a ruthless killing machine disposing of enemies and innocent people alike. He is unapologetically brutal and without a conscience. The violence in *GOW* is fuelled by both Kratos' rage and the player's eagerness to provide the inputs for such violence to manifest itself. Undeniably, there is a certain sadistic pleasure on behalf of the player to seek and relish all those opportunities of gratuitous violence which the game provides. Such feelings are but a realisation that the game does its job well to drive the player into a specific frame of mind, one which is dominated by primordial and reptilian instincts.

Such moments are described by Murray (1997, p.54) in her account of her first time encounter with a shooter called Mad Dog McGee. She points out that although the story in this game is almost ridiculous in its simplicity, it still provoked in her a moment of self confrontation in which she realised that shooting stuff gave her a pleasure which she never experienced before. Such a disquieting (for Murray) experience was according to her the mark of a new dramatic experience. In fact, she affirms that it is those powerful moments of revelation which make gaming an experience like no other.

Ultimately, there is no denying the fact that *GOW* is violent or rather incites violence, at least within the game world. The games in the trilogy provide an exhilarating experience fuelled by both violence and blood lust. The games in question make no attempt to hide that they want the player to have fun by taking part in extremely violent activities. On the other hand, the games never shy away from showing the sheer destructive power of violence on both victim and perpetrator. As a matter of fact, in one final act, packed with poetic justice, the game developers turn that violence against the 'player'. In the final act of *GOW3* the player is forced to do

something which very few games have done, that is, to kill one's own avatar. Indeed, the player is forced to turn Kratos against himself, in one final self-defiant and defining moment. This act while definitely not strong enough to redeem the whole experience, is quite indicative of a morality which though not apparent still forms part of the *GOW* experience.

The final sections of this paper will be dedicated to exploring further the narratorial qualities of this game series by looking at how these use setting and characterization to ground the player's actions.

Game Setting

This section will look at how the fictional settings in *GOW* provide players with a meaningful context or rather a canvas where to situate and anchor their actions. Nielsen et al. (2008, p.175) argue that the fictional world of a game is like a stage; that is a platform meant for action. According to them (2008, p.173) how successful game developers are in creating a fictional world is detrimental to the player's enjoyment of the game. Such an endeavour they add 'certainly stimulate the player's imagination to turn the playing experience into a kind of narrative related experience, even if this is not explicit'.

No matter how rudimentary, theme and plot enable the player to understand better the game and therefore to play in a better way. Everything in *GOW*, including gameplay, reinforces the idea that the player is experiencing an ancient brutal world. In order to maintain this make belief the game provides the player with the right props in the same way a child would use a plastic sword in a make belief game where pirates are the protagonists. Such props usually include:

- the detailed environments
- settings
- enemies
- characters (non playable characters)
- narrative (most important element since it sustains makes believe)

The universe created for *GOW* and for most video games is a fictional/fantastical one, which nevertheless borrows many elements from reality. Such borrowing helps the player to situate and understand better the actions taking place on screen. In the case of *GOW* the setting/universe created by the developers is that of Greek mythology. There is no doubt that the developers of this game managed to successfully bring to life an era which although very popular in cinema (sword and sandal genre) was not as prevalent in the game industry. Thompson (2010) argues that the various settings explored by Kratos are but mere representations of mankind's existential fears.

Mythology is a sort of soap opera for the reptilian mind cringing in fear of the unanswered question that awaits us in death

The series is full of references to Hellenic culture, including events, relationships between city states, myths (about creatures, gods and fictional characters),

architectural designs etc. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that most of game spaces are not realistic, in the sense that they do not mimic the real world, but only reproduce some features of it. Examples of these re-creations include the inside of the various temples in *GOW1* or the Greek Baths and docks of Rhodes in *GOW2*.

With regards to this, in his analysis of *Tomb Raider*, Atkins (2003, p.28) argues that game spaces are 'a fantasy world forever mediated not just by a distance between player and protagonist... but also by the technology of delivery'. Atkins's idea of realism in games is meant to be understood as a gameworld whose core mechanics are internally consistent, realistic in their own terms and built upon a set of defined conventions. In this sense *GOW* is highly realistic since both the setting and the core gameplay mechanics are an extension of the universe the developers wanted to create. Such ludic and spatial dynamics allow the player to experience an extremely brutal yet fascinating universe. In the next three sections this argument will be developed further by looking at the role non playable characters and Kratos' character have in the *GOW* experience.

Characters

If the setting or the fictional world of a game may be compared to a stage then the characters should be considered as actors. According to Campbell and subsequently Vogler characters in a fiction should be understood in terms of the archetypes they represent.

The archetypes to be discovered and assimilated are precisely those that have inspired, throughout the annals of human culture, the basic images of ritual, mythology, and vision (Campbell 1993, p.18)

Campbell in particular believed that there are universal patterns (Jungian concept) in the fundamental ideas of mankind which know no historical or natural boundaries and are therefore present in every culture. Vogler (2007, p.23) identifies eight types of archetypes who he believes describe 'the common character types, symbols and relationships' present in most fairy tales and myths. In line with the Jungian understanding of the term, Vogler defines archetype as: 'ancient patterns of personality that are the shared heritage of the human race'. Such archetypes are the result of a collective unconscious which manifests itself in fairy tales and myths.

The archetypes are amazingly constant throughout all times and cultures, in the dreams and personalities of individuals as well as in the mythic imagination of the entire world (Vogler 2007, p.23)

Vogler argues that it is thanks to those universal mechanisms that make possible the shared experience of storytelling. Furthermore he argues that writers/storytellers use characters and create relationships inspired by such archetypes because they want to create experiences which are recognisable and understandable by everyone. Archetypes are essentially masks which the characters put on during specific tracts of the story in order to carry out some function. Over the course of the story a character can be assigned various roles and therefore shift from one archetypal mask to another. In the case of *GOW*, many characters shift alignment⁴. Vogler (2007, pp.24-26) also argues that essentially archetypes can also be regarded as

either facets of the hero's personality, with the other characters representing various possibilities for the hero to embrace (mostly good or evil), but also as personified symbols of human qualities.

Every good story reflects the total human story, the universal human condition of being born into this world, growing, learning and struggling to become an individual and dying. Stories can be read as metaphors for the general human situation, with characters that embody universal, archetypal qualities... (Vogler 2007, p.26)

Characters in an action game as in a movie exist because they carry out a specific function. They exist in order to serve the narrative. Very much in line with Propp's idea of functional characters, NPCs⁵ in a videogame hold specific roles which further flesh out the narrative and help to develop the sense of immersion the player experiences when interacting with the game. There can be no 'immersion' in the game world unless that universe is inhabited by characters who give life to the fiction.

With regards to the various types of characters inhabiting games spaces, Nielsen et al. (2008, p.178) categorises them according to the level of interactivity the player can have with them. These include:

1. *Stage characters*: these are simply there to give the impression that the in-game environment is a living breathing universe. In the case of *GOW* there is no such thing as stage characters. Whatever is found in the game is there to be killed.
2. *Functional characters*: these are characters which serve some specific purpose, In the case of *GOW* one might mention the soldiers running around the various cities and the frightened citizens. These can be killed and harvested for red orbs.
3. *Cast characters*: there is a huge array of these characters in *GOW*, including Athena, Hephaestus, Daedalus (the labyrinth architect) and Prometheus etc. Each character has its own role to play in the game and in how the story develops.
4. *Player characters*: the character controlled by the player, that is, Kratos.

Furthermore in *GOW* the various characters also lend themselves to be classified into an additional 3 categories:

1. those who appear in the game's cutscenes but the player never has the opportunity to interact with such as Athena.
2. those who appear in both cutscenes and play-time as well, such as Zeus.
3. those minor characters who the players interacts with in some way or another. These are further sub-divided into two kinds:
 - a. those characters who are met during actual game play such the oracle of Athens in the first game or Hephaestus in the third game that requires of the player some particular task.
 - b. those characters that are encountered during gameplay which are there only for Kratos to slaughter (Athenian soldiers killed/harvested for red orbs) or to use them in some puzzle (the human sacrifice in *GOW1*)

While, these categorizations are certainly useful, they only show that from a narrative perspective, action games still have a long way to go before complex (enriching) secondary characters become an integral part of the video game experience. Since character development is normally a prerogative of main characters, the next and final section of this paper will be entirely dedicated to explore Kratos' and the role he 'plays' in the game.

Who Is Kratos?

Without any doubt the *GOW* series is centred around the character of Kratos. Naturally, Kratos' importance as a character goes beyond that of other characters because of his role as avatar. Rehak (2003) in Dovey and Kennedy (2006, p.91) argues that an avatar is 'a semiotic vessel intended to be worn like a glove'. However far from being an empty shell intended to be worn like a glove, Kratos' character is a fully-fleshed individual with a biography and a past of his own. Although there is a tendency to compare avatars with chess pieces (Newman and Eskelinen in Dovey and Kennedy, 2006, p.98), contrary to the later, avatars do not exist in a vacuum; 'they have intertextual representational lives' that affect how the game is played. Players are informed about such 'lives' through graphical representations (posters, box-art), cutscenes, or content (inspired from) found in other media content. In the case of *GOW*, Kratos' character also lives in comic books, books and fan-made content. Most predominantly, it is in these media that the player can learn many details about Kratos' story and thus enrich the actual in-game experience.

According to Nielsen et al. (2008, p.180) fully-fleshed characters like Kratos can be considered 'actors' as these have a biography that is integrated in the game story. The name given to the protagonist of this trilogy already gives an indication of what sort of character Kratos is. In fact the same name implies notions of power and strength (in ancient Greek). He is primarily a vehicle which embodies humanity's darkest side. Like many heroes of antiquity he is also the result of various stereotypes and biased gender roles. As was mentioned above, Kratos is a tormented soul in search of redemption through vengeance (main motivator for the action). Throughout the three games the character is at war with everything and everyone, he has no friends and fewer allies, only pawns to be used and then immediately discarded. His character can be defined as that of an 'ubermensch' (super-human), a man of action, extremely violent, bold and goal driven.

Nevertheless, it must be stated that Kratos proved to be the perfect host for the player to embody, since what is seen in the cutscenes is reflected in the player's actions during gameplay (and vice-versa). This is somewhat of an oddity in action games, as most of the time there is a huge incongruence between how the heroic figure behaves during cutscenes when compared to how the character behaves when under the player's control. With regards to this, Kratos maybe one of the few characters in the industry whose persona remains constant during both the narrative as well as the ludic component of the experience.

Kratos' character is interesting because it holds an 'interior life' which albeit superficial and easily ignorable provides additional momentum and pathos to the story. On their behalf, Dovey and Kennedy (2006, p.97) state that the interior life of a

character is irrelevant in a videogame. In this case one can easily argue the contrary since it is that torment, desperation and guilt feeling which drives this character's motivation. Furthermore by quoting, Marie-Laure-Ryan (2001), the same authors (2006, p.97) state that the player would be out of his mind to submit himself to the fate of a hero who in a passionate and ultimate moment of desperation commits suicide. However, this is exactly what happens in *GOW*. The trilogy opens up with Kratos committing suicide and ends with him carrying out the same act, this time at the hand of the player. The game developers use the suicide-plot to show how much the character has developed over the course of the trilogy. In the first instance Kratos wants to die for 'relatively' selfish reasons, while in the third instalment of the series, this act is one of selflessness and generosity.

Notwithstanding this, throughout the trilogy there is very little to indicate the human aspect of Kratos apart from those few glimpses in Kratos' past where he is seen interacting with his family. Still, even those few moments are tainted with blood and violence. Essentially Kratos is a very lonely character. It is only during the final stages of the story that Kratos connects again with another character; Pandora. Kratos' meeting with this character in *GOW3* changes both the ludic as well as the narrative dynamics of the game. For the first time, Kratos is not fighting for selfish reasons but to protect someone else. Ultimately, this sole reconnection with another being would be the light which will guide Kratos in the final phases of his story. In fact it is Pandora which will show him the meaning of 'Hope' and the power of forgiveness. Through her Kratos realises that redemption cannot be achieved unless one acknowledges the mistakes done and forgives himself.

Once again the similarities which this game holds with Campbell's monomyth are exceptional. Campbell argues that it is very common in mythological adventures for the hero to realise that whatever powers were sought had been there all the time.

The godly powers sought and dangerously won are revealed to have been within the heart of the hero all the time. He is the King's son....God's son... (Campbell 1993, p.39)

Not only Kratos is revealed to be Zeus's son⁶, but more importantly it is the realisation that it is not by magical powers or godly weapons that Kratos saves himself but by a more powerful power which comes from within.

From this point of view the hero is symbolical of that divine creative and redemptive image which is hidden within us all, only waiting to be known and rendered into life. (Campbell 1993, p.39)

Conclusion

This analysis has attempted to demonstrate that examining the narratorial component of a video game is not solely an act of academic fandom but a worthwhile enterprise which sheds light on the communicative nature of the medium. There is no doubt that while the gameplay aspect of modern videogames has developed quite a lot in recent times, the same cannot be affirmed for the narratorial component. Effectively there are very few examples of developers who dedicate equal attention

to both elements and even when they do so the end result sometimes still betrays such efforts.

As things stand today one finds it very hard to argue against the fact that narrativity is still considered to be subservient to gameplay. For instance after playing *GOW*, Tavinor came to the conclusion that:

...for the most part the interpretative involvement of the fiction in God of War is not driven by an interest in an unfolding narrative but by an interest in meeting the challenges of gameplay... (Tavinor 2009, p.116)

Moreover, he states that:

The interactive gaming nature of videogames may thus put them somewhat at odds with the narrative aims of traditional fictions...the events are not chosen for their contribution to an unfolding plot. Rather they are chosen by the player, or are chosen by the game designer, for their contribution to a game fiction. (Tavinor 2009, p.120)

While Tavinor is partially correct in his assertions he does not take into consideration the efforts game developers are making to bridge the gap between the story telling and the ludic aspect of games. The quick-time-event and the camera-pan overview of the gameplay arena are but two examples of such efforts. As the medium matures, more developers are challenging such a notion by bringing the two elements closer to each other. This reconciliation will not take place over night but there are already signs that the industry is moving in the right direction.

Finally this paper is an attempt to provoke critics of video game narratives to reconsider their stance vis-à-vis this particular aspect of games, since as has been seen in this analysis, even rudimentary forms of storytelling tell us a lot about the real world. Due to the current state of affairs of the narratorial component in videogames, Campbell/Vogler's model proved to be highly adequate in this attempt to make sense of the various storytelling devices used by the industry. Furthermore, Nielsen et al.'s 'reception based theory' also proved very useful in highlighting the various themes developed throughout the games and their intertextual cultural references. Way back in 1997, Murray promised a new era where of medianic convergence. She argued (1997, p.64) that

...we are on the brink of a historic convergence as novelists, play writers and filmmakers move toward multiform stories and digital formats: computer scientists move toward the creation of fictional worlds; and the audience moves towards the virtual stage.

...we can expect a continued loosening of traditional boundaries between games and stories, between films and rides, between broadcast media (like television and radio) and archival media (like books or videotape), between narrative forms (like books) and dramatic forms (like theatre or film), and even between the audience and the author.

It is very difficult to ascertain whether such achievement has been made, most probably not, however she was very right in her predictions that game developers will move away from 'adolescent rehearsal fantasies' and towards the expression of

more realistic and adult desires (Murray 1997, p.167). *GOW* is the proof that such themes can be tackled without effecting the enjoyment of the game. Finally, while acknowledging the fact the medium should not limit itself to traditional storytelling techniques and formats; change for the sake of changing should be discouraged. Hypertextual and nonlinear formats are interesting attempts but not necessarily the only viable solutions to address the issue of narrativity in this new emerging medium.

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Notes

- ¹ Vogler has reinterpreted and adapted Campbell's Hero's Journey for modern audiences' sensibilities. Vogler's model essentially follows the same predefined path and revolves around the same key milestones as Campbell's model, however it also eliminates those stages which are unnecessary or outmoded.
- ² In MGS4 developers made use of interactive or experiential cutscenes which deliver important story elements without detracting the player from the experience.
- ³ For example; the platforming sections of Hades (GOW1) require a lot of precision on behalf of the player and were attempted several times before the right sequence of actions was achieved.
- ⁴ Zeus's character shifts from being an ally to a shadow over the course of the story. Similarly Athena also holds various roles including that of mentor, goddess (as intended by Campbell) and enemy.
- ⁵ Non playable character
- ⁶ Such revelation takes place at the end of GOW2 at the hand of Athena.