The Hybrid Narrator

It was a clear day in the Mushroom Kingdom. A stubby plumber with a big black mustache sprinted through an open field. He had no time to enjoy the sights: the helpless princess had to be rescued from the claws of her evil kidnapper. The knight in overalls raced ahead, swiftly eluding hazardous obstacles and prevailing over every enemy that tried to impede his march. Just after bravely stomping on a menacing tortoise, despite his finest efforts, a miscalculated jump led the working-class hero to the bottom of a pit where he died instantly.

It was a clear day in the Mushroom Kingdom. A stubby plumber with a big black mustache sprinted through an open field. He had no time to enjoy the sights: the helpless princess had to be rescued from the claws of her evil kidnapper. The knight in overalls raced ahead, swiftly eluding hazardous obstacles and prevailing over every enemy that tried to impede his march. Just after bravely stomping on a menacing tortoise, he successfully leaped over a pit that could have led him to a tragic death, had he not calculated the jump with the utmost precision.

The above paragraphs narrate a hypothetical scene from SUPER MARIO BROS. Players probe their way through the virtual world by means of the common trial-and-error learning process that often leads the virtual character to its death. Following the Groundhog-Day-Effect logic in the scene described above, the repetition of the paragraph could go on and on for pages undergoing only slight changes—depending on how often the player character dies and how many lives the player has at their disposal. This example intends to illustrate—in an admittedly ludicrous way—the problems with of one of the main elements of narrative in the video game medium: *the verbal narrator*.[1]

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1 I will use the notion of *verbal narrator* to speak of a storyteller who uses language, whether it is written or spoken. The intricate academic discussion surrounding the narrator exceeds the scope of this argument and this section will not delve into it in detail.

THE RETROSPECTIVE NARRATOR

Traditionally speaking, the narrator is a voice that tells a story[2] to an audience. I will refer to the narrator that is already familiar with the recounted events from beginning to end as the *retrospective narrator* (compare Ryan 1993, p. 1).[3] In literature, the retrospective narrator seems to be indissociable from the notion of narrative. Take, for instance, the definition of narrative by the renowned literary scholar Gerald Prince: "the recounting (as product and process, object and act, structure and structuration) of one or more real or fictitious events communicated by one, two or several (more or less overt) narrators to one, two or several (more or less overt) narratees" (in Eskelinen 2001). According to this definition, the absence of a narrator would entail the absence of a narration.[4]

In the realm of film, the relation between narrative and narrator acquires a new level of complexity that challenges Prince's definition. This medium does not require a narrative voice to describe the action; it displays it directly in front of the spectator in the form of a moving image. As Kuhn and Schmitt have argued:

"Though almost all feature films abound in storytelling capacities and thus belong to a predominantly narrative medium, their specific mode of plurimedial presentation and their peculiar blending of temporal and spatial elements set them apart from forms of narrative that are principally language-based" (Kuhn and Schmitt, 2014).

Thus, narration in film arises from the combination of different elements that result in the final audiovisual experience, such as the camera, editing, sound, and the mise-en-scène (compare ibid.; Thon 2016, p. 143). This assertion implies either that there can be narrative without a narrator, or that film has another kind

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Jan-Noel Thon's TRANSMEDIA NARRATOLOGY AND CONTEMPORARY MEDIA CULTURE (Thon 2016) offers a thorough account of this discussion with regard to film, comics, and video games.

2   In this particular section, I am interested in "story" or "narrative" in the traditional sense of "the presentation of a number of events" (Juul 2005, p. 156). I will use both terms interchangeably.

3   A retrospective narrator does not need to employ the past tense. Narration in the present tense is "a disguised form of retrospective narration" (Ryan 1993, p. 1) if it is authored with a predefined ending in mind.

4   This line of argument can be traced back to book three of Plato's REPUBLIC (2013) and his distinction between imitation and narration.

of retrospective narrator, different from the one found in literature: one that shows the story instead of telling it (compare Arsenault 2006, p. 52; Thon 2016, p. 143).[5] Nevertheless, the verbal narrator is far from absent in film. In the early, silent years, its role was assigned to intertitles, and a vast number of films since the introduction of sound make use of a voice-over narrator.

The characteristics of gametime complicate matters even further for the verbal retrospective narrator (compare Thon 2016, p. 207). The storytelling during gameplay portions is generally carried out without the aid of a verbal narrator, and it is instead performed with other elements of the medium—some of which can be found in film as well—, such as the camera, sound and level design, and the mise-en-scène (compare Jenkins 2004, p. 123). The retrospective narrator, if featured at all, is commonly relegated to non-gameplay portions. Cutscenes and text passages can easily make use of a verbal narrator, just like film or literature. But, during gameplay, the action emerges in real time as the player interacts with the gameworld. In this way, the present tense of gameplay and the past tense of narration are safely kept apart. In the words of game designer Chris Crawford:

"The story itself is noninteractive, and the game itself lacks dramatic content. You interact with the nonnarrative game, then see some non-interactive story, then interact some more with the game, then see more story, and if you alternate between the two fast enough, it becomes an 'interactive story'—right?" (Crawford 2003, p. 260).

Additionally, the constant iteration produced by the Groundhog Day Effect provides another layer of complexity. A narration repeating over and over with every iteration of a particular segment (just like the two paragraphs that open this section) would run the risk of rapidly becoming irritating. Thus, one could argue that gameplay is incompatible with the retrospective narrator—though this is not necessarily the case.

The retrospective narrator appears in video games outside of gameplay portions in different ways. THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT, for example, recaps the main plot points in the form of 2D animations every time the player launches the game. These animations are narrated in voice-over by Dandelion, a bard who is a friend of the protagonist, Geralt of Rivia. The game also shows the player short 2D animations after several quests, with voice-over narration by Geralt himself, reflecting on the foregone events. These animations can differ according to the decisions made by the player during each quest. A final way in which THE

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5   Film critic Seymour Chatman, for instance, has called it the *cinematic narrator* (in Thon 2016, p. 143), while film scholar André Gaudreault speaks of a *monstrator* (one who shows) instead of a *narrator* (one who tells) (in Arsenault 2006, p. 52).

WITCHER 3 introduces the voice of a retrospective narrator is in the multitude of texts that are available to the player. Some of them are found in the quests menu and recap the events of already played missions, which proves especially useful when resuming a quest that has been put on hold and whose details might have been somewhat obscured by the passage of time—considering the limits of working memory described in chapter one, section 1.1. The voice narrating these texts is, once again, that of Dandelion. Other texts with narrators include diaries, letters, and books that provide information on the history and legends of Geralt's world. All of these texts refer to the events they describe in the past tense, but never are the events of the game narrated as they occur. Hence, there are two temporalities in THE WITCHER 3: the present tense of gameplay and in-game cutscenes, and the past tense of the recounted events in 2D animations and texts.

Some video games include retrospective, voice-over narration during gameplay that does not directly address the action happening on screen. THOMAS WAS ALONE (Bithell 2012) is an example of this. The narration runs while the player interacts with the game world, providing information about the character's feelings, thoughts, and motivations, while leaving the description of the space and the action to the interactive moving image. Remedy's QUANTUM BREAK (Remedy Entertainment 2016) and ALAN WAKE (Remedy Entertainment 2010) are further examples of retrospective, voice-over narration in video games. In each case, the gameplay is framed by the narration as a reconstruction of past events.

THE REAL-TIME NARRATOR

Real-time verbal narration (as opposed to retrospective narration) is usually called "commentary" (compare Ryan 1993, pp. 148-150). When watching a football (soccer) match on television or listening to it on the radio, the event is narrated to the spectators as it is happening. Take this radio commentary that ESPN's Jorge Ramos shared on his Twitter account (@ESPN_JorgeRamos, May 6, 2015):

"Jordi Alba steals the ball and starts the counter-attack. Jordi takes it. He crosses the halfway line. Messi wants the ball. Everyone gives it to him because he can solve almost anything. Messi cannot get through. Now Boateng has it. Second recovery by Rakitić. He's heading toward the center spot. Gives it to Dani Alves. Back to Rakitić. Passes it back to Piqué. Now to Busquets. Gives the ball to Rakitić. Rakitić gives it to Messi. Messi wants to get into the 18-yard box. This can get messy. He's in! Gooooal! Oh my God! I'm leav-

ing! There's nothing else to see here! Ladies and gentlemen, we are turning everything off! Close the radio! Close the network! End football!"[6]

As Marie-Laure Ryan argues, live sports broadcasting is primarily a form of chronicle, since it is "mainly interested in the *what* of the game" and "the primary task of the announcer is to report everything that happens on the field as soon as it happens" (Ryan 1993, pp. 141).

What distinguishes retrospective from real-time narration is the time elapsed between the narration and the narrated event. Real-time narration occurs *during* the narrated event, while it still has an open ending; retrospective narration takes place *after* the narrated event has already finished. Retrospective narrators have thus greater control over the plot, since they already possess all the pieces of the story before they start to tell it. Retrospective narrators can, for instance, omit irrelevant information or swap the order of the events—for example, by telling the ending first (compare ibid., pp. 148-150). Real-time narrators do not know how the narration is going to end, and cannot influence the pacing or the order of events. As Ryan puts it, in real-time narration "[t]he relation between the duration of the narrated and the duration of the narration is rarely comfortable: there is usually either too much or too little time for language to capture the action live" (ibid. p. 141). Hence, a sense of urgency is typical in the production of real-time narration, due to the need to keep up with the succession of events.

Yet sports commentary is not a mere description of events. It is also embellished speech aimed at enhancing the drama of a match. A study by Bryant and coworkers (1977) examined the commentary of several American football matches in different networks. They classified the different sentences in three categories: descriptive, dramatic, or humorous. As the researchers report:

"From the 6 games analyzed, a total of 5728 sentences were coded, or an average of about 955 sentences per game. Of these, an average of 690 per game, or about 72 percent were

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6   Transcription of the Spanish original: "Roba Jordi Alba y se viene la contra. La lleva Jordi. Atención, cruza la linea ecuatorial. La pide Messi. Todos se la dan a él porque el soluciona casi todo. Allí Messi no puede. Ahora con Boateng. Segunda pelota que recupera Rakitić. Encaró hacia el medio. La vuelve a tocar con Dani Alves. Devuelve para Rakitić. Atrás para Piqué. De primera para Busquets. Juega para Rakitić, Rakitić para Messi. Messi se va a meter al area. Puede armar lío. ¡Se metió! ¡Golaaaaazo, por Dios! ¡Me levanto y me voy, no hay más nada para ver! ¡Damas y caballeros apagamos todo! ¡Qué se cierre la radio! ¡Qué se cierre la cadena! ¡Qué no haya más fútbol!" The audio can be heard at https://soundcloud.com/polanco-4/gol-barza-2-0-bayern (accessed March 8, 2018).

classified as descriptive. For the remaining commentary, approximately 27 percent, or an average of 251 sentences per game, were recorded as serious dramatic sentences, while the remaining 1 percent, or 14 sentences per game, were classified as humorous" (Bryant et al. 1977, p. 144).

Thus, while the majority of the sentences were descriptive, a significant percentage of the commentary (more than a quarter) was dramatic.

Real-time narrators can also tell retrospective stories relevant to the narrated event. Sports commentators might talk about past matches between the contesting teams, or the history between two particular players. These stories have a particular function: to increase the tension produced by the drama developing on the court. In fact, another study by Bryant showed that the enjoyment of a match increases substantially if the commentators portray the relationship between the opposing players as hostile (Bryant et al. 1982). "Classic" confrontations (for example, Real Madrid vs. Barcelona) are particularly appealing to audiences because of the long history of rivalry between the opposing teams (ibid. p. 109). But this does not detract from the fact that the real-time narrator is reacting to events without knowledge of what the outcome will be. These retrospective portions extend the duration of the story towards the past mainly to exploit the open-ended nature of the current confrontation. In an actual retrospective narration, the ending can influence the recounting of events.

There are different instances within video game culture where live commentators narrate what the spectator sees on the screen—just like in sports matches—such as E-sports broadcasts and *let's play* videos. Sports video games, on the other hand, feature simulated commentary. The commentary in series like FIFA or MADDEN NFL consists of audio snippets that are pre-recorded by professional commentators. An algorithm then stitches these fragments together as the player plays.

One of the first games to include commentary was NFL SPORTS TALK FOOTBALL '93 (Blue Sky Software 1992), for the Sega Mega Drive. The commentary in this game was robotic and repetitive, but quite the novelty for its time. Games like ROCK & ROLL RACING (Blizzard Entertainment 1993) ("Rip is about to blow!") or NBA JAM (Midway 1993) ("He's on fire!") included highly formulaic, sporadic commentary as well. The popularization of the CD-ROM as a console and PC-gaming format appears to have facilitated a drastic jump in the quality of video game commentary. Game series that previously featured no or very little commentary suddenly had far richer and better-quality commentary in their 1997 iterations (along with the new implementation of 3D engines)—for

example, FIFA 97 (EA Canada 1996), MADDEN NFL 97 (EA Tiburon 1996), or NHL 97 (EA Canada 1996).[7]

Before the release of the 2017 installment of the MADDEN NFL franchise (EA Tiburon 2016), part of the game's advertising campaign mentioned an overhaul of the commentary system with a new team of announcers and the ambition "to do something that had never been done in the commentary space before" (EA SPORTS 2016). A piece on Vice Sports of July 2016 asked hyperbolically: "Can Madden 17 save sports commentary in video games?" (Porter 2016). Reviews of the game have been largely positive,[8] but the critics' verdict concerning the new commentary appears to be somewhat mixed.[9] Nonetheless, while it can still be repetitive and at moments limited to one-liners, simulated commentary has certainly come a long way since its early days in cartridge consoles.

For the most part, real-time narration is constituted by a live chronicle of events that are out of the narrator's control. Whether a computer algorithm selecting pertinent audio samples from a library or a real-life person, the real-time narrator needs to react to the events happening on the field or court and report them while enhancing the drama.

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7   I hasten to add that the "CD-ROM revolution," as labeled by Tristan Donovan in his book REPLAY (2010, pp. 237-247), started much earlier than 1997. According to Donovan, Sony released the first CD music player in 1982 and the format caught the attention of game developers from early on. PC gaming made use of the CD-ROM in the early nineties with titles like THE 7TH GUEST (1993) or STAR WARS: REBEL ASSAULT (1993), which kindled the popularity of the PC as a gaming medium, Donovan argues. During this time, the main gaming consoles were the cartridge-based Sega Genesis and the Super NES (Panasonic's 3DO console already made use of the CD-ROM in 1993, but it could not compete against Sega's and Nintendo's popularity). By looking at the evolution of sport games, it would appear that until 1997 most of them were developed with the limitations of consoles in mind. It seems reasonable to infer that, once the Sony PlayStation and the Sega Saturn were released in the mid-nineties and popularized the CD-ROM as a console format, sports game developers could start exploiting its increased storage capacity, thus enhancing the graphics and sound in their titles.

8   The game has an average score of 83/100 on Metacritic, both for the PlayStation 4 and the Xbox One versions (Metacritic 2016).

9   For example, IGN's Dustin Toms (2016) reported being "not convinced," while Destructoid's Chris Carter praised it for being "vastly improved with strings of new dialogue that provide coherent and relevant thoughts" and added that "it's taken a step further with update patches that add in relevant happenings from week to week" (Carter 2016).

So far, I have shown that both the retrospective and the real-time narrator are present in video games, even though they tend not to mix. Still, on some rare occasions, they do, giving rise to what I call the hybrid narrator.[10]

THE HYBRID NARRATOR

Developers and scholars have previously scrutinized narration in video games (see for instance Crawford 2003, Jenkins 2004, Arsenault 2006, and Thon 2016), but there is a form of narrator that has not yet been explicitly addressed. The hybrid narrator, as I will hereafter call it, is an amalgamation of the real-time and the retrospective narrator. This voice knows and tells the game's story retrospectively from start to finish, while at the same time commenting in real time on the player's actions.

Games commonly tell stories with fixed beginnings and endings while leaving enough leeway for the player to make decisions that have no effect on the final outcome. Mario will always find Princess Peach at the end of SUPER MARIO BROS. Many decisions along the journey from A to B are up to the player, but the events that take place before A (the kidnapping of the princess) and after B (the princess finally being in the eighth castle) are outside of the player's jurisdiction. In Jenkin's (2005, p. 8) words, "The introduction needs to establish the character's goals or explain the basic conflict; the conclusion needs to show the successful completion of those goals or the final defeat of the antagonist." What happens in between can differ within a certain range of parameters that the player can influence in real time.

Because of this blending of time frames, games tend to lack a verbal narrator and, those that feature one, generally restrict its presence to non-gameplay sections such as cutscenes. Conversely, games with commentators usually do not feature retrospective narrators, since they emulate sports broadcasting and do not tell a pre-written story. The hybrid narrator works both ways: On the one hand, this figure possesses a retrospective aspect conceived by the designer as an indispensable part of the narrative. On the other hand, this narrator also features a real-time aspect that—while it is also pre-written and thus to some extent predictable—needs to be triggered by gameplay events to emerge and is not critical for the story to develop. The hybrid narrator is the embodiment of the hybrid

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10 The hybrid narrator discussed here should not be confused with the notion of hybrid narrative, which can be used to refer to the combination of different points of view or different writing styles in one text.

temporal nature of video games, yet it is rather the exception than the rule. In what follows, I will analyze three games that feature hybrid narrators: PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME, THE STANLEY PARABLE, and BASTION.

Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time

The hybrid narrator featured in PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME is not particularly well executed, which makes it an interesting place to start. In this game, the eponymous protagonist tells the story of how he partook in an invasion of a Maharaja palace led by his own father, king Sharaman. The game starts with a cutscene narrated in voice-over by the prince. Once the cutscene concludes, the player takes control of the character and plays through a section that introduces basic mechanics—like movement, jumping, climbing, and sword fighting. After the first few challenges are over, the prince resumes the narration during gameplay (always in voice-over; it is not the avatar on screen who is speaking). The prince's narration does not comment on what happens on screen, but explains his own motivations and provides context for the action. But, a few minutes into the game, something peculiar happens: The game pauses automatically and a menu opens with the text "Do you want to save?" displayed on the screen, to which the player needs to answer by clicking on "yes" or "no." At the same time, the prince's voice asks "Shall I continue my story from here the next time we're interrupted?"

Unless the player character dies during the (quite easy) tutorial section, this is the first hint that the narrator in PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME is not a typical retrospective narrator (compare Atkins 2007, pp. 247-248). With this question, the prince's voice trespasses from the realm of the narration into the realm of the mechanics. But notice the awkwardness of the question. Why would anyone ask that? If you are telling a story and are interrupted, you normally resume from where you left. If your interlocutor forgot important details of your tale, then you could recap those; but you wouldn't stop to ask if you should start from a particular point just in case you are interrupted *while* you are telling the story. Once the player is finished saving the game, the prince says: "Done. I'll start the story from here next time."

Another instance in which the narrator crosses the boundary between narrative and mechanics is when the player character dies. Whenever this happens, the narrating prince utters "No, no, no. That's not what happened. May I start again?" This case is perhaps even stranger than the previous one. The prince seems to imply he mistakenly told the listener that he died when he actually did not. These two cases (the save game menu and the comments when dying) are

particularly salient because of their awkward implementation and recurrence throughout the game.

Figure 2.18: PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME.

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME, though not without flaws, is an early and laudable effort to implement a hybrid narrator in a video game. One might consider that the prince's narration has been written with a somewhat amusing intent, but the game's overall dramatic tone does not quite support this decision.

The Stanley Parable

THE STANLEY PARABLE[11] makes use of the hybrid narrative voice with grace and wit, wryly underscoring the problems that can afflict the hybrid narrator. While PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME divides its focus between gameplay and storytelling, THE STANLEY PARABLE has a straightforward narrative intent. The player's role is limited to walking around an office building and occasionally in-

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11 THE STANLEY PARABLE was first released as a modification of HALF-LIFE 2 (Valve 2004) in 2011. In 2013 a standalone version was released with some changes, such as new narrative paths and improved graphics. This analysis is based on the standalone version.

teracting with buttons or doors while an omnipresent voice-over narrator tells "the story of a man named Stanley."

In the opening cutscene, the narrator introduces Stanley, a content office worker whose daily routine consists of pressing buttons on a keyboard by following prompts as they appear on a screen. "And then one day," the narrator states, "something very peculiar happened. Something that would forever change Stanley. Something he would never quite forget." After sitting at his desk for the good part of an hour, he had received no orders, nor had seen any coworkers. "Something was very clearly wrong," continues the narrator: "Shocked, frozen solid, Stanley found himself unable to move for the longest time. But as he came to his wits and regained his senses he got up from his desk and stepped out of his office."

At this point, the player gains control of Stanley from a first-person perspective. The player needs to move around the building and, as far as the narrative motivation goes, figure out why everyone has disappeared. As the player inspects the surroundings, the narrator provides information about Stanley's thoughts and a first objective: "Stanley decided to go to the meeting room. Perhaps he had simply missed a memo."

If the player tries to interact with the objects (computers, desk drawers, cabinets) in one of the first rooms, the narrator promptly reveals his hybrid nature[12]: "Stanley went around touching every little thing in the office, but it didn't make a single difference, nor did it advance the story in any way." Even if the player's actions trigger this remark, the game might seem to develop in a linear fashion at first, with few possibilities for interaction. The first minute or so consists of a series of corridors and rooms filled with jejune props such as cubicles, computers, and file drawers that do not react to the player's prompts—aside from computer screens that turn off when clicked on. This situation changes soon enough when the player walks into a room with two open doors on the opposite end: "When Stanley came to a set of two open doors, he entered the door on his left," declares the narrator (see figure 2.19).

If the player chooses to enter the door on the left, the narrator continues his tale undisturbed. Other forking paths appear on the way but, as long as the player follows instructions, the narrator maintains a retrospective point of view. If the player chooses to go right, however, the narrator starts to become uneasy: "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

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12 "The Stanley Parable Announcer Pack" for Dota 2 (Valve 2013) replaces the game's default announcer with THE STANLEY PARABLE'S narrator (Dota 2 Wiki 2017). Here he embraces the role of a straightforward commentator.

hallway leads directly to a dull common area with some chairs, coffee, and a soda vending machine. If the player lingers in this room, the narrator grows impatient: "Yes, really, really worth it being here in the room. A room so utterly captivating that even though all your coworkers have mysteriously vanished here you sit looking at these chairs and some paintings. Really worth it."

Figure 2.19: THE STANLEY PARABLE.

"He entered the door on his left."

When the player finally decides to exit the room, the narrator tries to send Stanley in the direction the story demands ("But at last he had enough of the amazing room and took the first door on his left to get back to business"). But the more the player ignores the narrator's directives, the more frustrated he grows. Soon he starts criticizing Stanley and even addressing him directly in the second person, imploring him to cooperate: "Look, Stanley, I think perhaps we've gotten off on the wrong foot here. I'm not your enemy. Really. I'm not. I realize that investing your trust in someone else can be difficult, but the fact is that the story has been about nothing but you all this time."

The narrator's frustration and frequent sarcasm are enhanced by his temperate British accent and correct diction, which complete a humorous arrangement that drives the player to search for the many possible ways in which the storyteller can be caused to derail. This branching structure can culminate in several

possible endings with different tones and subjects[13]: One reflects on free will, one on insanity, and another on art, to name a few. Above all, THE STANLEY PARABLE provides a facetious commentary on the nature of games and the tension between narrative and mechanics, between guided storytelling and player freedom.

Bastion

The final example, BASTION, does not seek to strike the humorous note of THE STANLEY PARABLE. Instead, it presents the earnest story of a city struck by a catastrophe, the Calamity, which killed most of its inhabitants. The player controls a character, referred to as "The Kid" by the narrator, from an isometric perspective. His task is at first to reach the titular bastion and reactivate a device in it by collecting the cores (magic crystals) that power it. The player later learns that this device, called the monument, has the power to turn back time. At the end of the game, the player can choose to fly away from the city and start anew somewhere else, or go back in time to try to prevent the Calamity.

Rucks, a character that The Kid meets in the bastion, narrates the game.[14] At the very start of the game, accompanying the image of The Kid resting among the floating ruins of what seems to be his home, Rucks says: "Proper stories are supposed to start at the beginning. Ain't so simple with this one." This observation, combined with the knowledge of the bastion's time-bending capabilities revealed later, suggests that this is not the first time that the Calamity has taken place and that The Kid has already used the bastion to go back in time at least once. Rucks seems to be telling the story with knowledge of this repetition.

Once the narrator finishes his brief introduction, The Kid lies asleep, motionless until the player presses a button. When this happens, the narrator comments: "He gets up." Here the narrator is providing a direct commentary on the action happening on screen as the player causes it. In contrast to THE STANLEY PARABLE and PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME, the narrator in BASTION tells the story in the present tense, which makes his role of commentator more evident. However, the game's narration is depicted as retrospective, disguising the com-

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13 According to THE STANLEY PARABLE Wiki there are 19 possible endings (The Stanley Parable Wiki 2018).

14 BASTION'S writer Greg Kasavin has written about his creative process in his blog. He calls the narrator in BASTION a real-time narrator, even though his function exceeds that of a typical commentator: "Its purpose is to deliver story and exposition, and to build atmosphere, investment, and immersion in close partnership with the gameplay" (Kasavin 2010).

mentary as part of the story. That is, the gameplay is portrayed as being caused by the verbal narration, although it is often the other way around (compare Thon 2016, p. 216). After all, Rucks states from the very beginning that he is telling a story—albeit not a "proper" one—and later provides further cues that he is telling the story from a point in the future.[15]

Figure 2.20: BASTION.

"Kid just rages for a while."

The narration is often triggered by unavoidable actions—such as waking up at the beginning, or finding the first weapon in the game, a hammer (to which the narrator says: "Finds his lifelong friend"). Still, other parts of the narration are activated by certain noncompulsory actions. After defeating the first enemy in the game, if the player stays in the area and starts smashing props with the hammer, this triggers the commentary "Kid just rages for a while" (figure 2.20), which would not be heard if the player proceeded to the next area directly after defeating the enemy. In addition, if The Kid falls to his death, Rucks can deny this happened ("And then he falls to his death. I'm just fooling!"), just like in PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME, or utter a passing remark ("Can't be too careful these days").

The narrator in BASTION also provides information about the main character's inner world and the game's mechanics, as in the previous examples. The

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15 After The Kid finds the first core to power the bastion's monument, for example, Rucks says: "I still remember the look in his face after that one."

phrase "Kid's worked up quite a thirst by now, so that fountain looks real inviting" realizes both functions, because it points the player towards a fountain in the game world that can be used to drink water and heal the character.

Rucks performs his hybrid role of commentator and storyteller, just like the other two described narrators, but this is made seamless through lines that never address the narratee directly. In THE SANDS OF TIME, the prince talks directly to an unknown listener when saying that he will continue to tell his story from the point where the game is saved, or acts confused every time the player character dies and says that he will start over because "that's not what happened." As argued above, this is highly unusual behavior for a storyteller. Additionally, it can lead players to think that the prince is breaking the fourth wall by addressing them, since only in the end players learn that the prince is telling the story to the Maharaja's daughter, Farah. For these reasons, the dissonance between story (past) and gameplay (present) becomes evident. BASTION does a much better job at concealing the tension between retrospective and real-time narration. THE STANLEY PARABLE, on the other hand, makes this disconnect conspicuous and exploits it to comedic effect.

FINDING A BALANCE

Juul once said that "it is impossible to influence something that has already happened," which means that "*you cannot have interactivity and narration at the same time*" (Juul 2001). But video games can grant players the capacity to affect some variables within a particular story, which can nonetheless still be a fixed sequence of events with a predetermined ending. In this sense, interactivity and narration do happen at the same time, and it is from this mixture that the hybrid narrator emerged.

Retrospective narration can usually provide a much more selective reconstruction of events and leave irrelevant information out. Real-time narration monitors the action as it happens and often comments on events that are not essential to the overall narrative ("Kid just rages for a while"). As Ryan points out, "the broadcast displays what the retrospective narrative eliminates: what does not fit into a game-story" (1993, pp. 141-142). In a retrospective narrative, the narrator can also condense actions in broader concepts. If a character prepares a meal, the retrospective narrator could just say "he cooked dinner." A real-time narrator, however, does not have that luxury and needs to either describe the cooking process step by step, spend that time providing additional information that might complement the narrative, or remain silent while the action unfolds.

The retrospective narrator can also adopt an omniscient perspective that is normally out of bounds for a real-time narrator. The hybrid narrator makes this whole range of options available, which developers could use at their discretion.

A final point that should be made concerns iteration, and specifically the Groundhog Day Effect. Repeating a game section or an action that prompts the narrator (falling from a ledge) can lead to the recurrence of the narrator's lines, which can risk a loss of immersion. Greg Kasavin, BASTION'S writer, made a clear point about this issue:

"[N]othing sucks the momentum out of the game's narrative like a repeated line. […] So we drew a line in the sand: No repeats in the game, not unless you replay the game from the start or restart a scenario from scratch (and even then we mix up the narration)" (Kasavin 2010).

To this end, "BASTION uses about three thousand predetermined 'pieces' of verbal narration, represented in spoken as well as written form, that are triggered by a variety of player actions" (Thon 2016, p. 215). Both PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME and THE STANLEY PARABLE deal with this issue in similar ways. In the former, the prince can utter one of several different lines when then the player character dies, while THE STANLEY PARABLE'S narrator does not start to tell the story all over again with every iteration, thus omitting lines that he has already delivered. While the reappearance of lines cannot be entirely avoided, these strategies help elude frequent repetition that might risk breaking the spell of immersion.

Surely enough, the hybrid narrator can lead to disruptive cases of ludonarrative dissonance. Yet, if implemented with care, it has the potential to deliver suitable narration by merging the retrospective and real-time points of view in one single voice, simultaneously addressing the narrative and interactive properties of the video game medium.

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Our interaction with video games is marked by iteration. This chapter has explored how we learn through repetition, and how that experience is enhanced by the capacity to reset gametime. Additionally, two further areas of friction between mechanics and storytelling were uncovered: The temporal paradox caused by the Groundhog Day Effect, and the difficulties of implementing verbal narrators.

Chapter three will treat the experience of time as analogous to traveling through a landscape. Understood as a landscape, time can be said to have a per-

spective. We can focus on what lies ahead of us (future), behind us (past), or immediately around us (present). We can also travel through the temporal landscape at different speeds. Some moments seem to last forever, and others are over before we know it. While gametime allows us to travel in two directions, our travels through the temporal landscape take place exclusively in one direction. The final chapter of this study will show that our relation to the temporal landscape holds a significant role when we play video games.