

Shared Realities, Solitary Actions

Media Languages as Agents of Formation, Reinforcement, and Change

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Abstract

Narratives in any medium, from orally transmitted myths to video games, can be powerful agents on the personal and on the societal level—as formative agents, agents of reinforcement, and agents of change. However, while individual books or films have had a huge impact both on the personal and the societal level, the impact of games still seems to be restricted to the personal level. “Shared Realities, Solitary Actions: Media Languages as Agents of Formation, Reinforcement, and Change” explores some of the conditions that help or hinder individual games to have a societal impact similar to narratives in other media, from the external perspective of media change and the internal perspective of player action and agency.

INTRODUCTION

Any narrative—a story, a book, a movie, a video game—can be an agent of self-formation for personal development. Involved, prominently, are personal spiritual journeys and rites of passage, in other words, myth. Myths are vital for self-formation. Being part of the human condition, myths safeguard the past, explain the present, and affirm the future.

Also, every narrative can be an agent of reinforcement: reinforcing personal beliefs about doing the right thing or being on the right side, including the right side of history. Naturally, this also encompasses norm-reinforcement.

Finally, every narrative can be an agent of change, with changes in beliefs and attitudes. These changes, of course, do not necessarily have to be good.

In this context, we usually think of these changes as changes on a personal level, not on a societal level. There is a component of societal change in journey structures, e.g., when the traveler in the hero's journey returns home, somewhat reluctantly, with the boon. Nevertheless, mythical journey structures are essentially cyclical, notwithstanding later injections of eschatological concepts and, even later, the invention of the future as a non-eschatological place different from the present.¹ Thus, our rite of passage templates provide us with shared realities, but in the absence of the modern conception of the future, mastering these realities remains solitary and mostly directed at ourselves.

From *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to POKÉMON GO

The question is: can a narrative trigger social action as well? Would it be possible, for example, to create a video game that rallies people to fight against fracking, against voter suppression, even galvanize people, perhaps, to overthrow the political order to avert a climate catastrophe?

While this might not appear too plausible in the present public discourse, narratives exist that did have a comparable impact. From the Western cultural sphere, a famous book and an infamous movie might serve as examples.

Uncle Tom's Cabin, published in 1852,² became, except for the Bible, the best-selling book in America in the nineteenth century. It fueled the abolitionist cause and drove people to become active in the abolitionist movement. Among these people were also high-ranking military personnel, and the book is said to have been among the factors that prepared the ground for the Civil War.

The second example, *THE BIRTH OF A NATION*,³ is widely considered the most racist movie ever made in the United States. It was released in 1915, and it was

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- 1 In Luhmann, Niklas: "The Future Cannot Begin: Temporal Structures in Modern Society," in: *Social Research* Vol.43 no.1, 1976. 130–52, Luhmann dates the beginning of the modern conception of the future, i.e., a future that is neither cyclical along turning points nor a completely different order of the world or time itself, as late as the seventeenth or even late eighteenth century.
 - 2 Stowe, Harriet Beecher: *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly*, Boston: John P. Jewett 1852.
 - 3 *THE BIRTH OF A NATION* (USA 1915, D: D. W. Griffith).

the highest-grossing movie until *GONE WITH THE WIND* in 1939,⁴ about which a lot could be said in this context too. *THE BIRTH OF A NATION* became a major contributor to racial segregation doctrine; it was an acknowledged inspiration for the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan; and it was the strongest historical influence on how people viewed the Reconstruction era, and how they acted and voted on these views.

Now what about video games? The mobile augmented reality game *POKÉMON GO*, released in 2016,⁵ certainly had a visible societal impact, even with a topical touch: players go out and capture creatures to enslave and train them for gladiatorial combat. This example might sound somewhat facetious, which it is. But it is not entirely facetious. *POKÉMON GO* did facilitate social action—or at least mass-socializing with strangers in public spaces.

A bar, admittedly, that is not very high. Could games do better than merely facilitate socializing with strangers? Could games even impact players to the point of social action? There are aspects that make this less likely or more likely for video games than for other media. But before these aspects can be explored, an important postulate has to be taken care of first.

THE LANGUAGE OF GAMES IS THE LANGUAGE OF ACTION

It can be postulated that the language of games is the language of action. Numerous metaphors revolve around this, like “verbs” for gameplay mechanics. This language of games is complemented by the language of game design—which, as C. Thi Nguyen put it in *Games: Agency as Art*⁶—is the language of agency.

Despite action and agency, however, games don’t strike us as the most likely or most suitable medium to get people out onto the streets and help bring about societal change. We do not expect to hear a player say, for example, “I played *WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER*⁷ and now I want to fight against voter suppression!”

Then again, a much more sinister version of that is exactly what certain people think is the case, or pretend to think: that games do send people out onto the streets for a very special kind of social action. This action, as they see it, is mass murder,

4 *GONE WITH THE WIND* (USA 1939, D: Victor Fleming).

5 *POKÉMON GO* (USA 2016, O: Niantic).

6 Nguyen, C. Thi: *Games: Agency as Art*, Oxford: Oxford UP 2020.

7 *WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER* (USA 2014, O: MachineGames—Bethesda Softworks).

and antisocial behavior in general that might well bring about the breakdown of Western civilization if left uncensored.

How valid is this? How did it come about? While first-person shooter games are often at the center of these controversies, the dominant driver for these sentiments is not game content, but video games as a medium. For example, we can follow the controversy around DOOM⁸ along the documentary footage collected by Tim Rogers in “Action Button Reviews DOOM.”⁹ In DOOM, released in 1993, the player takes the role of a nameless space marine who fights against all kinds of demons and monsters on the moons of Mars and in Hell with an arsenal of real and futuristic weapons. In 1999, after the Columbine High School massacre, where two mass murderers wearing black, who also liked to depict themselves in trench coats, killed fifteen people and injured twenty-four more with carbines, shotguns, pistols, knives, and explosives, Senator Joe Lieberman claimed that “the school gunmen murderously mimicked DOOM, down to the choice of weapons and apparel.”¹⁰

This claim, as stunning as it is, actually represents the level of accuracy one has come to expect around these kinds of accusations. Along subsequent mass murders, even more bizarre and irrational assertions filled the ether. Games were blamed that the shooter hadn’t been interested in or played at all, or had been played by one of the victims. In another case, the mass murderer’s favorite game was DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION.¹¹ The question is, where did Senator Lieberman and other people and politicians get these notions? They can easily be traced to established media and the circle of “experts” to whom TV formats and newspapers incessantly gave prominence. What was actually going on under the hood was a media war.

INTERPRETATIVE DOMINANCE

What all this is primarily about is interpretative dominance or, more catchily, *Deutungshoheit* in German. But this demands an immediate caveat. The dynamics of interpretative dominance are often explored ahistorically, as if they were largely or even solely directed against video games, which occasionally leads to

8 DOOM (USA 1993, O: id Software).

9 Rogers, Tim: “Action Button Reviews DOOM,” YouTube, Sept.13, 2020, <https://youtu.be/38zduHkwGcc>

10 Ibid.

11 DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION (JPN 1998, O: Konami).

arguments perilously close to game exceptionalism. The media war against video games, instead, hails from a hallowed tradition. Whenever there was a new kid on the block to capture people's attention and imagination, and could potentially become a conduit for social action, established media did not take well to it.

In the beginning, people used language, aka speech. Speeches are famous for rousing people to social action, beginning with Pericles, as related by Thucydides, and other depressing examples.¹² Then, along came the first competitor: writing, or text.

Contrary to expectations, writing was by no means uncontroversial. Socrates, in Plato's *Phaedrus*,¹³ asserts that writing leads to laziness and forgetfulness, and that future generations—that is us—will only appear being properly taught and wise but not actually be so. What is at stake here, as the French philosopher Jacques Derrida astutely observed, is that Socrates perceives writing as a threat to the patriarchal immediacy and control of the spoken word.¹⁴

A few hundred years later in England, one of several historical showdowns between the spoken and the written word played out. There, the early church championed the written word against the massive resistance of English warlords, more popularly known as nobles and kings, whose entire legitimacy was based on orally transmitted genealogical myths. One way the church tried to break their power was by establishing writing, or books, as the only legitimate source of authority. Which, so to speak, finally handed patriarchal immediacy a remote control.

Another new kid on the block was film. Again, there's the notion that speech and text and film got along fine. And, once again, that was not the case at all. Film was decried as an agent of demoralization and corruption, from providing "education for crime" to being a "training ground for prostitution and robbery"—original quotes from the time, as documented by Trine Syvertsen in *Media Resistance*.¹⁵ Which, in turn, triggered the Motion Picture Production Code, or Hays Code, with its brutal censorship that was to remain in effect for a whole generation. The same, as a final example, happened to comics in the mid-1950s, almost exactly twenty years later. Here, too, a moral panic was created with distorted and even

12 Thucydides: *The Peloponnesian War*, Hammond, Martin (trans.), Oxford: Oxford UP 2009.

13 Plato: *Phaedrus*, Hackforth, R. (trans.), Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1972.

14 Derrida, Jacques: *Of Grammatology*, Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (trans.), Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP 1976.

15 Syvertsen, Trine: *Media Resistance: Protest, Dislike, Abstention*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2017, pp. 21-23, here p. 21.

manufactured evidence, as attested to by Carol L. Tilley's findings in "Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications That Helped Condemn Comics."¹⁶ Similar to film, the media pressure and the ensuing political pressure led to the establishment of the Comics Code Authority as an instrument of self-censorship. The impact all this had on the development of comics as an artistic mainstream medium, on publishers, and on the personal lives and careers of comic writers and artists—examined, among others, by David Hajdu in *The Ten-Cent Plague* and fictionalized by Michael Chabon in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*¹⁷—lasted for two generations from 1954 until the early 2000s.

To return to DOOM and video games in general, it was exactly this interpretative dominance that had been at stake in the 2000s. Supported by a lot of vested interests from retaining eyeballs to averting gun laws, established media sought to inflict the same detrimental conditions on video games that had been inflicted on other media before. Indeed, that this attack on a new medium did not succeed, after all, is a historical exception of note.

Now that video games belong to the club of established mass media and are no longer singularly responsible for all of society's ills, questions can be explored as to the actual potential of video games to lead players from the language of action to social action.

ON FROGS AND FIRING SQUADS

To shine a light on player action and player agency that is not too rosily-tinted, it might be best to start with some examples of how games themselves can reflect critically on player action and agency in clever ways, from two rather simple examples, FROG BLENDER and EXECUTION, to more complex examples like IRON SUNSET and MOIRAI.¹⁸

16 Tilley, Carol L.: "Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications That Helped Condemn Comics," *Information & Culture* vol.47 no.4 (2012), pp. 383–413.

17 Hajdu, David: *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America*, London: Picador 2009; Chabon, Michael: *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, New York: Random House 2000.

18 THE JÓESTERIZER 10 SPEED FROG BLENDER 2000 (USA 2000, O: Joe Cartoon); EXECUTION (USA 2008, O: YoYo Games); IRON SUNSET (USA 2015, O: Edu Verzinsky, Jon Romero, Ragde Games, and sergeeo); MOIRAI (USA 2013, O: Chris Johnson, Brad Barrett, and John Oestmann).

In Joe Cartoon's game FROG BLENDER or, more accurately, THE JOESTERIZER 10 SPEED FROG BLENDER 2000, a cartoon frog in a blender taunts the player with a colorful repertoire of insults ("You ain't got the balls. No balls.") to crank up the blade to higher speeds. From speed level 7 on, however, the frog begins to plead with the player ("Ok joke's over, turn it off.") to stop. Probably not many players on this planet did set the mixer back to zero and stopped playing; the game wasn't even programmed to react properly to that. (But there was a follow-up game involving a gerbil and piranhas that did.) In the experimental game EXECUTION, the player sees a wall, a prisoner bound to a stake in front of the wall, and the cross-hairs of their gun in first-person view. The player can look around and shoot at anything, but that is all they can do. If the player shoots the prisoner, the prisoner dies and the game is over. If the player reloads the game, the prisoner is still dead, and there is nothing the player can do about it (because the game file rewrote itself). The point made by these two games, with regard to action and agency, should be obvious.

IRON SUNSET and MOIRAI, both secret multiplayer games, reflect on player action even more poignantly. In IRON SUNSET, the player must decide which of three prisoners to shoot as a traitor. The prisoners defend themselves with pop-up dialogue lines; some pleading, some cryptic, and everything in between. After shooting one of the prisoners, the player is informed that it's their turn now to being accused as a traitor, with a prompt to type in a message to save their life. Later, outside the game, the player receives an email message that a relative of theirs was foully murdered at a certain date and time, together with the number of seconds it took the assassin to shoot. In MOIRAI, the player looks for a missing woman in a cave near a village, where they encounter a farmer with a blood-stained knife. The player asks the farmer three questions, and when the farmer has answered these questions, the player can either kill him or let him pass. When the player leaves the cave after explorations and complications and a moral choice regarding the life of the missing woman, they are confronted by another person who asks the same three questions the player had asked before, with prompts to type in their own answers.

Games like FROG BLENDER, EXECUTION, IRON SUNSET, and MOIRAI show how games themselves can be critical of the language of action and the language of agency in interesting ways, and of an all-too-prevalent "cult of player agency" in general, while also showing their potential.

THE ETHICAL-MECHANICAL COMPLEX

This critical perspective leads to what will be designated as the “ethical-mechanical complex.” Two of its aspects make it less likely that games trigger social action at any scale, while a third aspect might make it more likely. The first two aspects are people and purpose or, more precisely, non-player characters and the goal of the game. The third aspect is fiction or, more precisely, fiction’s involvement in Kant’s categorical imperative.

The first aspect, people/NPCs, comes with a very particular flavor in games, but can be observed in all other media as well. In John Barth’s novel *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*, a postmodern retelling of Sinbad’s travels that constantly reflects on itself and its own writing process, the narrator introduces a new chapter like this: “[Sinbad] makes it to shore, as always, this time with a handful of others, whose next job in his story is to die and leave him the sole survivor.”¹⁹ In games, just as in other media, the author or creator or designer sets these “others” up. But in games, it’s regularly the player who actually kills them off.

The argument here is not that clicking on mouse or controller buttons equals shooting, or that pixels are people. What is at stake here is the logic of player action and agency. There was a contest once on Twitter, initiated by video producer and streamer Jess aka @VoidBurger, to “unnecessarily humanize the enemy in video games.” This contest went into interesting corners in that regard. Three examples of many, by @wooper, @Waffleman_, and @Ouijae, respectively: “Fworg just got health insurance and can finally afford therapy for his emotional issues.” “The soldiers in this unit often donate significant portions of their paychecks to a local home for battered women.” “__ was conscripted at the age of 18, he’s been at war for 5 years. He wants to go home to his boyfriend and adopt a child.”²⁰

Killing everything that moves has a long tradition in video games. In lockstep with advances in technology, the targets have become more and more realistic, but player action has become more realistic too. In *THE LAST OF US*,²¹ for example, killing NPCs is extremely visceral, and the game leaves the player no choice when

19 Barth, John: *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*, New York: Little, Brown, and Company 1991, here p.11.

20 Jess aka @VoidBurger: “Molydeux-style idea I had: Have a manual with enemy descriptions that don’t help you and unnecessarily humanize the enemy,” <https://twitter.com/VoidBurger/status/321260177326239744>

21 *THE LAST OF US* (USA 2013, O: Naughty Dog—Sony Computer Entertainment).

it comes to inflicting wholesale slaughter. Many players—even Neil Druckman, the lead writer, acknowledged this—stopped playing, particularly toward the ending, because they couldn’t do what the game told them to do.²²

The point to make here is that the player must speak the language of action, but the game does not necessarily grant the player the language of agency. More often than not, it is action, or mechanics, all the way down, the way it has been since players stomped on turtles in MARIO games.²³

This leads to the first hypothesis about why it is harder for games than for books or movies to motivate people to participate in societal action and social change, even though games create shared realities that are much more tangible and visceral than works in other media: that games are overdetermined in terms of action. Every challenge within a game, on top of its narrative motivators, must be solved with a certain set of actions aka mechanics that define the gameplay loop and demand to be used.

This overdetermination works both in the familiar sense, i.e., that there are more causes present than are necessary to cause a certain effect, and in the psychoanalytical sense of a surplus of potency that might be generated by these dynamics. Overdetermination can backfire, however, as can be observed even in contexts as mundane as promotional pricing: if any one cause falls away, a disproportionate decline in motivation can follow, which is then measurably below what it would have been if it had been driven by one cause alone in the first place.

The second aspect, purpose/goal of the game, is best introduced with some game examples. In MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF MORDOR,²⁴ the player battles Sauron’s minions for fifty hours at least, prominently through mind-enslaving orcs who are persistent NPCs to boot, thanks to the game’s Nemesis system.²⁵ But anyway: by the end of the game, all that notwithstanding, the player has made Middle-Earth a safer place. A perhaps more joyful example is DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS.²⁶ Again, after 50–100 hours of gameplay, the player has changed the world, freed the slaves, saved the kingdom, and beat the game. And they worked hard for that, didn’t they! Finally, as a third and contemporary example, the player can

22 “The AIAS Game Maker’s Notebook: Neil Druckman,” Podcast, December 20, 2017.

23 In fact, ever since the inaugural game, MARIO BROS. (JP 1983, O: Nintendo).

24 MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF MORDOR (USA 2014, O: Monolith Productions—Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment).

25 All that happens after the player character has been sufficiently motivated by way of the “Women in Refrigerators” trope, i.e., by watching their player character’s wife and family being sacrificed to Sauron.

26 DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS (USA 2009, O: BioWare—Electronic Arts).

retake the Capitol in TOM CLANCY'S THE DIVISION 2²⁷ and free America from an authoritarian rogue government. Yay! But, according to Ubisoft, it is not political—an assertion lavishly reported on and ridiculed by, e.g., Charlie Hall, Rosh Kelly, or Zack Zwiezen in *Polygon*, *Wired*, and *Kotaku*, respectively.²⁸

This leads to the second hypothesis, that the language of action is not only overdetermined in games, but perpetually at risk of being “always already” absorbed by the medium. Games offer shared realities, but player actions remain safely and non-threateningly contained as solitary actions within the game world. So much so that all the major studios and publishers can play the “hey, it’s not political!” card with a straight face, up to and including for games like CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE.²⁹ And the player? Will they go out and join a cause, right after they invested hundreds of hours to save the universe?

LITTLE FICTIONS AND THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

The third and last aspect is fiction in its relation to ethics. In *The Ethics of Reading*, J. Hillis Miller discusses Kant’s categorical imperative, and how one can possibly test, or know, whether a maxim that underlies a particular action would qualify as a universal rule. According to Miller, Kant already gave an answer to this, inadvertently, through his “as if” in the law of nature formulation—“Act as if the maxims of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature”—and his subsequent examples that Miller calls “miniature novels” or “little fictions.”³⁰ In other words, narrative acts are the necessary and perhaps only bridge between the universal law on the one hand and life’s practice on the other.

27 TOM CLANCY'S THE DIVISION 2 (USA 2019, O: Massive Entertainment—Ubisoft).

28 Hall, Charlie: “Tom Clancy’s *The Division 2* ‘Is Not Making Any Political Statements’: A Game About the Next Civil War Refuses to Take a Side,” *Kotaku*, June 12, 2018, <https://www.polygon.com/e3/2018/6/12/17451688/the-division-2-is-not-making-any-political-statements>; Kelly, Rosh: “*The Division 2*’s Refusal to Engage with Politics Makes It Hard to Enjoy,” *Wired*, March 16, 2019, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/the-division-2-review>; Zwiezen, Zack: “Ubisoft Insists Latest Game, [INSERT NAME], Isn’t Political,” *Kotaku* May 28, 2021 (updated May 31, 2021) <https://kotaku.com/ubisoft-insists-latest-game-insert-name-isn-t-polit-1846995146>

29 CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE (US 2019, O: Infinity Ward—Activision).

30 Miller, J. Hillis: *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin*, New York: Columbia UP 1987, here p.28.

And that is the place where games can shine. Because the player can play out these narratives, cross these bridges, and test if particular actions are fit to become universal law. Or, in slightly less grandiose terms, experience the consequences of their actions in worlds where these actions, qua mechanics, are set up as universal laws.

THE FUTURE

The question or challenge is whether this third aspect can overcome the first two, overdetermination and absorption, or even reconcile all three, to unlock video games' potential to facilitate action beyond purely personal experiences of self-formation, reinforcement, and change. It seems possible: by way of wider, more interesting palettes of game mechanics; goals that engage in the world's burning challenges; player action complemented by the language of agency; and narratives that invite us to test our strategies and tell us where these strategies might lead. A kind of games we should create and experiment with and advance in the future—alongside many other kinds of games that are equally important and enjoyable in different ways—to become agents of change not only on the personal level, but on the societal level as well.

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