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### THE FUTURE, THE CRISIS, AND THE FUTURE OF *REPLAY STORY*

The article explores the notion of *replay story* by Janet Murray. *Replay story* – a game telling a story through choices and allowing the player to access all of their outcomes – was supposed to be a step in the process of games becoming the most important narrative medium of a new era. Soon after that, the reasonable critique emerged: not every story can, and should, be told through a *replay story*. Some, mostly tragic ones, can even be highly controversial if told in such form. However, new ways of storytelling through replay have emerged in recent years: New Game +, multiple routes that influence one another, and games that are conscious of previous playthroughs. Three years ago, Ian Bogost stated that the possibilities of development of narrative games had already been played out, and yet, there still is a chance that *replay story* can once again be considered a keystone in the evolution of games.

Keywords: replay story, replayability, replay value, tellability, game studies, digital games, video games

#### PREMISE

This article explores the notion of *replay story*. First, it focuses on expectations towards *replay story*, its quickly discovered shortcomings, and the ways games limited the possibility of replay or avoided it altogether in order to deal with serious topics. Then, it discusses new ideas for creative use of replay in digital games. Finally, it touches on the relationship between the replayability of narrative games and the tellability of their stories.

#### THE PLEASURE AND CONTROVERSY OF REPLAY

Early game studies had high hopes for replay. Janet Murray introduced the term *replay story* while describing the possibility of replay as one of the most important narrative capacities

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of games. She wrote that replay gives players endless access to “the ‘pullulating’ moment, as Borges called it, in which all the quantum possibilities of the world are present” and so they are not only able to choose their path in an interactive story but experience all the possible paths (Murray, 2004).

In fact, control over the narrative is just one benefit of replay. There are more reasons to replay a game. Lucian Smith proposes four: mastery, experience, completion, and impact. Replaying for mastery is based on the will to be the best – or just better – at the game; for completion – to reach the ending, or different endings or access all of the game’s content; for impact – to achieve control over the game and be able to change its world; and for experience – for the feelings that a particular game evokes: pleasure, satisfaction, pride, immersion, safety, grief, nostalgia, and other (Smith, as cited in Krall and Menzies, 2012, pp. 461–462). Joseph Krall and Tim Menzies added two more reasons for replaying a game to this list: challenge and social reasons. Replaying for challenge is about re-experiencing the thrill of the obstacles in the game; replaying for social reasons is connected to interacting with other people in the game or interacting with others while participating in game-related activities (watching others play, streaming, etc.) (Krall and Menzies, 2012, pp. 461–462).

It seems that these six reasons for replay boil down to just three. First, there is re-experiencing the text (which is not specific to games). Then there are social reasons. Finally, everything else discussed by Smith, Krall, and Menzies. Because what else is the excitement of overcoming obstacles if not being happy about mastering the game, which then is a way to control the game, have an influence over it, and access all of its content? The core here is control (over the gameworld, over time, over the plot) – the rest are the attempts to achieve this control and the results of exercising it.

Noël Carroll in *The Philosophy of Mass Art* discusses claims that receivers of mass art are passive. One such position is that of Clement Greenberg, presented in the essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.” Greenberg perceives mass art as passively received, as it does not challenge the audience and requires neither interpretation nor reflection (Greenberg, as paraphrased in Carroll, 2011, pp. 42–43). Carroll disagrees, claiming that all kinds of art require some sort of effort to be processed, and that this effort does not necessarily need to be connected with the difficulty of the form (Carroll, 2011, pp. 44–56). Among many examples of mass art that require the activity of the audience, he brings up video games and karaoke (Carroll, 2011, pp. 52–53). Indeed, video games require players’ activity. However, this activity is different from interpretative efforts; it requires a different set of skills (agility, reflexes, decision-making, etc.) and is participatory rather than reflective.

Robin George Collinwood describes mass art as repetitive, in the sense that new texts use the same means that older ones have used to evoke the same responses in a calculated way (as paraphrased in Carroll, 2011, pp. 64). Games can be discussed in accordance with this claim in two ways: on one hand, new games repeat what older ones have established, while on the other, in-game repetitions bring the player the same sense of familiarity and safety as staying within a well-known genre. This narrative safety, combined with participatory activity that may end in controlling the game, can give players what receivers of highbrow art receive from its texts: the satisfaction of moving through its text without feeling lost; a sense of agency (in highbrow art coming from a successful act of interpretation, in games

from overcoming a challenge); and the level of novelty appropriate to the audience depending on their experience, mood, or needs. In this sense, games truly can be what Greenberg calls *kitsch, ersatz culture* – means of replacing highbrow art for those who cannot access it.

Clement Greenberg's views, as Carroll points out, were a basis of criticism towards almost every new mass medium arising in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Carroll, 2011, pp. 45). Games can fit perfectly into Greenberg's and Collinwood's criticism of mass media (the latter criticized not mass media, but a corresponding phenomenon of *entertainment art*). However, there is no reason for assuming that the participatory effort required in games excludes interpretative effort. To the contrary, the means of participation can be creatively used to create meaning, which I will further discuss in the last section of this text.

Janet Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* described – and partially predicted – the narrative capacities of digital games (Murray, 1997). However, the presence of *Hamlet* in the title suggests the capacity of games to touch upon tragedy, and that one is still under discussion. Gonzalo Frasca, while commenting on the theoretical possibility of designing a game about the Holocaust, claimed that “there is no room [...] for fate and tragedy” in digital games (Frasca, 2000). It is important to clarify what Frasca means by tragedy: his definition does not match with Aristotle's understanding of tragedy as a mimetic representation of events of a certain magnitude, encouraging sympathy and empathy and inviting the audience to process their own sadness or fear through processing the emotions of characters (Arystoteles, 1887, pp. 10–11). Frasca does not discuss fictional tragedies, but real tragic events; however, he relies on Aristotle in the sense that he perceives the capacity of games to evoke tragedy as dependent on their ability to express the unavoidability of fate. “There is no room [...] for fate,” he states – because the events in *replay story* can always be changed – and therefore no room for tragedy, either.

It has been widely discussed whether games can successfully touch on tragic topics. There is definitely little room for games about the most traumatic limit situations (*grenzsituation*, as understood by Karl Jaspers, as paraphrased in Mundt, 2014, pp. 169–171), such as the theoretical Holocaust games brought up by Frasca. The reason for that is not the supposed low status of the medium<sup>1</sup> but its mechanics – mostly means of participation and replay, and the control they grant to the player.

While participating in a Holocaust game the player would have to assume a certain perspective. And even assuming the perspective of somebody else than a perpetrator bears significant problems. The way games reward performance would result in one of two scenarios: The game would either punish the failing player with a vision of unspeakable suffering, which would not only be a wrong way to treat them, but also a very wrong way to treat the actual victims, ridiculing them and exploiting their suffering for the means of entertainment. Or the game would reward a winning player with a chance to change the characters' fate. In this case, the events of the Holocaust would become modal – changeable; this modality would not only violate the status of a testimony, as Giorgio Agamben understands it (Agamben, 2008, pp. 146–148), but also suggest that the Holocaust could somehow be *won*.

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<sup>1</sup> Such narratives were successfully featured in many new media – e.g., the graphic novel *Maus* – and in lowbrow fiction – e.g. stalg fiction.

The most controversial aspect of employing limit situations such as the Holocaust in digital games, however, seems to be the pleasure to be derived from replaying. It is not, unlike in other media, the pleasure of knowing or experiencing, even as a voyeur. The satisfaction of replay comes from taking over control, mastering the game, and exercising power. Even if the perspective assumed in the game is that of the victims, the pleasure derived from playing comes dramatically close to the pleasure of the perpetrators. The relationship between the player and a Holocaust game, whatever the perspective assumed, mimics the oppression and replays the powerlessness, humiliation, and dehumanization of the victims.

Taking out the possibility of replaying the game is one solution to this problem allowing games – but not *replay stories* – to touch on tragic events. This was proposed by Gonzalo Frasca, who invented OSGON – “one-session games of narration” (Frasca, 1998). OSGON are intended to be impossible to replay, and so they can feature both fate and tragic events, and while they are still ergodic, modal, and games, they are not *replay stories*. An important example of OSGON is *One Chance*, a game from 2010 by Dan Moynihan which employed perma-permadeath. It gave the players one chance to save the world and then stopped them from replaying, leaving them with the ending they arrived at through a series of random choices with unpredictable effects – most probably a tragic ending. OSGON are supposed to be impossible to replay (and are sometimes successful in that). And so a medium “characterized by multiplicity and repetition” (Mukherjee, 2008) develops texts that cannot be re-accessed.<sup>2</sup>

Un-repeatable experiences, however, were not the only answer to the controversy of limit situations in games. Gonzalo Frasca himself designed *September 12th*, a broken serious game that used its mechanics to mirror a circle of violence. The game can be replayed but cannot be won – and it is successful in commenting on its topic in an appropriate yet moving way. As it turns out, the possibility to successfully touch on serious topics does not only rely on limiting the possibility of replay. It might be done by changing the role of replay and taking some amount of power granted by it away from the player.

## REPLAY REVISITED

*My Memory of Us* and *This War of Mine* are two examples of games that manage to use limit situations as their topic and allow replay.<sup>3</sup> The world of *My Memory of Us* is based on German-occupied Poland; it focuses particularly on imprisoning Jews in ghettos. The presentation of the topic, however, is highly metaphorical: it is a story of two children, friends, who try to maintain their friendship in a fictional, dream-like city captured by an army of robots in Nazi-like uniforms. As Aleksandra Mochocka noticed, one of the important ways in which *My Memory of Us* references World War II is through references to other texts about

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<sup>2</sup> It seems that games cannot escape repetition even if they are impossible to repeat. *One Chance* is inspired by *Everyday the same dream* and features a few days which resemble one another.

<sup>3</sup> Games that use the war as a circumstance to allow the player to be strong, skillful, or heroic, and do not really aim at expressing the suffering of the victims, are not the subject of this analysis.

war, such as graphic design reminding the audience of *Schindler's List*, or particular scenes and visuals referencing Polish movies about the occupation (Mochocka, 2019). The use of children as main characters makes the game closer to *La vita è bella* or *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*: the war is seen through the eyes of an innocent, unreliable narrator. Presenting the events as memories and not current events also enhances the surreal, dream-like quality of the game. The experience of war is addressed indirectly; the detachment and symbolism make it easier – and more palatable – to speak of the tragic events.

The quests are also adjusted to the difficult topic. The tasks of the children are not aimed at winning or losing the war – they are more about keeping in touch, which associates the game with the war, but keeps it more focused on noticing and dealing with suffering than on changing history. All this is quite enough to allow *My Memory of Us* to properly speak of the tragedy of war. There is no need to limit the possibility of replay, and so the game employs the mechanic of save and gives players the chance to repeat chosen chapters.

In *This War of Mine* the player controls a group of civilians that try to survive the siege of Pogoren, a fictional city based on Sarajevo. The game can be replayed – and has a high replay value – but there is a limitation to it. There is no save option, so after the death of a character the player either has to go on with other characters, facing the irretrievable and stirring loss<sup>4</sup>, or play from the beginning, risking that the random events would not be the same. Playing from the beginning does not make facing the failure much easier; it does not grant redemption, erase the previously achieved ending, or allow the player to patch things up.

The limitation of the possibility of replay, however, is not the only thing that makes the way *This War of Mine* addresses the experience of war right. Another important element of it is the goal of the game – it is not to win the war, but to address and deal with the suffering inflicted through it. Winning is possible through surviving the siege, but it is a bitter triumph as characters are still deeply affected by the war. Doing more than surviving, such as getting more supplies through robbing or killing others, is not rewarded, aside from the reward of knowing what would happen (and sometimes seeing new objects and places). It is impossible to gain a lot of control in the game, and so the position of the player does not come close to the position of a perpetrator. It is mechanically impossible to cross the boundaries of treating the characters with respect.

11 bit studios, the creators of *This War of Mine*, were in fact so successful in designing the mechanics that would prohibit players from humiliating characters – and the people and suffering they refer to – that they were able to release an expansion pack, *The Little Ones*, that added children to the game. This is rarely done in games in which characters can be killed, wounded, die of sickness, or starve, as these things happening to children – more powerless than other characters – would immediately set the players in the position of a perpetrator. Including children is then yet further proof of the tactfulness with which *This War of Mine* manages to deal with a limit situation of experiencing a war.

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<sup>4</sup> The characters in the game are fully fleshed out: they have backstories, personalities, and relationships. Their death is too easy and surprisingly permanent, but not impersonal either. When they die, the body remains in the place where they died. Other characters can recognize it.

## STORYTELLING THROUGH REPLAY

*My Memory of Us* and *This War of Mine* prove that replay can be used in games about difficult topics as well, if it is done skillfully. Many more modern games employ replay in creative ways. They are not classic *replay stories*, as they move away from the focus on the choice – *the pullulating moment* – and its possible outcomes and focus on the development of the world through time and acts of playing.

Janet Murray compares digital *replay stories* to film narratives like *Run, Lola, Run* and *Groundhog Day* (Murray, 2004). Such stories involving a character who is given endless access to the same moments in time and a task to discover how to achieve the best possible ending – stories using sequential repetition – are just one type of narrative employing repetition. Another type could be disorder repetition, when the repeated events do not happen because of some higher force or special circumstance allowing the characters to disregard time, but because of some sort of disturbance in how the world, or a character's mind, works. This sort of repetition is harder to use to gain control over the world, because it plays out in a more unreliable manner, and is more like an obstacle itself rather than a way to overcome obstacles. A film example of disorder repetition is *The Haunting of Bly Manor* series.

*One Hour One Life*, a multiplayer game created by Jason Rohrer, uses replay in a meaningful way. Every player enters the world of the game for just one hour at a time; during this hour a whole life of a character passes from infancy to old age, if they survive until the end and die of natural causes. Players are born to their mothers – other players – and they have children, too. Everything they build in the game stays in it, so the next generations can work on further civilizational growth. Jason Rohrer is a god-like figure, still managing the game and adding new things so the development of its world can resemble the evolution of human cultures. Every life can be accessed just once, but players can play as many times as they wish. Replay, then, is not just a mechanic; it is a literary device – multiple acts of play are a metaphorical presentation of multiple human lives and the way they change the world.

The possibility of replaying the game can be included in the plot on many levels. The plot of *Moirai*, an online game, when it was still accessible, relied on the decisions of the previous player. They had to decide whether to kill a potential murderer, not knowing that they would become him in the next player's game, and that the words they said in the game would be repeated to the next player (Prescott, 2017). The characters of *Undertale* remember the previous playthroughs, especially being killed. This points to the playful oppression happening in digital games, including the oppression allowed through replay. It is allowed – and not necessarily harmful – to exercise one's power over digital characters. Their consciousness, however, is traditionally not a part of the deal. *Undertale* resembles *Westworld*<sup>5</sup>, a television series about a simulated Wild West populated with AI robots who gain self-consciousness through suffering being abused and killed multiple times by clients, people having fun in the simulated world. In *Westworld*, however, the robots rally against their owners. The characters of *Undertale* just remind the players of how they have killed them. It may be left unnoticed,

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<sup>5</sup> It is also interesting how both texts needed to highlight how their worlds are separate from the human world we know through their titles, which focus on separateness and the peripheral location of these worlds.

or be a surprise, or evoke regret or shame. If it is noticed, it changes the replay and possibly tips the player off to play differently than they played for the first time or than they would if there had not been a change in the game.

Replay can also be used as a mechanic allowing the player to win, but not in a way that it happens in a *replay story*, in which the player can change a previously made decision, or through simply mastering their skill through repetitions. Sometimes, a part of the game or a whole game which ends in failure is indispensable for a future win. *Outer Wilds* is a game in which every playthrough lasts 22 minutes and ends with the sun reaching the supernova stage. The protagonist can remember what happened during each consecutive loop, but the world remains unaffected and replays itself again, letting the player discover what happens every 22 minutes in each place and arrive at a solution. *Braid* allows players to go back in time in every single moment of the game and solve puzzles through moving back and forward in time. At some point, distinguishing between past and present starts to be difficult. Finally, the interactive movie *Bandersnatch* requires the player to choose a specific route and fail; without it, the player does not have crucial information to finish another route leading to the main ending.

## REPLAYABILITY VS TELLABILITY

A tellable story, writes Raphaël Baroni, is a story worth telling. The audience perceives a story as a tellable one if its events are out of the ordinary, or the development of its plot is surprising enough (Baroni, 2011). The outcome of being told a subjectively tellable story is the pleasure of uncovering the plot, of the feeling of suspense, of being invested in the plot and rewarded with a satisfying ending. A story repeated multiple times to the same audience might lose in terms of tellability as the novelty wears off; in the same manner, a game replayed multiple times could lose its narrative appeal.

“Replayability,” as Krall and Menzies point out, is “a quantifiable measure to the enjoyability of the game. That is, a measure of how long a person can enjoy a game before it becomes boring” (2012, pp. 3). It would seem then that the two most powerful sources of pleasure in games, their replay value and the tellability of their stories, contradict each other. This would create a design conundrum: a game with high replay value would at some point lose so much tellability that it would become boring. A game with low replay value does not offer much pleasure from the beginning. The question is, then, how could a highly replayable game that would not bore players too quickly be designed?

Before exploring possible answers to this question, it is important to narrow the scope of games this dilemma even regards. First, there would be those which feature a story with distinguishable events, more or less significant to the whole game (*Undertale*, *What Remains of Edith Finch*, *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, *Diablo III*). Second, games that do not feature a narrative with distinguishable events even if the story can be superimposed by the player (*Chess*, *Tetris*, *The Sims* series without narrative expansions). There is not much to say about the relationship between tellability and replayability in regard to non-narrative games. Of course, elements of such games could be treated as elements of the story – then the game would retain its tellability for as long as there is a will to replay for

the sake of these elements (e.g., new levels, objects, achievements, or just purely winning). In most cases, however, treating elements of non-narrative games as elements of the narrative seems to be a stretch – and an unnecessary one.

The cause of a particular replay of a narrative game is crucial to the relationship between replaying and tellability of the story. It would seem that games that rely less on the narrative and more on the gameplay, like *Diablo*, would less often be replayed for the sake of exploring the story or changing its ending, and that games relying more heavily on the story, like *The Witcher*, would more often be replayed for narrative reasons. If the game is replayed for the sake of something else than the narrative, then the featured story is repeated, possibly multiple times, and might not be tellable anymore, as the novelty of events and development of the plot wears out. If the game is replayed to change or further explore the story, the opposite happens: new things discovered and changes in the development of the story do not lower tellability, they raise it.

There are some new ideas on how to keep a narrative game tellable, when it is played for reasons unrelated to the narrative.. One of them is New Game +, a mode adding new content after the player finishes the first playthrough. Many newer games use it to some extent: *Horizon Zero Dawn*, *Persona 5*, *Dark Souls 2*, and more (Sawyer, 2020). *The Last of Us 2* lets the player replay the game with a developed avatar they finished their first game with (Avard, 2020). *Layers of Fear 2* invites the player to replay the game in a more relaxed version (moving freely through chapters is now possible) in order to find all of the omitted game’s content and some new items which add to the story. Procedural generation of elements, such as the planets in *No Man’s Sky*, also make replays fresher and stories more tellable.

Another way to maintain tellability is the variation in possible paths. The older game *Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis* featured three paths: *wits*, *fists*, and *team*. Each path involves the same locations, but the quests are different. *Undertale* follows in its footsteps and offers three basic routes: *neutral*, *pacifist*, and *genocide*, as well as some additions, such as the so-called “hard mode” that can be started with naming the main character “Frisk.” It is even more complicated here, as the choice of routes affects further playthroughs (e.g., the genocide path affects all future pacifist routes; giving up the protagonist’s soul permanently alters the endings of the pacifist and genocide routes). Both these additions – New Game + and routes – raise the tellability of replayed stories, in some cases so much that new content might be the reason for replay.

However, there are prominent voices still speaking against the point of narrative-based games. In 2017, Ian Bogost commented on the holodeck fantasy in his article “Video Games Are Better Without Stories.” He states that there are certain difficulties in the creation of a game truly employing the player’s narrative agency. He brings up the example of *Façade*, a game loosely based on *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. “It was still easily undermined,” he argues; for example, by a player who pretended to be a zombie during the whole game and says “nothing but ‘brains’” (Bogost, 2017). It is hard to decide what exactly was easily undermined. Was it the player’s agency? They seemed to exercise it well enough, though the experience may have been spoiled by other characters’ oblivious responses. Or maybe it was the mood of the game that was undermined – but this interpretation relies on the belief that such counteractive play necessarily hurts the game, and that counteractive reading only applies to games (if it is an argument against narrative games and not narratives in general).



Or maybe, finally, such behavior undermines the Holodeck fantasy – a vision of moving freely through the world of fiction that is ready to receive us – and it is indeed a fantasy.

In order to escape the impossibility of fully responding to player's actions, Bogost reports, many games employ environmental storytelling and cast the player as a detective rather than a protagonist of the story. Bogost claims that it is unnecessary, as games like *What Remains of Edith Finch* or *Gone Home* could as well be films or other linear narratives (Bogost, 2017). Marie-Laure Ryan comments on the limitations of the player's role. She claims that the protagonist of a game will always be a type-character, more of a vehicle to explore the world than a narrative-changer. She writes that the reason for this is player's choice: that players would rather play a game like "Russian fairy tales, Alice in Wonderland, Harry Potter, or Sherlock Holmes" instead of potentially tragic, character-driven stories like "Hamlet, Emma Bovary, Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*, Oedipus, Anna Karenina, [or] the betrayer Brutus in *Julius Ceasar*" (Ryan, 2001). The choice, however, does not seem to be the real reason. As Jesper Juul proved, playing always comes hand in hand with suffering and failure (Juul, 2013), and there are many people ready to experience it in a playful activity. It is more the technical difficulties that such stories face. They have to use a script, and moving with the script, even if it allows choice, is hardly comparable with exercising as much agency as a Shakespearian character. The tellability suffers, and so does the story – as Aristotle wrote, "events with the greatest 'cathartic' effect are those whose development, even though causally connected, are unexpected by the audience" (as paraphrased in Baroni, 2011).

The key to the development of games as a narrative medium is then for them to produce something else than either stories that are good but would we also be fine expressed in other media, or stories aiming at narrative grandeur but limited by their form. It would be strange not to notice everything that does not fall into these categories. First, Ian Bogost does not bring up his procedural rhetorics in this argument, although it is a very important *narrative* device – and one that is characteristic of games. Second, self-conscious games like *Doki Doki Literature Club*, *Bandersnatch*, or *Undertale* might not be able to respond to players whatever they do – and what players can do is limited – but nevertheless they are able to react and comment on players' actions in a meaningful way. And with or without commentary, influencing or trying and being unable to influence the world is still something only a game can simulate. It is unknown whether this can go any further – but the future of *replay story* is still definitely worth exploring.

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### **Ludography and filmography**

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