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Abstract

This article takes a deeper look at the notion of ludo-narrative dissonance (henceforth LND), a popular term that refers to the perceived clash between the ludic and the narrative aspects of games. We wish to argue that a better understanding of the nature of LND and the reasons it appears in games enables us to look at this phenomenon from a new perspective that was not, as of yet, considered in game studies literature or the popular discourse. The typical approach to LND presents it as a problem or a design flaw that needs to be avoided by the developers. In contrast to this, we suggest that LND can be seen as a source of inspiration for the creators as it inherently invites the developers and the players to reflect on the game structure. We start with a closer look at the notion of LND and present three ways it can be interpreted. In section two we analyze the reasons LND can appear in games (regardless of the developers' intentions). Section three goes through some of the existing methods of dealing with LND. Here we argue that embracing LND as a result of some of the necessary tensions of game design can result in the creative victory of the developers. We finish the paper, in the fourth section, with a longer case study of *Manhunt* which we see as a good exemplification of the reinvigorating power of LND.

Keywords

Ludo-narrative dissonance; ludology; narrativity; gameplay; games and violence

Introduction

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, we wish to provide a deeper look at the notion of ludo-narrative dissonance (henceforth LND), a popular term that refers to the perceived clash between the ludic and the narrative aspects of games. Second, we wish to argue that a better understanding of the nature of LND and the reasons it appears in games enables us to look at this phenomenon from a new perspective that was not considered in game studies literature or the popular discourse. We argue that the typical approach to LND presents it as a problem or a design flaw that needs to be avoided by the developers. In contrast to this, we suggest that LND can be seen as a source of inspiration for the creators as it inherently invites the developers and the players to reflect on the game structure. We argue that this positive perspective on LND brings video games closer to other art forms.

Within game design and the study of games (ludology) LND is primarily seen as a flaw that needs to be fixed (Wardrip-Fruin 2009; Turner 2013; Seraphine 2016).[1] Why this cavity waiting to be filled, this nuisance for the player? Or, is 'LND', as suggested by Eric Swain, simply an intellectual trope for narrative design gone rouge in computer games (Swain 2010)?[2] Christian Roth et al. address the problem too vis-à-vis the extended catalogue of literary experiments when they write that:

> [While] the term ludonarrative dissonance seems to evoke diachronicity—a tension or clash resulting from the combination of two disharmonious or unsuitable elements during a musical piece—the term very often describes its problem in holistic terms. A game either is ludonarratively dissonant, or it is not. (Roth et al. 2018, p. 96)

What we propose here is to bring some constructive vibe to the either-or understanding of LND—that the latter is actually good for something. Storytelling is not always about reaching harmony (Frederic 2016). Our prime hypothesis is that LND is not (only) to be interpreted as a shambolic byproduct of bad design or storytelling; but rather, that it is a fuel with which to energize the fissures that arise between gameplay or *ludus* and fiction or *poiesis*—no matter how well or how badly stories thrive in games in the first place (cf. e.g., Aarseth 2012; Domsch 2013; Neitzel 2014).

What we also want to pursue is that, as we are going to see in the examples such as *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe 2011) or *Manhunt* (Rockstar North 2003), the idea of a constructive LND opens a particular brand of meta-gameness, or meta-ludic awareness. These are questions concerning how games can inform us, the players, about their 'gameness'; or how games can be moral without being explicitly moralizing. Although we consider our line of thought to be important from a design perspective, our main focus is analytical, which means that we can bypass the question of 'intentionality': We do not have to ask the designers (authors) permission to crack open the crannies between game and story. In what follows we will investigate symptomatic sequences from popular computer games in which, we insist, the player is taken down into the underlying machinery of the gamified story (and the storified game).[3]

The argument that follows is structured over four sections. We start with a closer look at the notion of LND and present three ways it can be interpreted. In section two we analyze the reasons LND can appear in games (regardless of the developers' intentions). Section three goes through some of the existing methods of dealing with

LND. Here we argue that embracing LND as a result of some of the necessary tensions of game design can result in the creative victory of the developers. We finish the paper, in the fourth section, with a clarification of dissonant ludo-narrative 'narrators', which we call 'Shouters', followed by a longer case study of *Manhunt* which we see as a good exemplification of the reinvigorating power of LND.

What is ludo-narrative dissonance?

The term "ludo-narrative dissonance" was originally coined by Clint Hocking (2007) in response to the game *BioShock* (2K Boston and 2K Australia 2007) which, Hocking argued, endorses the theme of egocentric behavior through its gameplay and mechanics while at the same time promoting the opposing theme of selflessness through its narrative. Because of this crooked dichotomy of gameplay and fiction the game creates a violation of aesthetic distance that seems to pull the player out of the game. Hocking's point is that there is a recurrent conflict in games between the ludic and the narrative structure, and thus between what the player is allowed to do (i.e., the rules) and why the player is asked to do it, i.e., the fictional context of the game (see also Henry 2017). Related to *ludo* we find controls, choices, and consequences while the realm of narrative in games usually contain graphics, dialogue, cutscenes, and, obviously, characters.

Remedy Studio's writer Mikko Rautalahti has the following to say about storytelling in video games:

> I think it can be difficult to tell stories in video games. There are all these conventions—you are expected to have a certain amount of combat, a certain minimum number of gameplay hours, etc. These conventions aren't really engineered with storytelling in mind. So, a lot of the time, you end up kind of glossing over some of the details in your head—I mean, if you're playing the lone hero, in terms of the story, does that guy really rack up a four-digit body count? Does he really get repeatedly shot with high-calibre weapons and mysteriously heal himself? And if you really get stuck at a difficult part, does that really mean that the hero also spent an hour just running around in frustration and then quit. Probably not, you know. (Rautalahti, in Hernandez 2010)

There are methodologically challenging issues related to the task of establishing the 'inside' of games. Reflections tend to focus either on the functionality of invariant elements that constitute 'a game' (rules, mechanics, world; Juul 2005; Sicart 2008; Aarseth & Möring 2020); or they evolve around topics of genre, that is, what groups of games have in common while opposing others (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith and Tosca 2009). Game studies thus primarily focus on the *poetics* of games, how to analyze or design the aesthetics that will harvest the internal configuration and hold the game together. What is lacking in this picture, and what we hope to find a shimmer of in the framework of LND, is the *poetological* side of affairs.[4]

One starting point for a poetological enquiry into the inside of games is to look at the word 'dissonance' in LND. The word covers (at least) three modes of meaning: musical, spatial, and conceptual. In musical terms, it refers to a lack of harmony (resonance) in the register of well-tempered notes, in particular overtones which are partial waves or constituent frequencies that are either harmonic or disharmonic. A disharmonic partial

(sound) represents a frequency that does not multiply with the totality of the waves of overtones. We then say that vibrations or pitches produce a harsh sound, a discord, or even a cacophony.

In spatial terms it refers to the ambiguity arising from dissonance signifying a *cavity* as well as an *opening*, at the same time. Note here, that we are not talking about space in computer games, how games are rendered as spatial designs and worlds (Aarseth 2001; Nitsche 2008; Günzel 2008; Möring 2019). Rather, what motivates the deployment of spatiality is the entry point to the structural configuration of games and especially how the complexity of *ludus* and story is arranged, or should we say *misarranged* to provoke sensations of disparity and non-identity. While the cavity is a flaw in the design of the alignment of game and story, and therefore is in desperate want of repair; the cavity-as-opening marks an entry to the "heart of gameness", to use Jesper Juul's phrase (Juul 2005).

Yet, while the spatial significance of 'dissonance' is more of a metaphor for the composition of stories and the way they cue into gameplay than it is actual game world design; space and narrative construction may nevertheless concur with each other.[5] Consider for instance the Express Car Service, in *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar Games 2008). It is a site of action for Niko Bellic that contains lots of gameplay as well as being a spatial 'hub' for the various plotlines that weave underneath the game. Thus, the inside of the Express Car Service serves as an arena for fast-moving, enjoyable gameplay moments, like preventing the Mafia from doing shady business and ultimately destroy the cousin's life's work. But the site also epitomizes the misalliance that the player faces, namely Bellic's engagements that as the game progresses stand in ever starker contrast to his allegedly more peaceful intentions. Ultimately, the site unveils the opening through which the player can detect the disparity within the game, the fissure between game and story, and subsequently ponder its meaning.

Last but not least, LND can be also seen as a conceptual conflict—a dissonance between the player's self-narrative and the game's narrative. It can be represented in the following way. Let us assume that the player describes all of the actions they observe on the screen. To make it easier, let's say that we index sentences in such a way that we label all of the sentences describing the player's actions as L-sentences and all of the sentences that describe narrative elements the player can only passively observe as N-sentences. The inspiration for this distinction comes from Rudolf Carnap who analyzed language of scientific theories using the distinction between empirical sentences and logical sentences (called L-sentences) (Carnap 1937). LND can be then defined as a contradiction between L and N sentences. To give a simple example: The player who experiences GTA IV (Rockstar North 2008) and wants to have some fun doing mayhem on the city streets has to deal with a contradiction of an N-sentence "I don't want to kill more people" with an L-sentence "I want to kill some more people". As we are going to argue below, this should not be treated as a design flaw that should be eliminated, but there is no denying that it causes a cognitive problem the player must solve. This cognitive problem is very close to the phenomenon of "cognitive dissonance", which is the state defined in psychology as holding contradictory beliefs (Festinger 1957). As pointed out in the psychological literature on the subject, people who become aware of the contradiction in their beliefs (or between their beliefs and actions) can often experience stress (van Kampen 2019, Ursin 1988) as well as fear (Archer 1976). Since cognitive dissonance results in discomfort, people try to eliminate

it with strategies, such as the process of rationalization. Similar to the way people deal with cognitive dissonance, the player may feel the pressure to "fix" the overarching narrative (comprised of L- and N-sentences), to make it coherent again. It is exactly this pressure, which is implicitly staged in the game *Manhunt*, as we shall see in the last section.

What causes ludo-narrative dissonances?

There are many reasons why playing games may result in LND. Up to this point, we already touched upon one of them. First, the game can demand the players to perform actions or prevent them from performing them in a way that clearly contradicts the narrative. This can happen on a very basic level. For example, the game may make it impossible for the players to jump over small obstacles and then present the character in a cut-scene easily making the same jump. This can also happen on a very general level of the meaning of the whole narrative, similarly to the *BioShock* case that inspired Clint Hocking. The other main reason for LND is that the game may allow the player to play in a transgressive way. This phenomenon can be traced back to the early text-adventures published in the 1980s for many microcomputers. The player interacted with the game using a parser that interpreted natural language sentences as commands for the avatar. It was very common for the players to test the limits of the parser by issuing commands that made very little sense from the point of view of the narrative, thus in a way toying with the L- and N-sentences that we described above. The practice was so common that the developers often tried to anticipate these transgressive practices and outsmart the players by creating narrative explanations of why a certain action was not performed by the avatar. For example, if the player tried to kill herself in *Zork II: The Wizard of Frobozz* (Infocom 1981) the game parser responded: "Suicide is not the answer".

This practice of finding the cracks in the unity of simulation and narration of games can be compared to the practice of looking for bugs or glitches in games and this may be one of the reasons why LND has been perceived as a flaw that should be avoided or eliminated (cf. Swink 2009). We argue that this line of reasoning impoverishes game design space as developers may favor one of the two easy ways out: downplaying the role of narration or making it strictly linear. In contrast to this, embracing the possibility of LND and finding ways of exploiting it in creative ways may lead to more interesting, experimental game design. One example of such an approach can be found in *The Stanley Parable*, released for PC in 2011. The biggest novelty of the game is the introduction of a narrator who recognizes and reacts to the player's actions. The role of the narrator is that of a guide as it gives the player clear objectives (Herte 2016; Backe and Thon 2019). The subtle difference comes from the fact that, in accord with a well-established literary tradition, the narrator uses past tense (Sarian 2018) which teases the player and invites transgressive play. The players learn about their objectives as if they were already performed in the narrative while the ludic part clearly shows that they are only about to happen. The players are then put in a position where the only choice they have is either to submit fully to the narrator or to try to break the game. This transforms *The Stanley Parable* into a game between a character staged within the narrative that could be called 'the developer' (more on that in Section 4) and

the player who try to outsmart each other. In this sense, it can be seen as a continuation of the tradition that originated in text-adventure games of the 1980s.

The third reason for the appearance of LND in games is very interesting as it seems to be tied mostly to modern game design and modern publishing practices. It can be best seen in the so-called "open-world" games such as GTA IV that we have already mentioned. The main cause of this is that most games of this type try to combine the rigid, linear structure of narratives with open simulations which require the player to perform actions that may be disjointed or blatantly incongruous with the narrative.

How does this incongruity play out? In GTA IV the player controls Niko Bellic, a petty immigrant from former Yugoslavia who arrives in the United States seduced by the usual clichés: freedom, happiness, and money. As it turns out, this is somewhat of an illusion. Niko gets trapped in the unforgiving gangland of Liberty City (a city loosely based on the real New York) with not much else to do than chop cars and fight. The core narrative of GTA IV portrays not only how Niko tussles his way to the crime summit, but it also showcases the fact that he is not capable of fleeing his destiny. He seems to be irresistibly tied up with his felonious *vitae*, as it is part and parcel of his interesting and playable ontology. Not to mention Bellic's backstory. At some point it is implied that his father was an abusive alcoholic and that he suffered many traumas as a teenage soldier in the Bosnian War. Niko witnessed and committed numerous atrocities that shaped his cynical approach to life but also a certain degree of repentance, depression, and emotional friability. And on top of that, he is caught in a computer game that you and I are playing for fun.

As Miguel Sicart notes, we not only play by the rules, but are also immersed into the simulation, the game world, the fiction, and the characters (Sicart 2009; 2011). Gameplay and drama, or narrative immersion, are not two opposing things; they weave into one another, enhance, and subtract energy from each other. GTA IV becomes a game that questions the very existence of the presence of morality. Our anti-hero, Bellic, has arguably huge existential challenges in facing the punitive set of rules in this world (first encountered when we meet his cousin, Roman Bellic, who owns a taxi company, the Express Car Service, which is later burnt down by the Russian Mafia). He wants to be emancipated from his criminal record, hunt down the villains of his unforgettable past. It is safe to say that we understand him. But in realizing the Utopia that he set out for himself he precisely must gather and master all the violent techniques required for the game to be a success.

In GTA IV narrative closure and the success and fun of gameplay point in two significantly different directions: the mainstream player would rather have Bellic cling to crime because otherwise the game loses its forthright fascination. The more fun we have as players, the more unhappy Niko Bellic becomes. Before one jump to the rash conclusion that the game of GTA IV suffers from a dissonance, a lacuna between gameplay and story; one could instead think of this subtle incongruity, suggested by Walther (2019), as a confrontational synthesis of two modes of 'playing' that invites the player to take a meta-ethical standpoint: One mode is where the drama is 'fixed' too soon, weakening the fictionality to lenient plot traversal. The openness that we tend to demand of computer games, with their myriads of bifurcations and interesting branch points, are narrowed down to a kind of 'quasi-book' that we read-by-playing instead of truly play. The other mode is where the player has too much power over the destiny of

the character. The point is that this complex asynchroneity which sparks the player's reflection is not reducible to a design-centric 'within' (meaning it cannot readily be devised and 'fixed'); but rather it emerges as a *result* of the dissonant ludo-narrational architecture, and maybe even to the point where the game "presents in itself a critical engagement with the politics of its genre", as commented by Hans-Joachim Backe on a different game but in a similar context (Backe 2018). Thus, the outcome of LND moves beyond mere design, and the effect is, as we shall look into in Section 4, constituted by the 'Shouters' of games, proxies of guidance and misguidance.

Even though typical for open-world design, this problem can be visible also in some of the linear games due to additional, narratively irrelevant requirements that are connected to meta-systems such as achievements or trophies. This can be easily seen in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward 2019) (and its sequels) where the player is constantly directed and hastened by his character's teammates. At the same time, the existence of the said meta-systems invites them to a meticulous search for trinkets that they have to collect to get the achievements/trophies.

One last example comes from the contemporary publishing model that accompanies the main game with additional downloaded content. To make the purchase more enticing these additional pieces of a game present narratives that are very different in tone (*Red Dead Redemption: Undead Nightmare*, Rockstar San Diego 2010) or introduce new activities. One example of this can be found in *Watch Dogs 2* (Ubisoft Montreal 2016), an open-world game set in modern San Francisco. The game depicts a struggle between a grassroots hacker group and a big IT corporation. Even though it addresses serious issues such as privacy, surveillance, and the state of digitized societies, the overall tone of the narrative borders on satire. A DLC mission "Zodiac Killer" represents a significant exception to this. The mission depicts a series of gruesome murders of women performed by a copycat of the infamous Zodiac Killer. The player is supposed to find the bodies and document them by taking a photograph. Because this particular mission represents only a very small portion of the game and functions as an addition, it does not change the gameplay of the main part and forces the player to use the existing camera mechanics to photograph the bodies. The problem is that true to the tone of the rest of the game, the photos made in the game are stylized as so-called "selfies" of the main character who strikes poses typically for this style of photography. This results in a jarring contradiction between a character who reports the shock and horror he feels when he discovers the bodies and the fact the player has to make him shoot a tourist style selfie with the deceased. Again, as we saw in GTA IV, we may suggest that it is the 'confrontational synthesis' of these two modes, shock versus selfie, that has the potential to spark ethical reflection in the player.

Even though all the examples presented above differ slightly, they can be regarded as similar because they are all caused by the modern paradigm of enclosing many different mechanics and narrative elements in a single game, especially if the game is later expanded by additional content.

How is the LND "problem" solved?

As we noted in the previous section the reasons LND appears in games are quite numerous and avoiding it completely might be difficult and time consuming. Still, since according to the prevailing paradigm LND is perceived as a problem to be solved, the developers routinely try to mitigate its effects. Roughly speaking we can discern three main strategies of dealing with LND that developers employ.

As Brett Makedonski writes, the first option is to create games that are ever evolving and wholly responsive to any actions that the player makes. Rather than focusing on telling a particular story, the developers would have to give the player the means to make a story. The second solution is for developers to make games that give the player little to no control over any in-game decisions. Doing this will eliminate the possibility of the player diverging from the exact path that the developers intended (Makedonski 2012).

It is easy to see that the first solution is effectively a simulation of life whereas the second solution is a simulation of a fixed sequence of narrative elements, that is, a linear story. Thus, in trying to solve the puzzle of LND we either get too much life or too much story (comp. Bruner 1987). Feng Zhu makes a similar argument in relation to *The Stanley Parable*:

> Its own ambiguous status brings out the dissonance between two objectives: to give the player freedom and room for expression (to be a 'good' game), and to be a tight and cogent work that provokes reflection about freedom and the possibility of meaning (to be a 'good' Lukacsian novel/work of art). (Zhu 2020, p. 130)

The third way of solving the LND problem is to (at least partially) embrace it and explain it away using some of the existing game elements. The irony that we wish to point out is that the creativity unleashed by these masking strategies leads to some of the most interesting design decisions that can be found in modern games. The most prevalent solution to the problem of LND in open-world games is to contextualize various types of dissonant ludo-narrative 'narrators' in such a way that it explains the chorus of the multitude of voices. This can be done in several ways, so let us just point out some of the most prevalent.

It seems that the most popular solution is to channel narrational commands and ways to proceed in the 'story' of the game through modern communication devices such as a cellphone (GTA IV; *Watch Dogs 2*; *Spider-Man*, Insomniac Games 2018). Here the game relies on players' real-life understanding of a phone as a single object that physically unifies all of the competing requirements of the environment. This is especially visible in GTA IV and *Spider-Man* both of which have no qualms interrupting the actions of the player to announce all of the additional possibilities that wait for her on their way to the task the already selected. This design decision is often combined with an inner monologue of the character who may comment on the priorities dictated by the narrative. For example, after answering another call, the main protagonist of *Spider-Man* comments on it saying that he should check it after he deals with the main task. What that means, theoretically, is that the player is instructed by some narrator proxy within the game to make sure that gameplay and narrative are neatly conjoined. Similarly, whenever the player experiences a quiet moment (whenever the game does not demand a specific task or linear progression by the player), the main character

suggests that this is a good opportunity to do some of the minor tasks typical for open-world games.

Lastly, there's the game's environment itself, which often serves as a road sign to where the player can (or must) go. The easiest way to do it is to merge the interface with the world using visual or audio cues. Think of the infamous blue arrow in GTA IV. Needless to say, if the requirements and possibilities given to the player are numerous, this 'visual voice' of the game may end up being just as intrusive as the shouting commands we get from *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*.

Still, even the most successful unifying strategy that the developers employ on the side of the game-world does not change the main cause of LND in modern games—the identification of the player with the controlled avatar. To put it in simple terms, if the player identifies with the character, they must reconcile all of their actions as if they were the actions of a single entity. The fact that all of them were suggested by a plethora of dissonant ludo-narrative 'narrators' does not solve the problem on the side of the player/avatar.

Should we say that at least in this sense LND functions as a design flaw? Or maybe treat it as a price that we have to pay for the freedom modern games give us? We believe that even in these cases the LND should not be considered a flaw as its existence leaves an open window for in-depth interpretations and reconfigurations of the narrative.

A player who encounters LND may reflect on it and 'save' the narrative creating a consistent explanation of the apparent contradiction. At this point, the analogy with cognitive dissonance may once again be useful as the process is very similar to that of creating a rationalization, a new narrative that overwrites the inconsistent one. To refer to one of the examples we have given, a player could conclude that GTA IV's Nico is actually lying to himself in the narrative parts because he cannot accept his real nature that the actions of the player represent. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with letting the players deal with clashes between narration and simulation. Apparent contradictions can be thought-provoking.

It is nonetheless crucial to remember that the assumption of the existence of a single player-avatar entity is far from obvious and that it can be seen as a side-effect of modern game control schemes. In the old point-and-click adventure games, the main character was often negotiating its actions with the player, to the point where they were often refusing to do whatever they were asked to do. For example, in *Gobliiins* (Coktel Vision, Sierra On-Line 1991) the characters were often irritated at the player who made them do things that endangered them, gesticulating, and yelling at the screen. The attempt to kill the titular Gobliiins is not an act of transgressive play—it is just a lack of cooperation. Since most of the modern games moved from a point and click interface to direct movement, the duality of the player and the avatar became obfuscated. What remains are the residues such as the resistance of the avatar who does not 'want' to jump over a dangerous distance and has to be forced by the player by an additional input (see the *Assassin's Creed* series as a good example of this; Ubisoft 2007–2020).

Reminding the player of this underlying duality may be the most intriguing way of exploiting the LND. A very recent example of a game that tries to disconnect the player

from the avatar is *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog 2020). Roughly at half-point, the game narrative forces the player to change sides and control the character who up to this point played the role of the main antagonist. Note that this does not boil down to a simple change of the playable character as this happens often in games—for example in the first TLOU. The difference is that the players are being put in control of a character whose motivations are the exact opposite of the motivations the game tried the player to internalize earlier. Instead of trying to keep Ellie alive, the player has to now attack and (presumably) kill her. Even if many TLOU 2 players develop empathy towards Abby later in the game at this stage they are very likely to still be loyal to Ellie, a character they spent more time with (especially if you count in the prequel). At this point, the player realizes that the most natural way to situate herself within the game is to function as an efficient operator of the game, that is, switching allegiances and motivations whenever they are told.

The unexpected switch to the antagonist side inspired interesting reactions of the players. As can be seen in a compilation video many players straight up refused to play Abby and some of them even tried to kill her on purpose. The reason this reaction is interesting is that it shows that the players used LND—the possibility to kill the avatar in the simulation—to cope with the discomfort of being disconnected from the main character of the first half of the game. This action makes sense only on the symbolic level as at this point the players understand the ludic conventions of the game and know that they have to keep their character alive to proceed in the narrative. They exercise the freedom that the ludic side of the game gives them to ridicule or subvert the narrative (at least for a moment).

The dissonant 'movie' in *Manhunt*

Before we move on to the analysis of *Manhunt* we want to introduce the notion of 'Shouters'. Our proposal is that Shouters should be understood as voiced proxies of LND. They steer the player in certain directions; not, and this is critical, *away* from the cracks and crannies of LND, but, quite the opposite, *towards* them. Shouters are tourist guides equipped with a metaphorical megaphone and assigned with the task of leading players to the dangerous but fragile places within the game. It is important to note that Shouters can take the shape of real characters in the game, or within the fiction of the game; but they can also be more abstract installment or parts of the game's machinery. One such character-driven Shouter is Niko's cousin Roman in GTA IV. He is obviously a character within the game world, but on top of that he is a proxy that 'shouts' the delicate mix of gameplay errands and narrative traits to Niko Bellic and the player. Yet rather than having his character denote either mission (gameplay) or 'conscience' (narrative), he is the embodiment of both; he is the "confrontational synthesis" (Walther 2019) of game and story and thus the centrifugal point of LND. Now, let's look at the figure of the Shouter in more detail.

Shouters can have many faces, but we believe three emblematic shouter-figures can be discerned. The *Teacher* who tutors the player how to operate the game during (or prior to) gameplay; the *Director* who pilots the player in the right direction according to the narrative in the game; and the *Developer* that often with an ironical or a meta-fictional agenda guides (or misguides) the player in how to genuinely experience the layers of the game's narrative and all the ludic possibilities it contains (cf. Froschauer

2017; Engelns 2014; Thon 2016). The Teacher and the Director are both buzzing with cues for the player to take up often however leading to a desecration of the synchronicity of the game and the story it derives from. Key characteristics and games in which the Shouter-figures play prominent roles are listed in the matrix below (fig. 1):

Shouter-figure	Characteristics	Game example
Teacher	Tutors the player how to operate the game	*Watch Dogs 2* *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*
Director	Steers the player in the right direction according to the narrative	*Manhunt* *Zork II*
Developer	Combination of Teacher and Director—with an ironical twist	*The Stanley Parable* *GTA IV*

Figure 1: A (non-comprehensive) matrix of ludo-narrative Shouter-figures.

The three types of Shouter proxies are obviously analytical and idealized; when it comes to actual games and their interpretation, they merge in subtle ways. They allow us entrance to the cogwheels of the underlying machinery of games, and transcending mere narrators-by-another-name they are voices that discourse the discrepancy between player actions and the reason or meaning behind those actions. The Shouter in *Manhunt*, developed by Rockstar North and published in 2003 by Rockstar Games, is a violent force within the game as he literally yells and screeches at the player. The shouting is in fact a mixture of instructions in how to play the game and ditto in how to keep track of the narrative progression. The Shouter in *Manhunt* is both Teacher and Director. How does this double role of the Shouter play out?

Many computer games seem to disrupt the unfolding of narratives within game worlds to assist the player in how to control the keyboard, how to set up the buttons on the joystick, etc. Indeed, this is a mild or inevitable version of ludo-narrative dissonance since the functionality of the game and how it should be played, including knowledge about its operators, must be established prior to any potential immersion into the 'story' of the game. One needs to know how to play to get the full experience. Even *Manhunt*, perhaps the most violent commercial game of all time, acts out this functionality check both prior to the game and while the game is running at full throttle; then the player is taught how to perform multiple kills at once and checking her results on the menu.

From the outset the game can be read as a very thug comment upon so-called 'violent' games. Time and space allow only the highlights of a long and fuzzy debate: Does the violence lie within the game itself? Is it the violent reactions of the player by playing the game we should focus on? Or is violence rather, and more abstractly, to be situated in the context surrounding games as a cultural phenomenon? In continuation of this, do games simply cue right into a male, heteronormative socioeconomics of violent behavior *per se* (Keogh 2012; Consalvo 2012; Murphy 2016). Such positioning of issues of violence and ethics run the risk of either making the violence too 'big' to

fathom and analyze or too 'small' inviting the illusion that matters of ethics can somehow be fused into games, i.e., the attempt to deliberately design for ethics (Sicart 2013). As we shall see, *Manhunt* is neither about posing the grand cultural questions nor a result of intentionally coalescing the game with 'ethics'. Rather, it is a game filled with LND that may or may not force the player to reflect on the distance between gameplay (and having fun) and the inherent story.

In the game by Rockstar we play, in an intense third person perspective, the death sentenced James Earl Cash. The action is set within the fictional city Carcer City. Cash is saved from execution in the last minute and subsequently required to act in the disgraced snuff director Lionel Starkweather's megalomanic and very, very violent film production.[6] The title 'Manhunt' can easily refer to a) the label of the game itself; b) the 'hunt' for 'our man' (i.e. the avatar Cash); c) the 'hunt' which we are about to undertake (aka the snuff movie); and d) perhaps the title of the film we are shooting (which means that our gameplay from this point on will be the raw footing of said film). The game consists in navigating Cash through a morbid maze of traps and frantic antagonists, who act as high on crack or something, whom we better kill before they take down us (Cash). This killing should be done as brutally as possibly; the more brutal, the more points we get. Our spree is controlled by a designated *attack button*.

Manhunt is labelled as a stealth-based urban horror styled game, but one could also say that it is in fact a torture simulator designed to manipulate the player into feeling disgust and intrigue in the performance of sadistic acts. Already a direct link between the most efficient gameplay and the uttermost depraved morality has been established. It is the combination of the increase of our attack range, the upward trajectory of our multiple-kill percentage, and the continuous shouting of the director (the character); all of which serve as the plain and simple goal of the game: To reach the exit through most complex murders and graphical blood spills. The fact that Cash himself is playing a 'game', molded by the movie he is forced to take part in (and, of course, doubled by the player playing *Manhunt*), makes Rockstar's work not only very postmodern and self-aware, it also has the effect of clouding the sense of agency, or, as Gareth Schott remarks (2016), it emphasizes how a lack of agency undermines the nature of violence as violence (see also Klevjer 2018). Cash is not 'doing' violence; he just plays it. The question is of course whether within the twisted world of *Manhunt* an opening exists towards submissive resistance to the world created and upheld by a computer machine (Sicart 2018).

What is tricky, though, and perhaps a sign of contradiction amidst this hectic pursuit of shocking brutality, is the player's rational autonomy when stepping into the role of 'Cash'. It is he who decides for himself how intensively the killings should be acted out (which is to say, it's up to the player). Then the core question of gameplay immediately spirals from adding graphical details to murdering people to the question of whether one wants to be 'good' at playing the game—or 'good' at heart (cf. Zagal 2010). However, if the player desires to transcend the rules of the game; will they not then transgress the 'game' altogether? Ultimately, then, rather than *Manhunt* becoming a game to master, it turns into a game that torments the player to have the guts to resist playing it.[7]

One of the signs of the game's self-awareness, its performance of a game within the game, is the uncanny fictionalizing of the relation between the extreme poles of the

gameplay and the story weaved on top of and around it. Looking at the story that sets up *Manhunt* as the rationality behind Cash's actions there is really no justification to his deeds—other than the blind rage of a dead man walking, or the desirable 'fun' of the player. In his reading of *Manhunt* José P. Zagal writes: "The player is thus presented with a situation in which, narratively, there is no reason or motivation to opt for greater brutality in executions" (Zagal 2010).[8] It would be just as reasonable within the semantics of the narrative to envision Cash rebel against this fate that is being laid upon him by the tyranny of Lionel Starkweather. After all, the consequences of both of Cash's 'stories' are rather meek and bleak: Either he dies instantly already from the beginning by way of execution (in which case there is no game), or he suffers a quick death due to the 'game' he is trapped in, i.e., the movie he is obliged to take part in (he may be respawned, yes, but that makes the execution backstory bad storytelling: why is it not possible to respawn also from the fate of execution?). As a result—and herein may very well lie the true moral—he instead performs a 'movie', which is the scene entered by the player thus reverting the sad destiny of Cash to fun, adrenaline-packed gameplay.

The irony in *Manhunt*, curiously similar to the 'artsy' morale in *Stanley Parable*, is that the player is tricked into aligning her actions with both the gameplay and the underlying story. The gameplay becomes very violent; but that is simply, the player may insist, because of the projected resonance between this gameplay and the mission which the fictional character (Cash) is bullied into undertaking—the snuff film with its inbuilt horror game scenario. Since playing *Manhunt* is all about establishing *resonance* at all costs (players are forced to play the game violently because Cash is forced to play *his* game violently), players are cast in the role of 'game designers' diligently bridging the chasm between L- and N-sentences. If that is the case, we may further speculate (yet never know for certain) if the game indeed was created by its makers as a case of deliberate LND-design in the first place.

Cash:

L-sentence: Why do I kill?

N-sentence: Because I have to.

Player:

L-sentence: Why do I kill?

N-sentence: Because Cash has to.

Figure 2: Opting for ludo-narrative resonance (L- and N-sentences).

In *Manhunt,* the snuff director asserts not only that we (the player and Cash) should keep on doing what we seemingly do best, killing people in complex fashions, but further that we should make sure that Cash doesn't pause to reflect on the senselessness of his business. But the subtlety goes deeper: At first glance it would

seem, as we discussed earlier, that the Shouting within *Manhunt* is effectuated to make Cash shy away from the N-sentences. Shouting in this way would be a way for the game, within the game, to make sure that it does not fall prey to the LND trap. But that is clearly not the case—or, rather, it's not the whole truth. It is precisely *because* of the story that Cash himself, as fictional character, is dictated to steer clear of the realm of N-sentences—never asking why there is killing, but only relentlessly killing. For the player to replicate this, to play the game, they must do the same: momentarily block N-sentences the way Cash does and concentrate on 'gameplay'. At some point, this becomes a vicious circle, as it is infinite, dumb killing rather than enquiring about the semantics behind it. Yet, imagine the opposite: If Cash would indeed quit the 'game' *he* is playing he would also ruin the 'footage' *we* are making, player and Cash in tandem. Adding to that, it would definitively mean that there would be no game (the game of *Manhunt*) to play. No movie, no footage, no game. Ultimately, *Manhunt* starts out as LND—and *then* it plays out as a frantic race on behalf of the player to design their way out of the trap. *Manhunt* is an allegory of its own failure.

Conclusion

To summarize, the analysis of the causes of the LND shows that understanding this phenomenon in terms of a design flaw is a big oversimplification as the possibility of its occurrence is deeply rooted in the past and modern game design. As we claimed in the beginning of this article, storytelling is not always about reaching harmony and, thus, rather than a shambolic byproduct of bad design LND may (also) be interpreted as the fuel which energizes, in novels, television, and videogames, the fissures between gameplay and fiction, action and justification. In other words, the result of our argumentation in this paper is that instead of eliminating the tension of LND we should, in fact, embrace it as a poetic device rather than a flaw.[9]

As we saw, the clash between narration and simulation could be observed even in the case of early text-adventure games which shows that the phenomenon is much older than what is typically discussed in the literature. Heavily scripted linear games invoked the feeling of being controlled by the developers which can be acceptable in the case of the kind of Shouter whom we labeled the Teacher but becomes more problematic in the case of the Director. An overanxious Director may inspire resistance like the one generated by *The Stanley Parable*, even against the intentions of the developers. The moment we move to a more modern open-world design the game can no longer hide its inconsistent nature as the artificiality of a single Shouter is not enough to mask the incongruous nature of the game's possibility space. Also, as we saw in the analyses of GTA IV and *Manhunt*, the quest for the player to make the realm of gameplay and fiction *resonate* with each other, to align L- and N-sentences guided by a combination of Teachers and Directors, may be a token of fruitful LND design in contemporary games—whether intentional or not—that can be pushed and developed even further. Finally, the identification of the player and the avatar pushes the player to create a coherent overarching narrative. Even though this process can lead to creatively interesting results we need to remember that equally valuable results can also be obtained by forcing the player to disconnect from the character they are controlling. After all, who wants to be James Earl Cash in real life?

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Notes

1   This nomenclature of 'fixing' so hard to bypass in the ludology community rhymes very much with an increasing focus on 'game feel'—how to design it and how not to do it (Swink 2017; Walther & Larsen 2019).

2   The study of ludo-narrative dissonance has also extended into other disciplines; see Howe (2017) for analyses of conflicts experienced by sports participants between dominant narratives and self-generated interpretations of embodied experience.

3   A similar approach, though in films and tv series, is suggested and developed by Jason Mittell under the header of what he calls "operational aesthetics", places (or *loci*) where fictional characters are allowed entrance to the underlying mechanics of the fiction (e.g., the 'donkey wheel' in *Lost*) (Mittell 2007).

4   For the purpose of differentiation, and informed by literary studies, we propose to reserve the term 'poetics' for normative poetry doctrines (so-called rule poetics), while the term 'poetology' should be used for a particular poetic self-understanding or an individual style of writing (Wiele 2010). An interesting problem here is whether computer games are basically generic 'containers' for certain mediated activities, or whether they are 'floating' instances of play, or aesthetics of form, that can be appropriated and taken up by different content (and played by players). See Kirkpatrick (2011) for this (Gadamerian) discussion of what constitutes computer games as aesthetic form and material. Interesting questions on the hermeneutical nature of games' ontology are also raised in Aarseth and Möring (2020).

5   Although time and space does not allow for a full exploration of this, our argument about the intimate connection between narrative structure and spatial arrangement in games can be regarded as an extension of Henry Jenkins' analysis in his 2004 essay 'Game Design and Narrative Architecture' (Jenkins 2004).

6   As mentioned by David Leeson (2005) *Manhunt*'s plotline draws heavily on the short story by Richard Connell, 'The Most Dangerous Game', also entitled 'The Hounds of Zaroff', first published in *Colliers*, 1924. A contemporary, cinematic parallel would be *A Serbian Film*, an exploitation horror movie by Srđan Spasojević (2010).

7   José P. Zagal explains this combination of mechanic and point system in the essay '*Manhunt*—The Dilemma of Play': "Let's say Cash sneaks up behind a gang member with a plastic bag. Pressing the attack button will result in Cash yanking the bag over the victims [*sic*] head and suffocating him. If the player holds down the button for a few seconds, the execution is more violent and Cash might punch

the victim in the face in addition to suffocating him. The third, and most brutal, type of execution is carried out by holding down the attack button even longer. Thus, by deciding how long to press the attack button for, the player determines the degree of brutality of the execution" (Zagal 2010). The theme of *acceleration* is prevailing here along with the exaggerated iconography of sadism, as discussed by Gilles Deleuze in his *Coldness and Cruelty in Masochism* (1991). Cf. also Schubart 2001.

8   The increasing brutality of the gameplay corresponds to the point system and the level design of the game. The game has three levels of execution, with each level progressively more violent and graphic than the last: 'hasty' executions are quick and not very bloody, 'violent' are considerably more gory, and 'gruesome' are over-the-top blood-soaked murders.

9   We would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for a very insightful summary of the main thrust of our argument.