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NARRATIVE DEPICTION OF SUICIDE IN HORROR VIDEO GAMES

BLANCA ESTELA LÓPEZ PÉREZ

Abstract

This paper presents, and analyses, how a complex subject such as suicide in Western cultures is represented in horror video games. Depiction is more than just graphic images, it is a process that includes the way social imaginaries find a crucible in the way narrative design is built up in the game system. Thus, video games can be considered cultural texts that convey the authors' deep emotions and cultural meanings on suicide

Keywords

horror video games, narrative design, depiction, suicide

Introduction

The history of narrative depiction of suicide in the West is extensive (Andrés, 2015) and crosses fields ranging from philosophy and sociology to the arts, where the attention that the topic has received from literature is striking (Gamboa, 2001). It can be considered that the video game is no stranger to showing the theme in its production, especially when the language production is closely linked to the problems and anxieties of the social imaginaries in each context and culture.

Language elements chosen to produce an artwork are intimately related to the current imaginary that both, game designers and gamers, put in action while developing or playing a game. Therefore, the beliefs surrounding suicide in Western cultures become embodied in the way game mechanics are integrated into game and narrative designs. Being a discursive ludic text, the video game bears a very heavy ideological weight while it expresses the author´s subjectivity and even his or her process of coping with thoughts about self-destruction.

The above is why narrative depiction of suicide as a research topic must be considered from a transdisciplinary approach to identify specific ways in which video games have worked on the subject. The research question is: what characterizes the narrative representation of suicide in video games, particularly (although not exclusively) autobiographical ones? Given that the topic is highly complex and has few definitive answers, it is not surprising that its treatment is more frequent in independent productions than in the AAA industry. So, the corpus on which we will work is the following: *The Cat Lady* (Remigiusz Michalski 2012*), Neverending Nightmares* (Matt Gilgenbach 2014), and *The Static Speaks My Name (*Jesse Barksdale 2015). The concept of representation by Nelly Schnaith in her book Paradoxes of

Representation is also used. The goal is to identify the design mechanisms that allow suicide to be represented in video games, giving substance to the social imaginaries of a historical context.

Depiction And The Social Imaginary

When we think about depiction, it´s usually visual and graphic images that come to mind. Even though the philosophical attention around this phenomenon is bound together to the history of graphic production, especially through the concept of mimesis, it´s relationship with social and contextual belief cannot be kept apart. For Plato, the problem of representation is a phenomenon that participates in a materiality in which an imperfect image of an immutable idea that must be imitated is generated (1988, p. 472); despite the intention of these material presences, the representations remain incomplete in mimesis. The visual image as a material creation presents limits that do not apply to the so-called mental image or representation; furthermore, this abstract representation becomes the model with which the creation is compared to grant it a value due to its closeness to the idea. Consequently, every visual image is more a testimony of the ideological perspective of its author than of the concrete reality that it is supposed to imitate; the result is that the agreement between what is created and the model, is taken as what exists in the real world.

Several problems arise that compromise the certainty that epistemological fields such as the hard sciences, as well as the human and social sciences, try to offer. The real then escapes, since every epistemic construction will necessarily be crossed by a particular form of ideological gaze. It is evident that the fields of visual image creation cannot be the exception by revealing, with each production, the truth as "mental attitude in the relationship with the world and with other cultures" (Schnaith, 1999, p. 75). The production of images follows the guidelines of the gaze because of history, culture, and context, but, at the same time, it is a creator of the gaze that produces it; that is, the subjects' gaze is also constructed based on the visual patterns they

access, and according to which they learn to organize their perception.

This way to generate a depiction through language selection in text can be described as "pantonym," a model that organizes the semblance of the narrative world according to a particular point of view. "The model used excludes, on the one hand, what does not agree with it, but, on the other, it ensures and underlines its organizing power by reiterating the most important links of its structure" (Pimentel, 2001, p. 25). Thus, far from being a mimetic representation of the real world, people, and phenomena, the text becomes a crucible of the imaginary relationships a social context keeps among its members and with the conditions of their existence (Schnaith, 1999, p. 63). The imaginary or social imaginary can be understood as a shared way in which people make sense of their collective existence in specific time and space frames (Baeza, 2000, p. 15), being also a result of historical development and cultural interaction. Hence, narrative depiction is not a random product but a complex consequence of the use and selection of language and media to serve a narration that conveys a particular world view. The significations created by this social imaginary serve a practical operativity, as they organize human behavior and social relations (Arruda in Sammut, G. et. al, 2015, p. 133). Therefore, creators can be expected to reproduce this warp of social meanings and interpretations through their craft. However, according to Cornelious Castoriadis, the social imaginary can adapt to new phenomena, develop new significations (1987, p. 141), and even new ways to depict these cultural contents.

With the changes brought by late XIX century psychiatry, a major shift in suicide´s signification was presented. According to Michel Foucault, mental illness became the new leprosy (2009, p. 16) and quickly became stigmatized, and a matter of public health. It was no longer a consequence of devil´s deed or melancholia due to an exalted aesthetic sensitivity, but a matter of rational science and, thus, control. Suicide was no longer a sin but a disease (Andrés, 2021, pp. 355-359), and as such it could be prevented, and suicidal thoughts "cured." Even more, the XX century imaginary was impregnated by

the idea that, despite the hardships brought by the two Great Wars, social conflicts and the economic consequences of neoliberalism, pain could not only be avoided, but eliminated. "The suppression of pain is a «social» project that gained strength in the Enlightenment, based on unlimited faith in science and the improvement of social structures" (pp. 364). Before the rational, yet obtuse, medical perspective, the roads of arts and literature stood as a reminder of the limits of epistemological and scientific reason; arts as self-testimonies could help bring light to the matter.

Even nowadays, when suicide is mostly considered an effect of contextual social factors, gender expectations, education inequality, and alcohol/drug abuse (Lange, S. et.al, 2023, p. 2), contemporary media allows authors to depict the phenomenon through their specific language to convey significations of their social imaginary.

Pain and Sublimation Through the Ludic

Suicide has been a subject of psychoanalysis, especially, it's relation with the death drive, as well as the ways in which this *trieb* can be transformed into something not harmful for the individual and that nurtures his or her bonds with others. The creative processes offer a way to come to terms with the harshness and contradictions of complex social and subjective realities, by means of accepting the difference between our narcissistic demands want, and what we get. Sigmund Freud, Otto Rank, and Donald Winnicott, among many others, produced important works on how the death drive can be transformed or sublimated through artistic creation and, even more important, through play, since it is a form of transformation even more primal than word language. Because play gets organized as a performative language based on action, and that as a language inherits, reflects, and creates patterns from and for the social, psychoanalysis can be useful to understand how depictions are generated from a particular language and its medium.

Freud worked on mourning that follows the loss of a loved object invested with affect by the ego, while melancholia is also a mourning

but for a loss of the ego that invested and lost itself as a loved object (2008, p. 243). The affected person shows a mixture of self-contempt and exhibitionism (Critchley, 2020, p. 67) due to ambivalence of (self)love and (self)hate. So, the aggression that was originally meant for an external lost love object has now turned to the ego with violence; and that is the point at which the death drive can be projected on oneself with actual physical harm (Green, 2014, p. 131). Suicide thus becomes a sort of defensive act against the one causing pain and despair, with the ego being the main source. Freud points out that this is exactly what makes melancholia interesting and dangerous at the same time (Freud, 2008, p. 249).

In 1915, Freud posited that the force implied by the death drive *trieb* (impulse or urge) was to be transformed to achieve satisfaction (2008, p. 114). He also identified four ways or processes by which the *trieb* achieves its aim and, thus, satisfaction: 1) Reversal to its opposite; 2) Turning around onto the subject's own self; 3) Repression; and 4) Sublimation (Freud, 2008, p. 126). Our research focuses on numbers 2 and 3. Turning around onto the subject's own self becomes the key to understanding why self-aggression and suicide occur, while sublimation allows us to explain why art and play, on the other hand, help the death drive to be transformed without causing harm to the subject. Both mechanisms are found in social interactions and, consequently, it comes as no surprise that the two have found representation through artistic languages, with videoludic no exception.

The first process, turning around onto the subject's own self can be explained through the element of masochism, if it can be thought of as a form of sadism performed on the own ego. For Freud, "[...] the essence of the process is a change of object, while the aim remains unchanged" (2008, p. 127). The exercise of violence seeks to destroy the object causing pain and anguish, which, once reversed, is the person him/herself. This compulsive behavior not only implies self-destruction but also what Karl Menninger called focal suicide that can include self-injuries and mutilations, and purposive accidents (2023, pp. 202-202); both can be depicted in Matt Gilgenbach's *Neverending Nightmares* as the playable character, Thomas not only

dreams of killing himself and injuring various parts of his body, but the game also shows his multiple deaths by different impacts and traumas inflicted on his body. His compulsive loop of being killed or self-killed and waking up just to end up dead again, depicts the untransformed *trieb* turned against himself in a mixture of hate and commiseration, but also love. This ambivalence finds the sister figure as an avatar in which some part of the lost object of melancholia can be recovered.

In *The Cat Lady* Remigiusz Michalski tells the story of Susan Ashworth, who is described as a chronically depressed woman who forms emotional bonds only with cats. One night, Susan decides to kill herself, but fails and wakes up in a hospital after having a dark dream in which the Queen of Maggots gives her tasks to fulfill. During the gameplay, the player witnesses continuous awakenings that connect one nightmarish scenario to another, again in an untransformed death drive loop that seeks to be projected on the psychopathic parasites. Here the object to be destroyed was transferred from Susan herself to the parasites and to other characters that are portrayed as abusive and invasive. "In certain forms of psychosis, what makes life abhorrent may be the feeling of having been hurt by existence, the sensation of being perpetually invaded, parasitized, colonized by an object that strips one's identity" (Green, 2014, pp. 132-133).

The Static Speaks My Name by Jesse Barksdale can be seen as an example of the ominous double phenomenon. Jacob Ernholtz is the playable character that has ended his life, and after coming out of a dark void, the player gets to live Jacob's last day alive. The gameplay is about performing common domestic tasks inside the late Barksdale's apartment where the player will find a kidnapped artist, Jason Malone, with whom Jocob has become obsessed. The player will face the choice of killing the artist or allowing him to go free, after which the player will execute the instruction to make Jacob hang himself. The characters show a set of mirrors and doubles, showing an imperative return of the same "[...] so that one is co-possessor of the knowledge, feeling and experience of the other; identification with another

person to the point of being mistaken about one's own self or placing the other person's self in one's own place [...]" (Freud, 2008, XII, p. 234). Even though being in the character's shoes is common in video games, it is not always designed to convey this disquieting effect, which prevents the player from feeling in control of his/her actions.

With these elements in mind, the second method, *sublimation*, can be more easily understood. For Otto Rank, the death drive can be transformed through artistic creation to achieve immortality by *assuming* human mortality, thus, escaping anguish and existential dread (Rank, 1989, p. 39). This object for the drive transforms the death impulse by also changing the goal of the drive. It no longer has the form of aggression or seeks to destroy the love objects, but builds the possibility to create and bond through love. If primeval narcissistic love can avoid turning into destructive hate towards the love object (Freud, 2008, XIV, p. 133), it can recover the ability to preserve the object without destroying it, with it being an object different from the ego The bond that is created is supported by a creative drive between the artist (game designer) and the spectator (player).

In sublimation, the aggressive drive is neither repressed nor weakened, but redirected to a more elaborated, social, and highly regarded purpose (Nasio, 2016, p. 126). The gamers are enticed by their participation in the video game, and stimulated to produce something themselves (other games, fan fiction, cosplay). Therefore, sublimation can be identified in three different scenarios in the video game medium: 1) Sublimation through video game creation (artistic creation); 2) Sublimation through the act of playing video games (aesthetic experience); and 3) Representation of the sublimation in the game narrative (bonding of both).

Sublimation through the act of playing video games can be thought as an aesthetic experience, since it allows catharsis to occur and the death drive to be transformed. Freud observed an early playful elaboration that he referred to as fort-da. He attributes a playful substitutive power to this symbolization activity and considers it an act through which an infant manages to occupy the position of active subject, instead of suffering from that of the passive object. He

considers the act as the possibility of symbolic substitution of the Other through the creative work of play (Freud, 2008, XVIII, p. 15). The act of playing video games can therefore be considered a way in which the *trieb* transformation through performativity is observed in present time, while the means for that transformation were developed in the very early stages of life. The players appropriate the rules and mechanics, generating the game dynamics; the character imprinted in the way dynamics develop is the way the death drive is transformed through sublimation during the aesthetic experience.

Representation of the sublimation in the game narrative involves the use of languages to create images that are validated through the presence of the social imaginary in both the game designers and the game players. Deep cultural meanings are conveyed if there are elements common that creators and gamers share by using the video game, not only as a pleasurable craft, but also as a language phenomenon able to provoke identifications and projections of the self (García-Sánchez, R., 2019, p. 34). Play drive as a form of sublimation and, eventually, creation allows productions to be kept from being stored so that they can be lived as cultural performativity, even when the narrative theme talks about death and self-destruction. Topics that can't be put into these representation systems through language can be considered traumatic by definition; the traumatic being that raw pain that can't find any word to get attached to a representation of any kind.

The three possibilities of the sublimation work with the creation of something new if there is something else before that final product emerges. Autobiographic video games, like Gilgenbach´s *Neverending Nightmares,* are examples of sublimation through video game creation, as well as a depiction of anguish and intrusive self-destruction fantasies (Rainnie, A., 2012). The author has not only talked about his story with mental illness, but also the limited success of therapy; however, he has found solace in developing games that invite other people to open up and talk about their own mental illnesses. Sublimation is a transmission of a firsthand experience lived by an author through an artwork that resonates with the player

´s personal knowledge, thus stimulating a drive to build something else, perhaps an elemental explanation of their own pain.

Suicide And Design As Videoludic Narrative

Design fields are rarely considered to be something beyond technical labor, and this is more evident in the disciplines that deal with digital technologies. Narrative design is meant to transcend the order of enunciation to pursue an integration of new cultural meanings through the use and synthesis of languages (López in López-León, 2018, p. 58). In traditional narratology, narremes are organized into patterns that create a cohesive narrative structure, its basic elements being variables, values, and functions (Dinehart, S. 2020. p. 72). One of the tasks of narrative design is to provide structure, character, conflict, and plot to the story that is told in a video game (Denton Bryant, R. and Giglio, K, 2015, p. 60), and to create a meaningful bond between gameplay and storytelling (Bulatovic Trygg, N., Skult, P. and Smed, J., 2018), making sure that the story enhances the gameplay (McRae, E., 2020, p. 3) by conveying both technical and semantic language elements. Game mechanics can be considered the most basic linguistic signs of videoludic language, yet until they are inter-connected by *reading* the game, and meaning for the players and game dynamics make themselves present, video games can become texts.

For this effect to appear, the video game designer must be able to appeal to the players´ beliefs. In *The Cat Lady*, Susan Ashworth is treated as a dangerous person with no credibility, because in past decades mental illness has been considered the origin of the suicide impulse (Domènech, 1981, p. 81). As the gameplay moves forward and hallucinations become the fictional reality of the narrative experience, players empathize with Susan as an effect of the story point of view, allowing them to experience the character's lack of control and vulnerability. This narrative design shortens the distance between the player and the character by feasting on the social imaginary's representation of mental disorders and their social meanings.

The Static Speaks My Name is less expositive than *Neverending Nightmares* and *The Cat Lady,* and neither shows the character's background nor elaborates on their feelings – even when, at the end of the game, the smoke clouds only show names and methods chosen by people who supposedly committed suicide. However, it also shows black humor, which is a very subtle characteristic of the suicidal temperament described by Al Álvarez in his book *The Wild God* when he refers to the despair experienced by some of the Dadá artists (2022, p. 254). Humor reveals hidden meanings that the consciousness finds too painful to put into spoken words (Freud,2008, VIII, p. 15), thus the jokes in the game contribute to indicate something beyond what is shown in the gameplay, but remains unspoken.

The experience is the result of not only understanding the game's system of rules and its mechanics, but a significant appropriation of what is narrated in the player's inscription in a flow that allows him/her to organize and give meaning to what is narrated by the game system's material causes. To achieve this involvement, something of what is stated by the author of the story has been meant and apprehended by the player. In this way the player obtains meaning through his/her gaming experience (Juul, 2005, p.158). In narrative games, values change according to the semantic significance that players can attach mainly upon the story and the way it creates expectations.

Neverending Nightmares and *The Cat Lady* allow players to hope for an ending that will set the characters free from their pain, but not through suicide.

Sublimation overcomes the death drive in a constructive and socially acceptable fashion. Therefore, as the plot develops and the gameplay keeps going, gamers are lured to *want* Thomas and Susan to find a way to avoid death, which these characters do, even when the doomed endings are present in the narrative design. Depending on the players 'actions, there are three endings for Thomas: Wayward Dreamer, in which Thomas wakes up and goes to his sister's room to find her well and sleeping, with a "it was only a dream" effect; Destroyed Dreams deals with Thomas' actual suicide attempt and his

waking up in a hospital, but Gaby is there and she's fine. Players hope for these two endings, since both allow Thomas to remain alive and to experience what Menninger called self-reconstruction, which not only depends on the individual's work on him or herself, but also considers social intermediation, as the suicidal person is not isolated from social structures (2023, p. 400). The third ending, even though it is tragical in essence, keeps Thomas alive even before a great loss. *The Cat Lady* offers four endings, two of them that prevent Mitzi's death or prevent her from killing Adam; Susan's chance of self-reconstruction depends on her being capable of keeping other characters alive and safe from committing a murder.

While these two titles support the players' desire for salvation, *The Static Speaks My Name* takes a very different approach. Events in the game take a similar direction in the choices players are offered, a particularly important choice being whether or not to kill Malone. As the gameplay develops, the unchanging feeling of everyday simple actions supports the feeling of entrapment in a compulsive cycle where there are no disturbing incidents. Jacob can't escape the trawl of sameness, and he traps the player with him by limiting his actions and choices, and by pushing him to a fate that was foreseen at the beginning of the game. According to its creator, Jesse Barksdale, video games help explore the realm of human emotion, not by being obliging, but because of subversion and dissent (Novelle, 2018). The effect of not having a way out disrupts the expectation for salvation, bringing the depiction closer to the displacement of murder (Álvarez, 2022, p. 65) as self-defense before the suicidal act. No good deed or sacrifice can save Jacob from killing himself, not even allowing the painter to escape alive; this narrative representation then seems more a testimonial narration than a socially accepted depiction, which needs hope to overcome the crisis.

Suicide as a topic in fiction has been recurrent in the West since ancient Rome, and the narrative arts have been responsible for its depiction. It is a complex issue with causes that generate discomfort in different social groups. As such, the arts have turned out to be one of the most successful attempts to give it a place within beliefs and

social imaginaries. The social imaginary comprises a complex network of elements of different levels of abstraction that find representation through different languages that are the product of the construction of deep cultural meaning, inherited and generated in the interaction among people.

This is observable both in game design and narrative design. Therefore, it is necessary to take two situations into consideration: narrative design is a particular form of pattern in which the language has been organized following a pantonym. That pantonym is a cultural force that determines what is presented in a story and what language is appropriate for that purpose. Second, consequently, narrative design is an ideological construction that attends to the cultural forces of the social imaginary. The forces that drive suicide have been worked on by different fields of knowledge. In this space, psychoanalytic and narratological theories were worked on to explain the way in which languages account for the transformation of the death drive through sublimation.

Three moments were identified in which the sublimation mechanism occurred: the first is the act of creation carried out by the video game designer; the second is the act of play as a performative language that allows the player to transform his own death drive; and third, a moment that corresponds to the bond between creator and player in the act of play as an aesthetic experience that makes sense for both, as it resonates in the social imaginary they share. Consequently, narrative design cannot be considered as an execution that ends in the arrangement of technical elements, but rather it must be rethought from the basic elements of language as signs. A case of basic video-play language signs corresponds to the system of game mechanics, since the way in which its cohesion becomes game dynamics depends on how players read and interpret the game phenomenon as a text. For this reading to emerge, bridges must exist between the game designer and the player that connect them through language and patterns that come from social imaginaries.

Playing and creating video games on the topic of suicide does not necessarily trivialize a complex phenomenon or downplay its

importance. On the contrary, the suicide phenomenon is so complex that it is necessary to take it to the field of video games (creation, aesthetic consumption, and social connection) to begin to understand it and be able to provide a response before human pain. As psychoanalysis has shown, the act of play is a chance to rebel against the death *trieb,* and turn it into something else, something creative and for social bonding. Thus, it is evident that one of the most suitable areas to cope with the difficult and painful human issues is offered by video games as generators of language and deep cultural meaning.

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