PRZEGLĄD KULTUROZNAWCZY
NR 4 (62) 2024, s. 660–678
doi: 10.4467/20843860PK.24.041.21236
www.ejournals.eu/Przeglad-Kulturoznawczy/

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2340-4812
Agata Waszkiewicz
The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin
agata.waszkiewicz@kul.pl

NARRATIVE REFUSALS, LACUNAE, AND THE REFERENCE BY ABSENCE IN QUANTUM BREAK NOVELIZATION

FIRST VIEW

Abstract: The goal of the article is to scrutinize the rather narrow and scarce group of video game novelizations. Acknowledging the particular and unique quality of video game narration that largely depends on the player, the article considers the challenges of adapting the interactivity of the gameplay onto the text and the specificities of the relationship between the novelization and the source text. Through the close reading of Cam Rogers' novelization of the 2016 video game *Quantum Break* (Remedy Entertainment, 2016), the article draws from Peter Stockwell's conceptualization of the literary resonance as well as Robyn Warhol's and Gerald Prince's discussion of unnarrated and the unnarratable in literature to consider what is referred to as *reference by absence*. It is argued that the omissions of ludic elements or narrative moments dependent on the player's choice offer significant clues regarding interpreting certain game events as canon.

Keywords: video games, novelizations, literary resonance, reference by absence, *Quantum Break*

Introduction

Regardless of the source material, novelizations do not tend to gather kind reviews. In fact, the disdain seems to be shared by the fans and the scholars, with the latter's harsh opinions standing out from their usual, impersonal styles. And so, for Kate Nowell, novelization "remains a much-disparaged genre"[1], for Jan Baetens, it is "an ambiguous anachronism both innovative and monstrous"[2]; and Thomas Van

[1] K. Newell, *Expanding Adaptation Networks: From Illustration to Novelization*, Springer, London 2017, p. 33.

[2] J. Baetens, *Novelization, a Contaminated Fenre?*, "Critical Inquiry" 2005, Vol. 32, No. 1, pp. 43–60.

Parys quite directly calls most of their authors "hacks"[3] (2017, np.) and notes that "bad writing is, unfortunately, the rule rather than the exception."[4] Linda Hutcheon writes quite playfully that "[n]ot everyone approves of novelizations, of course: for many they are simply commercial grabs, unmitigated commodifications, or inflationary recycling."[5]

Apart from the overall dislike mirrored by these quotes, novelizations remain an underresearched adaptation type. This can certainly be explained through their perception as often poorly written and inferior to the source material (a critique often aimed at adaptations, regardless of their medium) – and any adaptation of video games is challenging, even if only because of the sheer difference in the scripts that often go into video games, especially those featuring branching narratives. Despite the significant body of research investigating interactions between video games and literature, be it in the form of interactive fiction or the literariness of games[6], the discourses around video games often aim at differentiating them from other media, and novels specifically, through the emphasis of their ergodic characters, unique modes of interactivity and immersiveness.

Another reason lies in the specificity of the video game industry. When discussing a 2001 novel set within the universe of *Halo* games, Tamer Thabet and Tim Lanzendörfer[7] mirror Hutcheon's abovementioned sentiment, saying that "the novel in question is unabashedly a merchandising project, one which is impossible to divorce from the desire to sell more copies of both the console and game of whose franchise it is part."[8] This tension between the expectation that an art form is created solely due to the artistic need and the consumerist reality of the entertainment industry is often similarly emerging in the discussions of whether video games – which, despite the changing discourses around them, still tend to be considered in terms of entertainment and marketed as toys (for children or grown adults) – can be considered art.[9] Regardless of whether the marketability of a novel should have anything to do with its value – and are popular thrillers and crime stories not carefully manufactured in a way that ensures the highest sellability? – the peculiarity of the video game industry

FIRST VIEW

[3] T. Van Parys, *A Fantastic Voyage into Inner Space: Description in Science-Fiction Novelizations*, "Science Fiction Studies" 2011, Vol. 38, No. 2, pp. 288–303; idem, *The Study of Novelisation: A Typology and Secondary Bibliography*, Belphégor: Littérature Populaire et Culture, 2011.

[4] Ibidem.

[5] L. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, Routledge, New York 2006, p. 119.

[6] S. Mukherjee, *Video Games and Storytelling: Reading Games and Playing Books*, Springer, London 2015.

[7] T. Thabet, T. Lanzendörfer, *The Video Game Novel: StoryWorld Narratives, Novelization, and the Contemporary Novel-Network* [in:] T. Lanzendörfer, C. Norrick-Rühl (red.), *The Novel as Network: Forms, Ideas, Commodities*, Springer, London 2020, pp. 181–201.

[8] Ibidem, p. 182.

[9] A. Smuts, *Are Video Games Art?*, "Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)" 2005, Vol. 3, No. 1 (6); J.P. Gee, *Why Game Studies Now? Video Games: A New Art Form*, "Games and Culture" 2006, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 58–61.

means that it is natural to expect it mostly from mainstream, big-budget companies like Ubisoft, BioWare, or Bungie rather than independent developers. Among these, even less are what one could consider a direct novelization rather than a tie-in novel: a distinction that scholars do not seem to make. Most of the research on novelizations, however, follows Thabet and Lanzendörfer's[10] understanding of the relationship between the novelization and their source material as inherently interconnected. I believe it can be argued that the reader of the game novelizations is often also a player, and such reader-player tends to be aware, if not just of the specific game, of the video game conventions.

Thus, the goal of this article is twofold. On the one hand, recognizing the gap in research, I scrutinize the rather narrow and scarce group of video game novelizations, juxtaposing them with tie-in novels and comic adaptations, focusing on whether book adaptations of canon and non-canon alike – can tell us something about the game storylines. I discuss the typologies of novelizations as adapted from Van Parys and Leuven's work. I argue that the novelization and the source video game remain in close dialogue, with the omissions of the gameplay and narrative moments in the former serving as an interesting framework for analysis of crucial points of the latter. Relying heavily on Peter Stockwell's *literary resonance* theory and especially the narrative considerations of what can be omitted or disnarrated from the story, I analyze Cam Rogers' *Quantum Break: The Zero State* (2016) novel published shortly after Remedy Entertainment's *Quantum Break* video game. Remedy Entertainment and its lead creative director/writer, Sam Lake, are known for highly metareferential titles. Thus, I discuss *references by absence* as important types of references, aiming to draw the reader-player's attention to specific storylines, characters, and choices. What is seemingly lost, if not in translation, then adaptation, can be interpreted as a critical, purposeful meta device.

FIRST VIEW

Novelization Typologies

Expanding on the above quote, Beatens argues for the paradoxical character of novelization as it "seems to go counter to the visual mutation now affecting every form of writing."[11] What is more, "it could be said that the rise of novelization is one of how a previously dominated system (that of writing) manages to counterattack, to appropriate the tools of the dominant system (that of the image) and to aim them against it; the text writes back."[12]

The definition of novelization is not uniform or precisely defined in most of the scholarship. Van Parys defines it as simply an adaptation process that, although tech-

[10] T. Thabet, T. Lanzendörfer, *The Video Game Novel…*, op. cit.
[11] J. Baetens, *Novelization…*, op. cit., p. 44.
[12] Ibidem.

nically could be "derived from anything"[13], is most often and most closely connected to film and television. Beatens's relationship with film is even more direct, even though he acknowledges the novelizations of comics and video games.[14] Johannes Mahlknecht[15] calls novelization "film ads", arguing that they are unequivocally connected to the production and marketing of film. Merad Soumeya, when comparing cinematic adaptation to novelization, offers a surprisingly positive description of the latter as "a subtle art that combined fidelity to the original and personal creativity."[16] Thabet and Lanzendörfer, however, want to consider novelization "as a more encompassing process than the ('mere') adaptation."[17]

Furthermore, the authors assume an interesting definition of the novelization, arguing that "it is both reciprocal – the 'novelization' of the video game entailing its writing and production in such a way that the narrative it presents can be meaningfully described as 'novelistic' – as well as open to the story-world's various interventions."[18] Consequently, they consider novels set in the Halo universe novelizations, even though they should be considered tie-in novels according to most common definitions. Thus, they stretch the definition further: "we understand novelization to be the act of writing novels that tie into a story-world also worked on by video games (a practice, if you will) as well as the influence of the novel on those games (a spirit, perhaps?)."[19] In this article, I am somewhat reluctant to assume that broad definition, focusing on adaptations of the game story rather than what I will continue to refer to as a tie-in novel.

Van Parys creates an in-depth typology of novelizations, considering the source texts and the authors, their relationship to the content of the source material, and genres. The first distinction is showing the author's closeness to the process of making the source material. In most cases, the novelization is an adaptation not of the final film, television show, or other audiovisual text but, rather, of its screenplay. That allows for recognizing how the relationship between the author and the director can vary. In some cases, the two collaborate closely, like in the case of Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which produces more integrated and influential works. Other times, the novel might be written by a ghostwriter, with the name of the film/series director on the cover meant to boost the sales and marketability, like with *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), credited to Steven Spielberg but written by Leslie Waller. Finally, coming back to the poor opinion of the novelizations' general

FIRST VIEW

13 T. Van Parys, *A Fantastic Voyage into Inner Space…*, op. cit.

14 J. Beatens, *Novelization…*, op. cit., p. 48.

15 J. Mahlknecht, *The Hollywood Novelization: Film as Literature or Literature as Film Promotion?*, "Poetics Today" 2012, Vol. 33, No. 2, pp. 137–168.

16 M. Soumeya, *Novelization: Another Way of Writing*, "Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers" 2024, Vol. 15 (1), p. 227.

17 T. Thabet, T. Lanzendörfer, *The Video Game Novel…*, op. cit., p. 185.

18 Ibidem.

19 Ibidem.

style, Van Parys notes, quite scornfully, that "The author of a novelization is typically a hack writer, who regards novelizing as a hack job and does not put much effort into the novelization, and often a writer with a bad reputation to boot."[20]

When it comes to the second category, the type, he lists adaptations of the screenplay as well as "continuation novelizations" such as crossover novelization, Choose Your Own Adventure novels, or meta-representational novelizations (mise-en-abyme spin-off), in which the novel is not recounting the events of the film, but rather realizes a text that has been briefly mentioned within it, e.g., "a manuscript of the book shown to the read by the characters in the series."[21]

What is interesting is how both Van Parys and Beatens alike seem to consider tie-in novels as a type of novelization since it "can also, in an intermingling of different forms and genres, present itself in the form of a continuation – no longer an adaptation of work A by work B but a prolongation of A by B in an 'original' sequel."[22] I am, however, rather reluctant to equate novelization and tie-in novels as quite the same creations, considering their quite different relationship to the source text. Whereas one is adaptation in the strictest sense, transferring the narrative, characters, and worldbuilding into another medium and, thus, often offers very little in terms of expansion of the original story (outside of the minimal additional information enforced by the specificity of the medium), while tie-in novels – prequels, sequels, crossovers, spin-offs, and other continuation novels bound to extrapolate the side characters' plotlines – make the narratives transmedial. That, in turn, has much broader ontological consequences for the discussed stories, increasing the scope of their fictional world. For this reason, I am more partial to Kate Newell's definition of a novelization as "a subgenre of 'tie-in' writing"[23], defined otherwise as "licensed works... written with the permission and supervision of the creators, studios, or other rights-holders of the original characters".[24]

While some authors are clear at categorizing novelizations as one of the many ways in which a source text can be advertised, Kate Newell notes a larger degree of contributions novelizations make to a given work's adaptation network, such as attracting reluctant readers, expanding their understanding of the characters and text's contexts, offering the alternative versions of a work's narrative and outcomes, and affirming recognizable references.[25] The early novelizations' function was to clarify film action for viewers, offering "what seemed to be missing in the movies themselves: the dialogue, during the last years of the silent era, and a strong narrative framework after that."[26]

First View

20 T. Van Parys, *The Study of Novelisation…*, op. cit.
21 Ibidem.
22 J. Baetens, *Novelization…*, op. cit., p. 48.
23 K. Newell, *Expanding Adaptation Networks…*, op. cit., p. 27.
24 Ibidem.
25 Ibidem.
26 Ibidem, p. 229.

The Challenges of the Intermedial Novelizations: The Case of Video Game Books

Regardless of their type, every adaptation will be met with certain difficulties in translating a text from one medium into another. Of course, unique challenges occur when the source text relies heavily on audiovisual or ludic elements to convey its story rather than textual narration, forcing the authors to decide whether to completely ignore the devices that make other media or genres stand out. Linda Hutcheon states that some performance modes (e.g., opera or musicals into film) face substantial challenges and that "[t]here seem to be two possible ways to proceed. The artifice can be acknowledged and cinematic realism sacrificed to self-reflexivity, or else the artifice can be 'naturalized.'"[27] However, for Beatens, "the impact of the visual is not necessarily diminished by the apparent return of the verbal. The novelization, in other words, offers a good example of the indirect contamination of one media regime by another."[28]

Intuitively, one could say that the challenges of video game novelization rest within two main areas: how to adapt the story (taking into consideration the sheer size of many mainstream games, their branching narrative paths, and the player choices), and how (or if) to acknowledge the gameplay mechanics and memorable gameplay moments.

Numerous works on video game narrative outline the differences between this and other media, and quite a few call out the similarities by discussing game novels.[29] Video game stories rely heavily on the player's engagement, often remaining what Hutcheon calls "problem-solving challenges."[30]

An important aspect of gamenessness that will eventually be lost in translation when looking at video game-to-novel adaptation is the player agency. As one of the most important concepts in game studies[31], it has been both conceptualized as an aesthetic quality[32], [33] and as a "space for 'meaningful' choice expressed via player action that translates into avatar action."[34] Bettina Bódi and Jan-Noël Thon discussed the four core dimensions afforded by various game design elements. The fourth, which

FIRST VIEW

27 L. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, op. cit., p. 46.

28 J. Baetens, *Novelization…*, op. cit., p. 45.

29 T. Majkowski, *Języki gropowieści: studia o różnojęzyczności gier cyfrowych*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2019; E. Aarseth, *Game or Supernovel? Playing and Reading Massive Game Novels*, "European Review" 2023, Vol. 31, No. S1, pp. S66–S76.

30 L. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, op. cit., p. 13.

31 J.H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1997; K. Salen, E. Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2003.

32 M.M. Chojnacki, *Estetyka sprawczości w grach wideo*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2022; B. Bódi, *Videogames and Agency*, Taylor & Francis, New York–London 2023.

33 C.T. Nguyen, *Games: Agency as Art*, Oxford University Press, New York 2020.

34 B. Bódi, J.-N. Thon, *Playing Stories? Narrative-Dramatic Agency in Disco Elysium (2019) and Astroneer (2019)*, "Frontiers of Narrative Studies" 2020, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 157.

they call *narrative-dramatic agency*, determines the player's impact on the unfolding story. For example, it might describe actions that affect "prototypically narrative elements of video games, such as cut-scenes or scripted sequences of events."[35] In the game adaptations, stories, especially those that rely heavily on the player's choices, can also problematize the canonicity of events.

Consider, for example, Gordon Doherty's *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* novel. In the games, the player begins by choosing which of the two siblings they will control: Kassandra or Alexios. Despite the choice, Kassandra has quickly become almost synonymous with the game, being used in all its marketing materials and generally considered canonical. Asked about this, the creative director of the game, Jonathan Dunmot, said: "Yes, there will be a canon represented in the novel. It features Kassandra and her journey. But in the game, you decide your path; there is no right or wrong way."[36] This comment seems to distinguish between the story canon (the protagonist of which is Kassandra) and the impossibility of the canon of the gameplay experience. Although Dunmot seems to suggest that the novel does not have an impact on the player experience – and it, of course, does not, as much as not a large percentage of the players of the game would read the novel, too – it still sheds some light on whichever path might be considered *canon*.

In digital games, that challenge will be posed by the visual aesthetic (e.g., the color and light or the design character choices) and gameplay. Yuhua Hanna Wu and Paul Martin, who analyze the novelization of ludic elements in video game fanfiction, both acknowledge that the definition of a "ludic element" is "a fuzzy concept."[37] So they define it quite broadly as "an aspect of the text that is primarily associated with videogames, including players' behaviors and objects associated with gameplay."[38] For example, they provide a leveling-up system in Massive Multiplayer Online games (MMOs) or quantification of health or experience in the form of a non-diegetic bar floating above the character or visible as a part of the game interface.

The authors further note that "[d]espite the lack of attention in the scholarship, videogame fanfics do frequently feature ludic elements of their source games, as we will show in the later analysis, often incorporating these ludic elements into the narrative in creative and surprising ways."[39] They mention the examples of Chinese system fanfiction (xitongwen 系统文), "in which a godlike system controls and directs the fate of the story's characters."[40] After Irina Rajewsky, they also argue that

PREVIEW

35 Ibidem, p. 164.

36 M. Harradence, *Kassandra Is Assassin's Creed Odyssey's Canon Character*, "Videogamer", 22.06.2018, https://www.video gamer.com/news/kassandra-is-assassins-creed-odysseys-canon--character/ (accessed: 7.05.2023).

37 H.Y. Wu, P. Martin, *The Narrativization of Ludic Elements in Videogame Fanfiction, "Convergence"* 2024, Vol. 30, No. 2, p. 824.

38 Ibidem, p. 824.

39 Ibidem.

40 Ibidem.

fanfiction establishes an intermedial relationship with digital games, where the story "thematizes, evokes or imitates elements or structures of another, conventionally distinct medium through the use of its own media-specific means."[41] Their example, although not exactly fitting with the Western book adaptations of Western video games I am focusing on in this article – mostly due to my own expertise and experiences – is interesting because it establishes an interesting precedence for how digital games can be adapted into text and offers a broader comparison between the official novelizations and the fan-made adaptations.

An interesting comparison can be made with Newell's discussion of the novelizations of musicals, which, quite similarly, use the songs and dance numbers to carry the plot and shape the audiences' experiences. Just like gameplay mechanics, musical numbers can often be understood as non-diegetic in the sense that they remain visible only to the audience/players, and the characters are not, in fact, *aware* that they are dancing. Blogger Monty Ashley[42] suggests three possible solutions for adapting musical numbers into text: a full omission of the dance and music numbers, an acknowledgment that the characters were singing and dancing at the given moment (though, perhaps, somewhat toned down to maintain realism), and the faithful adaptation of the lyrics into dialogue. As Newell describes, the second option has been used in Ron De Christoforo's novelization of *Grease* (1978), which "includes a token Greased Lightnin' scene in which Kenickie lists his planned improvements as he walks around and on top of the car, 'snapping his fingers and shaking his hips' and 'laying his jive' on the T-Birds (1978, 71)."[43] She further points out that "for this scene, De Christoforo seems to rely on readers' memory of the film to envision the number."[44]

The argument that I want to make in this article is that precisely those untranslatable moments of a game utilizing its ludic affordances to create meaning and memorable experiences make game novelizations stand out among other types of adaptation. Whether they manage to incorporate the ludic moments or omit them, their readers are often players first, looking at the novelization as a reflection of their unique gaming experience. Moreover, perhaps the decision to omit and ignore these crucial moments of gameplay might have an even more direct effect on how the player-reader experiences the story.

PREVIEW

41 I.O. Rajewsky, *Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality*, "Intermédialités" 2005, Vol. 6, p. 53.

42 K. Newell, *Expanding Adaptation Networks…*, op. cit., p. 47.

43 Ibidem, p. 49.

44 Ibidem.

The Lacuna and the Narrative Refusals

In *The Cognitive Poetics of Literary Resonance*, Peter Stockwell describes literary resonance as "an aspect of natural readers' intuitive sense that a literary text has *resonance*. This notion refers to the readerly feeling that certain powerful literary texts leave a long-lasting and ineffable sense of significance."[45] At its core, that concept seems quite intuitive, and everyone who enjoys reading can attest that "[t]exts resonate if they persist in the memory long after the actual physical reading has taken place."[46]

Stockwell builds his theory based on the understanding of resonance derived from mechanics. He adapts concepts such as intensity (the degree to which resonance is measured), damping (which can reduce resonance when a separate object interferes in the resonating system), decay (a measure of the speed of damping), or an echo (a persistent decay during which damping is inefficient). The two important forces describing resonance further are attention and neglect. Because "the conceptual space is generated by reading a literary work"[47], which Elizabeth Spelke refers to as a "cluttered array"[48], there are always many elements fighting for one's attention. On the other hand, the "Elements which are either no longer the focus of attention, were never prominent features, or have been deliberately backgrounded can be said to be relatively *neglected*."[49] That negation creates "a conceptual lacuna"[50], which can be described as "a tangible gap, a sense that there is not simply a space but something missing that was previously occupying the space. Lacunae are the resonant effects of attentional neglect that is textually recent in the reading process."[51] Crucially for Stockwell, lacunae, which he also refers to as "the felt effects of attentional neglect"[52], can also be objects of attention precisely because they draw attention as not being something else or due to how they are omitted from the text.

The problem of the non- or unnarratable is not something new to literary studies, and Marina Lambrou's fantastic book *Disnarration and the Unmentioned in Fact and Fiction* offers a broad overview of a variety of understandings of such lacunae, narrative gaps, narrative refusals[53], egregious gaps[54], and so on. Various scholars have

First View

45 P. Stockwell, *The Cognitive Poetics of Literary Resonance*, "Language and Cognition" 2009, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 27.

46 Ibidem, p. 28.

47 Ibidem, p. 29.

48 E. Spelke, *Principles of Object Perception*, "Cognitive Science" 1990, Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 29–56.

49 P. Stockwell, *The Cognitive Poetics…*, op. cit., p. 29.

50 Ibidem, p. 35.

51 Ibidem.

52 Ibidem, p. 37.

53 R. Warhol, *What Might Have Been Is Not What Is: Dickens's Narrative Refusals*, "Dickensian Studies Annual" 2010, Vol. 41, No. 1, pp. 45–59.

54 H. Abbott, H. Porter, *Real Mysteries: Narrative and the Unknowable*, The Ohio State University Press, Columbus 2013.

offered typologies[55], differentiating between types of what does not happen in fiction. Gerald Prince[56] offered three categories of phenomena that do not happen in fiction: unnarratable action and experience that "cannot be narrated or is not worth narrating"[57], including mundane, repeated, or obvious activities (e.g., tying shoelaces), intentional lacuna and gaps created when the narrator explicitly states what they will not address or describe, and disnarrated covering "all the events that do not happen but are referred to (in a negative or hypothetical mode) by the narrative text"[58]. On the other hand, Robyn Warhol's typology focuses on the reasoning for why something is omitted from the text. She defines such narrative refusals as "direct narratorial references to some of the specifics or what might have been and yet is not."[59] She offers another typology of four unnarratable moments or narrative refusals due to the reason for the omission: due to its boring or mundane character (subnarratable), due to the ineffible or impossible to describe character (supranarratable), due to trauma or taboo (antinarratable), or due to the narrative convention of the genre or period (paranarratable).

In studying the theory and philosophy of fiction, a similar and crucial concept is incompleteness. Ruth Ronen notes that "[f]ictional entities are inherently incomplete because it is impossible to construct a fictional object by specifying its characteristics and relations in every detail."[60] That inherent and necessary incompleteness differentiates real objects from fictional constructs.

Interestingly but perhaps unsurprisingly, scholars often focus on direct narrative refusal, that is, the moments in which the narrators specify what will not be discussed. In the *Quantum Break: Zero State* discussion, I want to look into the more subtle and indirect omissions and how they remain meaningful by evoking the echo of the game and through the gameplay resonance. Looking at both the omissions of gameplay elements in the novelization and the way that *Quantum Break* characters and storylines are purposefully not mentioned in other Remedy games but made obvious exactly by the narrative refusal is something I propose to call *reference by absence*.

First View

References by Absence in Remedy Entertainment's Games

Remedy Entertainment, a Finnish studio known for metafictional narratives – what, elsewhere, I refer to as "metagames" or "games about games"[61] *Quantum Break*

[55] G. Prince, *The Disnarrated*, "Style" 1988, No. 22, pp. 1–8; R. Warhol, *What Might Have Been…*, op. cit.

[56] G. Prince, *The Disnarrated*, op. cit.

[57] Ibidem, p. 1.

[58] Ibidem, p. 2.

[59] R. Warhol, *What Might Have Been…*, op. cit., p. 46.

[60] R. Ronen, *Completing the Incompleteness of Fictional Entitie*, "Poetics Today" 1988, Vol. 9, No. 3, p. 49.

[61] A. Waszkiewicz, *Metagames: Games about Games*, Routledge, London–New York 2024.

(2016) is probably one of their lesser-known titles, being overshadowed by the success of *Max Payne* (2001, 2003), *Control* (2019), and games from the *Alan Wake* series (2010, 2023). While after the release of *Alan Wake 2* and its first DLC (*Night Springs*, 2024) in particular, the connection between Quantum Break and the other gameworld has been established due to the ownership of the copyrights to the game by Microsoft, it cannot be officially included into what is now officially known as Remedy Connected Universe (RCU). Despite the studio's inability to mention certain characters by name, the multitude of references by absence has been made in *Alan Wake 2*, pointing towards these connections, which are finally confirmed in the abovementioned DLC. Whereas the relationship between *Quantum Break* novelization and its source game is marked by less tension, the peculiar situation of the game among the other titles.

Quantum Break is a science-fiction third-person shooter that follows Jack Joyce, who, in the aftermath of an explosion that threatens to destabilize and destroy time, acquires supernatural abilities allowing him to manipulate time. On Steam, it reads, "The Quantum Break experience is part game, part live-action show – where decisions in one dramatically affect the other." While trying to repair the time, Jack fights against the corporation Monarch and its CEO Martin Hatch, operating in cooperation with Paul Serene, Jack's friend-turned-enemy who causes and tries to prevent the collapse of time after years of being stuck first in the world after the catastrophe and, then, in the past. While Jack is the protagonist and the main playable character of the game, the player is granted control over Paul, who, after being lost in time, suffers from a progressive time sickness called Chronon Syndrome, which affects his sanity. As Paul, the player can make choices that affect the game, as well as the episodes of the television show. Giving control through choice to the game's villain is interesting, even more so that Paul is perhaps not that categorizable as such. Starting as Jack's friend at the beginning of the game, he is shown trying to save the world in any way he knows how. Because of his long entrapment in time, the second time the player sees him, Paul is a different person: a hardened soldier rather than an idealistic young man.

The connection between *Quantum Break* and other Remedy games is clear. Having been the first game released after *Alan Wake*, it features several references to that game, establishing that Alan Wake, the author of thrillers and the protagonist of the games named after him, and Jake Joyce live in the same universe. The player can find Wake's novels, and short fictional trailers for the in-game show *Night Springs*, for which Wake wrote screenplays. Still, the game also features hints towards future games: for example, one can find graffiti of the "AWE" sign that does not make sense until 2019 *Control*, where the abbreviation is revealed to mean "Altered World Event". The connection between the games is maintained because most actors reprise their roles in different games. *Alan Wake 2* establishes that the RCU is a multiverse, and all these various characters – just different versions of the same characters from alternative universes. Thus, Shawn Ashmore portrays both Jack in *Quantum Break*

First draft

and Sheriff Tim Breaker in *Alan Wake 2*. Courtney Hope, who in *Quantum Break* played an agent, Beth Wilder, became the protagonist of *Control*, Jesse Faden. Finally, *Quantum Break*'s villain, Martin Hatch, is clearly the same person as *Alan Wake 2*'s villain, Warlin Door – here, the change of the actor from Lance Reddick to David Harewood resulted from the first one passing.

Despite lacking intellectual rights to *Quantum Break*, Remedy has a clear plan to include the game's characters, events, and settings in the newly established multiverse. Before the identity of Hatch/Door has been confirmed in the DLC by showing Door's backstory as the same as Hatch's, the references by absence were skillfully used to point toward the similarities between the two characters. In *Alan Wake 2*, Tim Breaker (Jack's alter-ego) is trying to figure out Door's identity while trapped in the Dark Place: in the few locations where he can be met, he is seen next to whiteboards containing semi-chaotic notes. One of them evidences Tim's brainstorming synonyms for the word "door." The note reads: "Is Door the gatekeeper? Or trying to get somewhere? Everywhere? Door, gate, portal, port opening, access, window". The absence of "hatch" as a potential synonym for crossing between one space and another cannot be unintentional. Instead, the absence of the reference is easily noticeable and points the players' attention towards the word missing from the list. In other notes, Tim refers to the red-haired woman whom he sees when he dreams about his alternative lives. This makes an overt reference to Beth. When in the DLC, he finally meets Jesse, known to the players from *Control* and portrayed by the same actress, they remark on their emotions towards each other as echoing these alternative lives.

While the convoluted legal situation heavily influenced the use and form of these references by absence, they were not the reason for certain narrative refusals or omissions found within the novelization.

The Disnarration in *Quantum Break*: *Zero State*

The author of the *Quantum Break* novelization, Cam Rogers, is one of the writers working on the game, which gave him a unique insight into the development process and the evolution of the game's storylines. As Sam Lake, the creative director and writer behind Remedy's games, notes in the Foreword to the novel:

> *Quantum Break's* story went through quite a few different versions. Ideas were explored and then, for one reason or another, some were abandoned. Not always because they were not good ideas for the story, but because they didn't work with what we had in the game. Cam suggested that he could bring in some ideas and concepts that were present in the earlier drafts of the story. I liked the idea.[62]

That divergence from the events of the game mirrors what often happens with film novelizations, even though there, the cause is the fact that the authors are working

[62] C. Rogers, *Quantum Break: Zero State: A Novel*, Macmillan, 2016, p. 8.

with the film's early scripts. For Lake, these differences, on the one hand, provide an exciting opportunity that justifies the effort of writing a novel, even though he has "always struggled to see the point of a straightforward game novelization [because] there's more than fifty thousand words of text-based discoverable optional story content in *Quantum Break*."[63] On the other hand, they further develop the idea of alternative stories. He writes:

> *Quantum Break* is a story about time travel and branching timelines. Paul Serene sees visions of different potential futures, and he can choose which future comes to be. This opens door to the idea of a multiverse, or the many-worlds interpretation of quantum physics.[64]

Further, he adds: "As you play the game, you are creating your version of the *Quantum Break* universe via the junction choices that you make That is your own timeline, different from your friends' timeline, and yet they both exist side by side."[65] He finishes by adding, "This is not the *Quantum Break* you have played. Is this canon? Strictly speaking, no. But, in an experience where the player gets to make choices and shape the story in a multiverse, what isn't canon"?[66]

That very tension between what is and what is not considered canon – and whether it should be even considered in our attempts to make sense of the game's narrative – has, of course, been present in many other franchises. As the "contamination" of the *Star Wars* canon following Disney's acquisition of the company[67] shows, *canon* can prove to be a tricky and rather fluid concept. The novelization is not intended to be the same as the game, but what makes it unique is that it is also difficult to be analyzed fully outside the source text's context. However, since I am less interested in how we would understand Remedy's *canon* material than what even these *alternative* stories tell us about the gameworlds and the player's role in it, I will turn my attention toward the relationship between Rogers' novel (henceforth *Zero State*) and the game (referred further as *Quantum Break*).

As the above quote shows, *Zero State* follows the practice known from film-to-novel adaptations, basing not as much on the ready title but on the script and, since video games differ from film quite substantially in that sense, the cut storyboard plans and ideas – which Rogers was directly involved in. This, however, means that the novel's story does not fully follow the game's events. Some characters, specifically Beth, are given more extensive backstory in the book (as Zed, an assumed name under which she was Jack's ex-partner), while others are completely omitted. The lacunae I want to focus on relate to the representation of choices, which, after all, play such a crucial part in the game where they are referred to as Junction Impacts. There

63 Ibidem, p. 7.
64 Ibidem, p. 8.
65 Ibidem.
66 Ibidem, p. 9.
67 S. Gilmore, *Containing the Canon: The Impact of Disney's Acquisition on Canonicity in the Star Wars Franchise*, "Unbound: A Journal of Digital Scholarship" 2023, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 40–45.

PREVIEW

are four: Hardline/PR (Serene decides whether Monarch reacts with murder or creates a PR campaign against Jack), Personal/Business (after Jack surrenders to Monarch, Serene has to choose whether to focus on his friendship with Jack or his plans for the company), Amaral/Hatch (Serene has to decide which of the two characters to trust – doctor Sofia Amaral or Martin Hatch), and Control/Surrender (Serene decides whether to resist or give in the progressive health and mental deterioration).

These choices, being one of the crucial elements of gameplay, are vastly absent from Cam Roger's novelization, *Quantum Break: Zero State* (2016). The first one, which in the games is the Hardline/PR is presented in the most detail, showing Paul's focus on the potential futures to examine them: "He isolated his awareness of these potential causality streams and focused instead on already expiring streams. Paul's awareness scanned through this fading back-catalog, located the inbound path that had let to the particular moment they now inhabited, and traced it backwards."[68] The scene is then described in the following way:

> Martin Hatch radiated a sudden density of potential, a daisy-head of deeply consequential paths streaming from him. What he said next would determine the shape of the future – the success or failure, potentially, of everything Paul had worked for.
>
> "Release three, then exercise the hard-line option immediately. Civilians and law enforcement are contained, but not for much longer. You have sixty seconds."[69]

Whereas the games establish Paul and Jake – and, later, Tim – as someone capable of traveling between various worlds, each populated by different versions of themselves, Martin Hatch is a different, older being who has mastered the multiverse and functions in it in only one version. Towards the end of the novelization, Jack asks Paul, who now has almost completely succumbed to the time illness, "what's off about [Hatch]?"[70] to which Paul answers reluctantly, "Lives… are messy … Martin's … is not"[71]. Jack's brother asks then: "In all the futures you can see and choose from, Martin Hatch's actions never deviate?"[72]

The narration does not show Paul considering the two possible choices – Hardlines or PR – but rather frames the Hardline choice as the only one that could have occurred. Without the player's involvement – as the one controlling Paul's actions at the very moment – Martin makes a choice, and for him, there is no choice since he always follows one path.

This change is interesting for at least two reasons. On the one hand, it seems to show awareness and emphasize the core difference between how digital games and other media approach the question of agency. Next to interactivity, one of the most

68 C. Rogers, *Quantum Break…*, op. cit., pp. 126–127.
69 Ibidem, p. 127.
70 Ibidem, p. 432.
71 Ibidem, p. 433.
72 Ibidem.

FIRST VIEW

often discussed feature of the video game medium[73], it was originally conceptualized by Janet Murray as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of your decisions and choices."[74] This and most other definitions, such as Noah Wardrip-Fruin et al.'s[75] conceptualization as "a phenomenon involving both the game and the player", firmly "rest on an assumption of a distinction between a conscious, rational player-agent on the one hand and the game on the other."[76] The difference between the game and its novelization, of course, is the medium and how it shapes one's mode of involvement with it. And yet, I would argue that the implied reader of the novel is also a player. The lessened focus on the moments of the choice, because of how significant they were to the experience of the *Quantum Break* gameplay, becomes significant because of the absence.

On the other hand, this change of locus of the agency from Paul (controlled by the player) to Martin (the actual villain) has some interesting implications for our understanding of his character's actual helplessness. In the Remedy multiverse, Paul is one of very few key players who are never seen again, always succumbing to Chronon Syndrome and becoming a Shifter, a time-being in which one's all possible versions are collapsed into one. With the book putting much more emphasis on Paul's point of view than Jake's, the readers are presented with more detailed lore surrounding Shifters: the creatures that feel at peace in the stillness of the world after the end of time, reacting aggressively to all chronon anomalies (like Paul and Jake, and Monarch-mandated weapons capable of creating bubbles in which time flows normally). In *Zero State*, after becoming infected, Paul is continuously hunted by Shifters. One in particular, referred to as Shining Palm, is the most persistent in the pursuit and the most terrifying, only to be eventually revealed as always having been Paul. Eventually, "The Shining Palm, existing four-dimensionally, embraced Paul – embraced itself – at the moment of his/its own re/birth."[77]

In the game, being able to influence the story as Paul, but not Jake, complicates the game's overarching question of whether one can control one's own life where the time seems to be fixed and the events – pre-determined. Disnarrating the moments of choice or showing that the path has already been set in stone by Martin Hatch further shows that the character of Paul never changed. If anything, this can further emphasize the power held by Martin Hatch – the Shifter who has embraced and conquered

[73] C.T. Nguyen, *Games…*, op. cit.; B. Bodi, *Agency in and around Videogames*, PhD diss., University of Nottingham, 2021; M.M. Chojnacki, *Estetyka sprawczości…*, op. cit.

[74] J.H. Murray, *Hamlet…*, op. cit., p. 126.

[75] N. Wardrip-Fruin, M. Mateas, S. Dow, S. Sali, *'Agency Reconsidered.' – Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory. Proceedings of DiGRA 2009*, London, UK, September 1–4, 2009, p. 7.

[76] D. Vella, M. Cielecka, *"You Won't Even Know Who You Are Anymore": Bakthinian Polyphony and the Challenge to the Ludic Subject*, "Baltic Screen Media Review" 2021, Vol. 9, No. 1, p. 92.

[77] C. Rogers, *Quantum Break…*, op. cit., p. 437.

all his alternative selves, becoming what eventually was named the Master of Many Worlds in *Alan Wake 2*.

Still, that first choice reflects the gameplay, albeit with the aforementioned changes. Further, the novel diverges from the representation of the Junctions more and more. The second choice does not seem to be reflected in the novelization. Should the player choose the Private option in the game, the television show episodes show Paul coming to interrogate Jack, while in Business path, it is Martin. In the novel, however, the parallel scene is much shorter, and both men come to see Jake. They exchange only a few sentences before leaving, as Jake loses consciousness from the sustained wounds.

Amaral/Hatch choice does not exist in the novel at all. In the novel, where none of the story is left for the player to be found – and, thus, cannot be not experienced or read – Sofia Amaral's relationship with Paul is more obvious. On the other hand, he never doubts Martin's loyalty or intentions. This differentiates him again from the player, who quickly realizes that Martin is the story's real villain. Moreover, at the point of the third Junction, the game stresses that clearly enough, with both choices ultimately showing Martin handcuffed and taken into custody – although only temporarily.

Finally, these differences and omissions of the latter choices are significant for one additional reason, as it further complicates the relationship between the video game and the television series, having ignored the majority of the latter. The relationship between *Quantum Break* (the game) and *Quantum Break* (the accompanying television show) is quite complex on its own, and I have examined it in more detail elsewhere (Author, upcoming 2024). Although the title has been marketed as a video game, its story is told parallel through the player-dependent gameplay sections and the video that puts them in the role of a more passive observer. While perhaps such a decision stems, again, from the fact that Rogers was using previous versions of the script, it is difficult to fully ignore it, considering how carefully crafted Remedy's and Lake's games are.

Preview

Conclusions

Video game novelizations are not a particularly numerous category, especially when one adapts the more limiting definition that excludes tie-in novels. *Quantum Break: Zero State* drew my attention not only because it rejects the disdain most adaptation scholars seem to have towards novelizations but also because it offers clear examples of references by absence: something that is both a quality of both the book and the game (due to its presence), but also something that differentiates them (due to what and how is omitted). The close reading of Cam Rogers' novelization alongside the theoretical frameworks of Stockwell, Warhol, and Prince reveals the nuanced ways in which these absences function. The novelization of *Quantum Break* exemplifies

how omissions of ludic elements or narrative moments dependent on the player's choice can offer significant clues regarding the interpretation of certain game events as canon.

In examining these omissions, the article highlights the interplay between player agency in the game and the fixed narrative in the novelization. This relationship underscores the unique challenges and creative opportunities in adapting interactive media into a static text. The concept of reference by absence hopefully can enrich our understanding of the adaptation process and provide a valuable tool for analyzing how novelizations can frame and influence the reading of their source texts.

Due to its peculiar copyright situation and the construction of the multiverse universe, Remedy Entertainment's work is a perfect case study of game lacunae and narrative refusals and omissions. The omissions in the novelization are not just an effect of the medium change, but, like Stockwell's lacunae, they make a lasting, "felt effects of attentional neglect."[78] The argument, then, could be made that *Quantum Break* novelization remains aware of its position in that network of texts, and while some omissions are due to the requirements and limitations of the medium, others are used in a more purposeful, or even metareferential manner, thus offering a commentary on the difference in the agency between the player and the reader, speculate about the character's lack of agency, and emphasize and point specific connections and plot points between this and other narratives in Remedy's games.

FIRST VIEW

References

Aarseth E., *Game or Supernovel? Playing and Reading Massive Game Novels*, "European Review" 2023, Vol. 31, No. S1, pp. S66–S76.

Abbott H., Porter H., *Real Mysteries: Narrative and the Unknowable*, The Ohio State University Press, Columbus 2013.

Baetens J., *Novelization, a Contaminated Genre?*, "Critical Inquiry" 2005, Vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 43–60.

Baetens J., *From Screen to Text: Novelization, the Hidden Continent* [in:] D. Cartmell, I. Whelehan (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, pp. 226–238.

Bodi B., Thon J.-N., *Playing Stories? Narrative-Dramatic Agency in Disco Elysium (2019) and Astroneer (2019)*, "Frontiers of Narrative Studies" 2020, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 157–190.

Bódi B., *Agency in and around Videogames*, PhD diss., University of Nottingham, 2021.

Bódi B., *Videogames and Agency*, Taylor & Francis, New York–London 2023.

Chojnacki M.M., *Estetyka sprawczości w grach wideo*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2022.

De Christoforo R., *Grease*, Pocket Books, 1998.

Doherty G., *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, Bragelonne, 2018.

[78] Ibidem, p. 37.

Gee J.P., *Why Game Studies Now? Video Games: A New Art Form*, "Games and Culture" 2006, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 58–61.

Gilmore S., *Containing the Canon: The Impact of Disney's Acquisition on Canonicity in the Star Wars Franchise*, "Unbound: A Journal of Digital Scholarship" 2023, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 40–45.

Harradence M., *Kassandra is Assassin's Creed Odyssey's Canon Character*, "Videogamer", 22.06.2018, https://www.videogamer.com/news/kassandra-is-assassins-creed-odysseys--canon-character/ (accessed: 7.05.2023).

Hutcheon L., *A Theory of Adaptation*, Routledge, New York 2006.

Lambrou M., *Disnarration and the Unmentioned in Fact and Fiction*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, London 2019.

Mahlknecht J., *The Hollywood Novelization: Film as Literature or Literature as Film Promotion?*, "Poetics Today" 2012, Vol. 33, No. 2, pp. 137–168.

Majkowski T., *Języki gropowieści: studia o różnojęzyczności gier cyfrowych*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2019.

Mukherjee S., *Video Games and Storytelling: Reading Games and Playing Books*, Springer, London 2015.

Murray J.H., *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1997.

Newell K., *Expanding Adaptation Networks: From Illustration to Novelization*, Springer, London 2017.

Nguyen C.T., *Games: Agency as Art*, Oxford University Press, New York 2020.

Prince G., *The Disnarrated*, "Style" 1988, No. 22, pp. 1–8.

Rogers C., *Quantum Break: Zero State: A Novel*, Macmillan, 2016.

Ronen R., *Completing the Incompleteness of Fictional Entitie*, "Poetics Today" 1988, Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 497–514.

Ryan M.-L., *Transmedia Storytelling: Industry Buzzword or New Narrative Experience?*, "Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies" 2015, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 1–19.

Salen K., Zimmerman E., *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2003.

Smuts A., *Are Video Games Art?*, "Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)" 2005, Vol. 3, No. 1 (6).

Soumeya M., *Novelization: Another Way of Writing*, "Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers" 2024, Vol. 15 (1), pp. 224–230.

Spelke E., *Principles of Object Perception*, "Cognitive Science" 1990, Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 29–56.

Stockwell P., *The Cognitive Poetics of Literary Resonance*, "Language and Cognition" 2009, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 25–44.

Thabet T., Lanzendörfer T., *The Video Game Novel: StoryWorld Narratives, Novelization, and the Contemporary Novel-Network* [in:] T. Lanzendörfer, C. Norrick-Rühl (red.), *The Novel as Network: Forms, Ideas, Commodities*, Springer, London 2020, pp. 181–201.

Uses Alan Wake 2 To Let Us Know It Still Cares About Quantum Break, GameSpot (blog), https://www.gamespot.com/articles/remedy-uses-alan-wake-2-to-let-us-know-it-still-cares-about-quantum-break/1100-6519064/ (accessed: 4.07.2024).

Van Parys T., *A Fantastic Voyage into Inner Space: Description in Science-Fiction Novelizations*, "Science Fiction Studies" 2011, Vol. 38, No. 2, pp. 288–303.

FIRST VIEW

Van Parys T., *The Commercial Novelization: Research, History, Differentiation*, "Literature/Film Quarterly" 2009, Vol. 37, No. 4, pp. 305–317.
Van Parys T., *The Study of Novelisation: A Typology and Secondary Bibliography*, Belphégor: Littérature Populaire et Culture, 2011.
Vella D., Magdalena M., *"You Won't Even Know Who You Are Anymore": Bakthinian Polyphony and the Challenge to the Ludic Subject*, "Baltic Screen Media Review" 2021, Vol. 9, No. 1, pp. 90–104.
Wardrip-Fruin N., Mateas M., Dow S., Sali S., *'Agency Reconsidered.' – Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory. Proceedings of DiGRA 2009*, London, UK, September 1–4, 2009.
Warhol R., *What Might Have Been Is Not What Is: Dickens's Narrative Refusals*, "Dickensian Studies Annual" 2010, Vol. 41, No. 1, pp. 45–59.
Waszkiewicz A., *Metagames: Games about Games*, Routledge, London–New York 2024.
Wu Y.H., Martin P., *The Narrativization of Ludic Elements in Videogame Fanfiction*, "Convergence" 2024, Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 823–840.

Games cited:

Remedy Entertainment (2001). *Max Payne*. Gathering of Developers.
Remedy Entertainment (2003). *Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne*. Rockstar Games.
Remedy Entertainment (2010). *Alan Wake*. Microsoft Game Studios.
Remedy Entertainment (2016). *Quantum Break*. Microsoft Studios.
Remedy Entertainment (2019). *Control*. 505 Games.
Remedy Entertainment (2023). *Alan Wake 2*. Epic Games Publishing.
Remedy Entertainment (2023). *Alan Wake 2: Night Springs*. Epic Games Publishing.

FIRST VIEW