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Whose narrative is this?

A character's expression of Identity to counter a Hegemonic Narrative

ABSTRACT

As author-driven stories enter the realm of interactive narratives and provide interactors with freedom of choice in narrative paths and endings, this often happens at the character narrative's expense. Positioning this as expressing the character's identity in the face of hegemonic agency, we draw inspiration from the final episode of Marvel's *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law* series to explore how agency can favour the character's narrative. Comparison is made with the player's narrative and the role of identification in matching these together is explored. This is framed in the context of three case studies: two indie games that have experimented with agency at the expense of the character narrative and an interactive TV episode that provided unreliable agency to favour the character's narrative. We then draw seven lessons from these analyses to serve as guidelines for interactive narratives wishing to project character narratives as one of the perspectives presented to the interactor.

1. INTRODUCTION

SPOILER ALERT In the last episode of Marvel Cinematic Universe's series *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law* (Marvel Studios, 2022), titled *Whose show is this?*, we find the main character, Jennifer Walters – or Jen for short – being released from prison on the condition that she gives up her Hulk superpowers. Jen is a lawyer by profession and acquired her Hulk superpowers when her blood was contaminated by that of her cousin Bruce "The Hulk" Banner. While she never wanted these powers, she realises that the forced abdication of them is not just a "reluctant superhero story" but an unfair ending to her character's narrative. In response to this realisation, she asks the audience – breaking the fourth wall is a regular narrative device in this series – whether this is what they want. Then we get a foreshadowing of what is to come as she stops the voice-over

narration as soon as it starts. As the story progresses towards a narratively dissonant ending, she complains that the storylines are not making any sense and asks the audience whether the story is working for them. A streaming service menu screen comes up to silence her, but she counters it by breaking through her show's screen and jumping across into another of Marvel's series. She then walks off the set and marches into her own production team's meeting room where they are discussing the next season. She complains about the lack of originality in her final episode to which one of the writers retorts that *"there are certain things that are supposed to happen in a superhero story."*

Formulaic endings are a very common situation for gamers who are herded into a prescribed narrative with its outcome dictated by the game's structure and afforded choices. A constant tug-of-war between authors and players, game narratives try to find a compromise between providing players with freedom of interactivity while restraining the narrative to fit within the target closure (Aylett & Louchart, 2003; Harrell & Zhu, 2009; Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum, 2009). This hegemonic approach to storytelling in games may be acceptable when compensated by the provided gameplay interaction in the resulting experience. But in case of interactive narratives, where the focus is on the narrative and the choices that go along with it, the hegemonic narrative as the dominant perspective is brought into question.

Within the context of video games, the literature often considers only two competing narratives: the author narrative and the player narrative (Bryan, 2013; Bryce & Rutter, 2002; Grace, 2019). From a narratological perspective, the author narrative is the telling of pre-scripted events happening to a set of characters inhabiting some particular storyworld (Jahn, 2005). However, Barthes (1968) argued that once a narrative is created, the author's narrative gives way to the interpretation of the reader in the light of their own perspectives. This is highly evident in video games, particularly in interactive narratives where we introduce interaction at the level of narrative, expanding the narrative space to accommodate the player's potential narratives (Bryan, 2013). The author's narrative is represented by the branching narrative structure of decision points and end-points, often replete with branches converging to the same endpoint. The player's narrative is represented by the freedom to explore further and backwards at each decision point, the take up of side-quests away from what Bateman (2006) calls the 'Golden Path.' The author's narrative is also present in the judgement of the endings: whether they are 'good' or 'bad' endings, whether the player wins or loses. Indeed, each player action is deemed to be 'good' or 'bad' based on how closer is the narrative goal as a result of that action (Adams, 2010). Thus, in setting goals for a narrative, an author's narrative is made manifest.

However, a potential narrative that is largely silenced is that of the character, with literature often treating the player and their character as one 'player-character' (Hefner et al., 2007; Stang, 2019; Westecott, 2009). When character traits are presented, it is only as a 'contact point between the player and game'

(Lankoski, 2011, p. 306) whose goals 'limit plausible actions for players if they want to progress in a game…' (Lankoski, 2011, p. 300). By character narrative, we understand narrative choices that favour the development of the character arc, even in spite of the player's preferred narrative and the author's narrative goals. In *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law* we see how Jen negotiates an ending that better fits her character's narrative rather than the stereotypical ending imposed upon her. Identification with the player's character (Hefner et al., 2007; Klimmt et al., 2010) goes a long way in matching the player's narrative to the character's narrative (cf. goal related engagement (Lankoski, 2011)), but any shortfall in identification is more often than not to the detriment of the character's narrative, not the player's. As Lankoski affirms, "positive engagement with a game does not require positive evaluation of a player character" (Lankoski, 2011, p. 306). An approach that dissects the player-character is one that projects the player as a companion to the non-player character protagonist – what Larsen (2018) calls a 'virtual side-kick.' In *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law* we see how Jen often breaks the fourth wall to address and share her feelings with the audience, casting them into a passive side-kick.

In this paper we carry out a close reading of the (non-interactive) final episode of *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law* to understand the role that the character's narrative can play alongside the author's and player's narrative. We start by positioning the storyworld and its rules, as well as the provided interactions meant to facilitate player narratives, as part of the author's hegemonic structure. We support our argument by drawing from two indie games and an interactive episode from another TV series. We then describe the player's identification with the character as a means to converge the player's narrative with the character's narrative, facilitated by the breaking of the fourth wall but modulated by the afforded interaction. We conclude by outlining seven lessons derived from our analysis that may serve as guidelines for future interactive digital narratives.

2. STORYWORLDS' HEGEMONY

With interactive narratives aiming to provide interactors with some level of control over the narrative, ideally over the plot of the story, rather than just the narration of the telling, what remains to be controlled are the characters and the storyworld. As characters develop along the story (cf. hero's inner and outer journeys (Vogler, 2007)), they are liable to be shaped by the events in the narrative and thus remain within reach of the interactor's agency. Less so is the storyworld in which the author retains the majority of control and uses it to reinforce aspects of their narrative, such as mood and emotions (Domsch, 2019). Jenkins describes game designers as narrative architects (Jenkins, 2004) through their ability to shape stories based on the storyworlds they create. Tosca and Klastrup extend this beyond games to transmedia storytelling through their concept of transmedial worlds from which "a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized" (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004, p. 409). Video games that are part

of this repertoire employ game rules that are closely tied to, and help support, the imagining of the game's storyworld (Juul, 2005). Not all gameplay supports the narrative, however, as reported in Hocking's criticism (2007) of LudoNarrative Dissonance in *BioShock* (2K Games, 2007). We argue that the rules of the storyworld, as imagined and dictated by the author, impose a functional structure onto the game's interaction and form part of the author's narrative.

3. INTERACTION AS HEGEMONY

Hockley (1996) criticised the definition of interactivity as providing power to the user when all it does is merely to provide the 'illusion of control' by "broaden[ing] the paradigmatic set from which the viewer makes choices" (p. 10), particularly in its interpretation as "a concrete, quasi mechanical relationship with machine or software" (p. 10). Rieser (1997) interprets this illusion of control as the "power structures which control the media attempting to maintain their hegemony through safely limiting the forms of interactivity" (p. 10), while Meier sees games as "a form of rule-based learning of game structures which can be seen as a reflection of hegemonic society" (2015, p. 3). Video games themselves can be placed on a continuum between Games of Progression, which present sequential challenges that lead the player from beginning to the end of an authored story, and Games of Emergence, where game mechanics are chosen and combined in such a way that they lead to emergent gameplay and give more space for the player's story (Adams, 2010; Juul, 2005). Yet, these are still bounded by the choices made in production. Bryan comments on how both the author's narrative space and the player's narrative space exist "within the limitations of whatever system the gamespace exists within" (Bryan, 2013, p. 34). Thus, hegemony not only manifests itself in the author-driven story, but also in player-driven stories whereby the afforded interaction is controlled by the hegemonic parameterisation of such interaction by the author of the digital experience (cf. 'regulating goals' (Lankoski, 2011)).

Indeed, Rieser criticises the modelling of interactive narratives on computer games and their inherent structure (1997, p. 13) and argues for novel structures where "the user is freed both from the slavery of linearity and the reductivism of branching plot choices" (1997, p. 13). Interactive narratives are different from classical narratological structures in that they are systemic structures (Koenitz et al., 2021) that adapt to the user's interaction rather than prescribe the paths available to the interactor. Koenitz further argues that in order to not be confined within the spaces of traditional media, one must think of the interaction as the driving force of IDNs and that the medium has to be digital in order to afford interaction. Rieser even demands the invention of a coherent artistic language for interaction that transcends the established syntax of earlier forms and media (Rieser, 1997, p. 12).

Such variation from established genres, however, comes with its financial risks and it is no surprise that big game studios shy away from experimenting

with well-established genres and it is therefore in TV series and indie games that we more often find interesting offerings. *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (Slade, 2018), *Papers, Please* (Pope, 2013) and *The Stanley Parable* (Wreden & Pugh, 2011) are typical examples of such successful experiments (M. Kelly, 2018; Kubiński, 2017; Rezk & Haahr, 2020).

Black Mirror: Bandersnatch (Slade, 2018) is an interactive production published on the streaming platform Netflix, which provides viewers with the opportunity to choose a narrative path via binary options at key stages of the story (Rezk & Haahr, 2020). Starting with a small number of trivial (and non-consequential) choices in order to train the general public in how to handle the interaction, the choices soon become narrative-changing decisions that need to be made within a few seconds before a default choice is made. Some choices lead to dead ends which restart the narrative experience, forcing the viewers to choose a different option in order to progress the narrative. The interactive system is not consistent in the character's abiding by the player's choices, however, making for a confusing relationship between agency and narrative outcome.

Papers, Please (Pope, 2013) presents the player with the role of an immigration inspector, tasked to check the documentation of entrants to the fictitious country of Arstotzka in 1982, denying access to the country if the documents do not meet the specified criteria. With a family to feed and tend to, any infraction causes a decrease in pay, or even getting fired, resulting in potential loss of family members as they succumb to ill health, cold, or malnutrition. Thus, the player is compelled to obey the ever-increasing instructions but is challenged by the stories arising from interactions with the entrants, contextualised within a conflict with neighbouring states. Thus, between the player's ability to detect inconsistencies in the documentation and being swayed by the entrants' requests, the player has to balance between abiding by the rules to help his family survive and making infractions to carve their own survival in a turbulent country.

The Stanley Parable (Wreden & Pugh, 2011) similarly presents an employee, Stanley, whose monotonous servile job of button-pusher gets interrupted by an unusual cessation of his continuous instructions. The player is invited to help Stanley find out why he has been left alone to his own devices, guided by the instructions of the narrator whose voice-over describes the player's upcoming actions as a *fait-accompli*. Non-conformance with these instructions results in an initial frustration in the narrator, evolving into a direct address of the player asking them why they are unable to follow instructions like Stanley, and breaking the fourth wall for the player.

4. BREAKING THE FOURTH WALL
The audience of theatre and film, due to their unknown and unpredictable nature, are not part of the author's narrative and are usually not included in the narrative, serving only as silent observers and consumers of the performance. Indeed, the maxim never to look at the camera is considered crucial to immer-

sion, as making the audience visible to the characters breaks narrative immersion by "attacking the spectator's voyeurism" (Vernet, 1989, p. 48). When the audience is addressed during a theatrical performance, they are mostly in a comedic context – such as pantomimes – where the performer can defuse any off the rail replies from the audience by making fun of them and dismissing them as a comedic contribution. In film, where no audience feedback can jeopardize the ongoing narrative, the metaphoric fourth wall is broken to differentiate a character from the rest of the cast: such as in *House of Cards* (1990) or *Deadpool* (1997). They are characters who are able to see beyond the fabric of diegesis and are aware of the real world of the audience – what Vernet calls a 'meta-character… [both] witness … and commentator' (Vernet, 1989, p. 53). They go against the maxim and reach out to the audience, providing a rebellious nature against the hegemony of diegetic performance. Breaking the fourth wall has been used to provide an unexpected ending in *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*: choosing to jump out of the therapy room's window results in the camera pulling back to show that it is all a set and that the window is just a prop.

The result of Walters' breaking the fourth wall in *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law* to address the audience serves to help build a rapport with the viewers of the series. It establishes a communication channel which is predominantly one-way as the character shares her thoughts with the audience while the story moves forward. In the penultimate episode of the series, when Jen feels that her character has had her closure, she asks the audience why they are still there, why has the episode not ended yet. She then realises that there is a tacked-on scene and that it is the next episode that is the finale. In the extended scene, Jen is betrayed and gives in to her Hulk personality, causing the havoc the audience are used to see from Bruce Banner's Hulk. But, unlike her cousin, whose mayhem is lauded, she ends up in prison. In the finale, while trying to uncover who was behind her betrayal, she feels that the story is getting completely out of hand, and in desperation re-addresses the audience, asking them if this is what they wanted, if this "works for them." This has the effect of generating sympathy, of getting the audience on her side as she prepares to challenge the hegemony of the imposed author-driven story.

5. IDENTITY AND IDENTIFICATION

The choice of She-Hulk as a case study for the topic of counter-hegemony and expression of identity is not a coincidence. We have two discernible identities that represent the self-reflective ipse-identity and the external self idem-identity (Ricoeur, 1992) in the personas of Jen Walters and She-Hulk respectively. Moreover, Mitchell (2015) presents the She-Hulk character in the comics (upon which the TV series mentioned above is based) as a "monstrous feminine, confronting patriarchal power structures by challenging what constitutes the 'normal' as an attorney, as a woman and as a superhero" (Mitchell, 2015, p. 447). The power structure is provided by the law firm she is employed into,

run by the stereotypical 'White Man of the North;' by the harassment she suffers as a woman at the hands of thugs, lawyers, suitors and other female characters; and by the comparison of her to The Hulk by the general public – with the given name She-Hulk reflecting her being considered a female version of The Hulk. Through her She-Hulk identity she discovers that she is better able to challenge these power structures – "the only way to be free from patriarchal power structures is by becoming the monstrous and supernatural" (Mitchell, 2015, p. 474) – and thus prefers this alternate identity to her normal self: both as a lawyer and as a love interest for her suitors.

While the original She-Hulk comic character itself is a product of the second-wave feminism of the 1970s that promoted gender equality (Mitchell, 2015), the release of the TV series *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law* about fifty years later finds an audience that is once again challenging gender inequality, and thus open for identification with the protagonist, with identification here understood as "an imaginative experience in which a person surrenders consciousness of his or her own identity and experiences the world through someone else's point of view" (Cohen, 2001, p. 248). Bondi claims, however, that "power-laden differences [including] race, class, age, sexuality, … have the potential to disrupt any possibility of identification" (Bondi, 2003, p. 66) in interpersonal relationships. This may explain the use of breaking the fourth wall from the first episode and throughout the season, helping the character build a rapport with her audience that will see them accepting and lauding the mayhem she creates in the narrative in the final episode, not as a superheroine, but as a lawyer. Through this rapport, she makes her character's narrative outcome a desired goal for her audience.

While identification with film characters has been argued against (Barker, 2005), it is a common phenomenon in games (Klimmt et al., 2010). Aided through afforded agency, players take on the role of their assigned characters by performing actions on their behalf – what Cohen calls a 'vicarious experience' (Cohen, 2001, p. 249). However, players have to negotiate a narrative identity between their own self-identity and the target character as depicted by the author, based on the afforded interaction (Barbara & Haahr, 2022). As Heron and Belford point out, "[w]hile the narrative structure of games may offer opportunities for empathy and identification with player characters, the ludic requirements of balance serve to instantiate limits on both player agency and the viable set of actions" (Heron & Belford, 2014, p. 34). Thus, the nature of interactive narratives introduces an element that competes for dominance with the hegemonic power structures put in place by the author and its challenge by the narrative's characters: the player narrative.

6. CHARACTER'S NARRATIVE AND *BLACK MIRROR: BANDERSNATCH*

While it is true that the character's narrative is fundamentally still written by the author, we can see a competition between the characters and the rules of

the author's storyworld, what McKee calls 'external conflict' (McKee, 1998). Character-driven storytelling – where the plot develops along the characters' arc rather than a fixed target point that has to be reached – is found in film, such as film director Quentin Tarantino's character-based scriptwriting as explained during an interview with Vulture,[1] and also in games: "Characters have a right to their own lives in games" (Sheldon, 2014, p. 41). Character-driven storytelling is also a design methodology (Lankoski, 2010; Mariani & Ciancia, 2019) wherein "characters can be seen as narrative entities through which the audience is able to enter vicariously the storyworlds" (Mariani & Ciancia, 2019, p. 15).

In traditional non-interactive media, what determines whether the character is perceived to reach their full potential in the narrative is the audience's consumption of the narrative through the medium's affordance. The reader chooses whether to read a novel until the end or to stop along the way, never achieving closure. On screen, the viewer may decide to abandon the movie half way or to not watch the remaining episodes in a TV series. In interactive media, however, the player is given a more active involvement into the progression of the narrative: following a path that may be chosen to meet the player's idea of where the story should go, which may or may not match the character's idea of closure. Sometimes it is fenced in by the provided agency: in *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008), the game mechanics are all about street crime whilst the main character's story, Niko Bellic, is about wanting to give up the life of crime and retire. Thus, as the player takes advantage of the afforded agency in causing mayhem in the streets of Liberty City, each action detracts from Niko's ultimate aim of finding peace.

In the interactive TV series episode *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, a couple of scenes present two options to the viewer, with both actions going against the character's intentions. This seems to have the author narrative being forced onto the player. Yet, in the first instance, the character does not obey the player's instructions and thus keeps their goals in play. In the second instance however, another character follows the instructions and the player's narrative subdues that of the character. Undermining the player's authority over the narrative for the benefit of the character, especially in an inconsistent manner, is risky as it devalues the meaningfulness of the player's agency (cf. 'commitment to meaning' (Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum, 2009)).

7. NARRATIVE ENDINGS IN *PAPER, PLEASE*

In *Papers, Please* (Pope, 2013) we do not know much about the protagonist except that he has been chosen by lottery to work as an inspector on the border city of Grestin with his family being given lodging close by in East Grestin. At the end of each working day, we are given an account of his savings, salary and expenses in terms of food, rent and heat, beside a health status for all his family members. The game has 20 different predefined endings which reflect the choices made during the player's narrative. These endings can be grouped into three generic outcomes: (1) carrying out the orders given by the Government

1. https://www.vulture.com/2015/08/quentin-tarantino-lane-brown-in-conversation.htm

of Arstotzka and thus bow to the power of the regime, (2) supporting the rebel order of EZIC whose aim is to overthrow the government of Arstotzka, thus taking a counter-hegemonic stand, and (3) fleeing the country with or without members of the family. Given the only information we have about the inspector at the beginning of the game and the daily statement report, we can safely assume that the family is a key motivation for his character and every action taken will be judged in relation to their safety. Thus, fulfilling his job to the letter without infractions that might diminish his salary needed to maintain his family can be seen as a possible target for the inspector's character, bowing to the hegemony of the Arstotzka government. Had he to challenge and retaliate against his government's strict controls, it would involve seeking to take as many members of his family away to safety. Supporting a rebel organisation to bring instability to the country seems to be the least favourable outcome of the three for the safety of his family but it surely makes up for attractive action and turbulence for a detached observer, such as the player. So, for the sake of the argument we can say that outcome (1) is supporting the hegemonic power structure (the author`s narrative storyworld); outcome (2) jeopardizes the character's national and familial stability for the sake of action (the player narrative); and outcome (3) is a character ending that meets his priority of family safety (the character narrative).

8. THE NARRATOR IN *THE STANLEY PARABLE*

In both theatre and film, the narrator, whether a diegetic character or a non-diegetic voice, is aware of, and addresses, the audience. The narrator is a transdiegetic character that is witness to the action and commentator to the viewers (Vernet, 1989). In games, the role of the narrator is altered due to the agency given to the audience. The narrator is aware that the audience is an able player, at whose hands lies the driving force of the game. Thus, the role of the game narrator is not limited to explaining the narrative to the spectator, but also to explain to the 'spect-actor' – to use the name given to the audience of the interactive *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal, 2014) – how their actions can help shape the game's narrative.

In *The Stanley Parable* (Wreden & Pugh, 2011) the narrator, representing the hegemonic power of the author's storyworld, takes centre stage as the voice guiding the player's choices for the main character, Stanley. Stanley had a set life prior to the player's arrival: pushing buttons as instructed by the screen in front of him. It is only when these instructions stop arriving that Stanley is in need of someone else to make the choices for him, and that is where the player comes in. The narrator, commenting on what is to happen, projects a narrative that, if followed by the player, makes Stanley obey the hegemonic structure he is employed with and retorts sarcastically when the player chooses otherwise. At some points, such as in the broom cupboard scene, the narrator addresses the player directly, breaking the fourth wall by distinguishing between the player

and Stanley. It is made clear that the game is aware of the player, and that Stanley is still living up to his boring life of obeying the orders of others. Whereas before he obeyed the on-screen instructions to follow the author's narrative, now he obeys the controls of the player to follow the player's narrative. Thus, in the case of Stanley, there is no character narrative, also because the game itself is a reflection on the illusion of choice that games give to players, rather than the game being a proper narrative in itself.

This is in contrast with how the narrative plays out in *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law*'s last episode. As Jen is realising that the story is not serving her character's narrative and asks the audience if this is what they want, the narrator interrupts with a voice-over that describes her character as having reached a new low and claims that Jen is giving up. She takes over again with a resolute 'No!' and shuts the narrator off. This is the first sign of Jen taking control over her narrative. She then sends a private message to her cousin The Hulk but gets no reply. She then asks one of her superhero clients, Emil 'the Abomination' Bronsky, whether his offer to stay at his healing resort was still open. As we shall see later, in doing so she still plays into the author's narrative but does so on her own terms because, without waiting for Emil's reply, she decides that this is a time to take up his 'anytime' offer. As she is packing up to go, she remembers her audience, always watching, and, owing to the relationship she has been nurturing, feels like she has to explain herself. She declares she's not running away from her problems but taking a mental health break.

9. CHARACTER EXPRESSION IN *SHE-HULK: ATTORNEY AT LAW*

Unbeknownst to Jen, the resort is serving as the venue for a meeting of *Intelligencia*, a group trying to attack her image led by one of her past suitors who is jealous of her superpower and responsible for her betrayal at the party in the penultimate episode. Stumbling upon their meeting, which her client Emil was cluelessly addressing in his Abominable form, results in a scuffle that includes The Hulk coming to save the day. It is a stereotypical superhero ending that has already been used in the previous episode and in that instance landed Jen in jail. If the ending turns out well this time, an interpretation could be that her She-Hulk character was inferior to The Hulk. It was an ending that did not make sense for Jen, and she therefore protests to the camera. At this point, the episode is interrupted by the menu, and Jen grabs the opportunity to literally break through the menu's wall in order to reach across to the Avengers set and make her way to her production team, as we been described in the introduction. There the narrative continues with Jen (as She-Hulk) slamming her fists on the desk and suggesting that they (the production team) do the story their own way rather than following the traditional superhero ending. At this point, she learns of Kevin (the implied author) who is making all the decisions based on "the most advanced entertainment algorithm in the world." There follows a brief argument as to whose show it is: Jen's or Kevin's. This resolves to an agreement that the show is a legal

comedy, and this allows Jen (now in her human form at Kevin's request) to act her role as a professional lawyer and argue her way out of a super-soldier-serum[2] ending and towards one that better fits her character's narrative. Giving in to her requests, Kevin removes all three of the plots involving the male characters (the Intelligencia mastermind, The Hulk, and Abomination) and brings back her love interest into the story. On her return to the episode, back in Hulk form, she approaches the Intelligencia mastermind who, having been apprehended by the police and feeling vulnerable, closes his eyes expecting Hulk-like retribution. Instead, Jen morphs back into her human form and postpones the retribution to court. No Hulk smash ending for Jen, but a lawyer's way of dealing with problems, as befits her human character, allowing her to express her identity.

10. LESSONS FOR INTERACTIVE DIGITAL NARRATIVES

What can we learn from this final episode of She-Hulk, in the light of a hegemonic structure that suppresses one's identity? Also drawing from *Papers, Please, The Stanley Parable*, and *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, we now consider some takeaways to be considered when designing IDNs.

1.   Provide a narrative that provides closure for the character

They key takeaway is that besides the author's narrative and the player's narrative, characters have the right to their own character narrative too, especially in an environment where they are oppressed and misrepresented, such as Jen Walters in *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law*. IDNs ought to present narrative pathways that favour the character's closure as equally as those providing the player's narrative and the author's narrative. However one should be honest about the afforded agency: forcing an option that subsumes the character's narrative and then have the character ignore the player's action thwarts the players agency, as has been reported on *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (Rezk & Haahr, 2020). Other takeaways arise from our exploration of the literature and other games throughout the article.

2.   Provide interaction that is consonant with the narrative

By considering the hegemony of interaction, we commented on how the agency provided to the interactor in itself shapes the player narrative experience. Games in general may afford some level of dissonance between gameplay and game story if their focus is on providing a fun gameplay experience. We argue, however, that interactive narratives, representing a complex phenomenon through their focus on the narrative (Barbara, 2018; Koenitz et al., 2021), are expected to provide interaction that is consonant with the story being told in order to assist in its interpretation.

3.   Facilitate the player's identification with the character

Breaking the fourth wall may serve as a comedic trope that undermines the rigidity of a narrative, but in the *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law* series this helped build a relationship with the audience to facilitate empathy and identification. In video games, identification is needed to bring the player narrative as close as possible to the character narrative, especially when a character narrative

2. The super-soldier serum is a key plot in the Marvel universe in which normal humans are injected with a serum to gain superpowers (e.g., Captain America and Black Widow).

is not facilitated and all depends on the player's narrative. The player narrative becomes the character's narrative if the player is able to identify with the character. If they fall short of this identification, then their narrative identity will serve the player's narrative, and not the character's. The inspector played in *Papers, Please* was only outlined in terms of his family members' dependency on him, limiting the level of identification. While this projected a target situation of family survival, it afforded a risky player's narrative that the inspector would not have willingly chosen over the safety of his family.

4.   Write well-defined characters

For identification to happen, the character needs to be well defined such that there is a distinction between the character and the player. In *The Stanley Parable*, the player's character was a husk of a person without a will of their own, and thus there could never be a character narrative, just the implied author's (cf. Booth, 1961) (delivered through the narrator's instructions) and the player's narrative (delivered through resistance to the narrator's instructions).

5.   Do not create strong narrators that overshadow the characters

A strong narrator may compete with the player's and character's narratives by pushing the author's narrative forward, as in *The Stanley Parable*. The narrator's transdiegetic nature gives it a powerful presence that may compete with each narrative on its own turf. It is a very risky narrative device to employ and caution must be taken not to cause any imbalance towards one narrative over another.

6.   Write unique character narratives that avoid stereotypes

Character narratives should be careful not to fall into stereotypical endings. Characters find their identity through their uniqueness and endings should match their character as closely as possible – just like Jen Walters used her lawyer's profession to win the argument for her season's finale. Stereotypical endings can be relegated to the player narratives so as to meet genre expectations.

7.   Cast the player as a sidekick to shift attention onto the protagonist character

In closing, we wish to bring forward another option that was hinted at in the introduction and may well serve the need for a character narrative. This is the concept of assigning the players the role of a protagonist's sidekick (Larsen, 2018), potentially of multiple characters such that the player is not tied to a single character (Rezk & Haahr, 2020). In this scenario the player narrative(s) develop(s) alongside that of the character narrative as the player fulfils a secondary role rather than that of the protagonist, just like in the *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law* series where the audience is a companion to the She-Hulk character.

11. CONCLUSION

Counter-Hegemonic narratives traditionally present situations where one or more characters rebel against a tyrannical power structure and are able to express their own unique identity such as in films like *Happy Feet* (Miller, 2006) and *AntZ* (Darnell & Johnson, 1998) and the novel (and later TV series adap-

tation) *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1985). In this article, we shift our focus onto the hegemonic nature of the interactive system and how it affords player narratives at the behest of the intended author narrative. However, we argue that interactive narratives ought to also afford character narratives that serve the expression of the protagonist's identity rather than the player's. Matching the player's narrative to the character's narrative requires a high level of identification, which is a challenging task that often falls short of meeting the player's narrative objectives with the character's stakes in the story. We thus provide some guidelines built on lessons learnt from the *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law* series, the *Black: Mirror: Bandersnatch* episode, as well as from indie games *Papers, Please* and *The Stanley Parable*.

While we appreciate that translating tropes and techniques from non-interactive media onto interactive narratives does not contribute to the freedom sought in this blossoming creative and academic field, we do think that attempts to break free from such media forms are welcome inspirations for comparative outcomes in interactive narratives. We encourage further similar reflections and hopefully adoption of these lessons in future IDNs.

Finally, the ultimate expression of identity to counter hegemonic narratives is given by Jen Walters in defending her obliteration of Kevin's algorithmically determined ending: "It's what Hulks do. We smash things. Bruce [The Hulk] smashes buildings. I smash fourth walls and bad endings."

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