The role of Visual Novels as a Narrative Medium

Dennis van der Geest

s0922544

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Chapter 1: Introduction

There are typical opinions on video games, often based on assumed violence, being detrimental to school or work, decreasing attention span, or anything about various eye conditions, posture, etc. However, these are slowly set aside to make place for a more appreciative attitude. A separate field of study has formed to study video games from a more scientific angle. This field is called *ludology* and is concerned with everything that is related to video games, from programming to game design to narrative. This thesis will deal with the last issue: video game narrative. As soon as one says narrative, one other field of study comes to mind: *narratology*, which is about all kinds of narrative, ranging from literature to dance and traditional storytelling. Other fields of study relating to video game narrative include linguistics and psychology.

The question I will be addressing in this thesis is 'what is the role of visual novels as a narrative medium?' This question will be divided into several parts, with one chapter devoted to each part.

I have already mentioned narrative and the fields of study related to it, and so the next question to be asked is 'What are visual novels?'. Visual novels are a genre of video games that typically have little game play elements and a greater focus on the storyline. Therefore it is a good genre to use when looking at the definitions of terms, such as 'game', 'narrative' and so on. This is due to the fact that most visual novels tend to stretch these definitions, being very un-game-like games and having un-story-like narratives.

In setting out the scope for my thesis, I will only use the fields of narratology and literary science for the sake of their definition and for critically examining the field of ludology, and relevant articles in linguistics and psychology. I will not examine the stories and storylines involved in visual novels, but the phenomena of visual novels as a narrative medium itself. It is important to discuss the storylines in order to better explain visual novels, but dissecting the storylines and characters involved is not part of this thesis. Narratology and ludology together are simply required when talking about video game narrative, as both fields have developed their own necessary ideas on the topic. Discussing and placing video game narrative in a broader picture of narrative is not just a task for ludologists and narratologists, but (cognitive) linguists and some psychologists have also done research in this area.

The first chapter will deal with the work done by ludologists and narratologists in the area of video game narrative and its place. In the second chapter I will go into explaining visual novels, including examples. The third chapter will be a-directed attempt to answer the main question, referring to both previous chapters.

In relation to videogames as a topic of study: as mentioned in the first paragraph, video games are still highly underrepresented in academics. The field of ludology is small and young, while in today's society the effect of video games on culture may be greater than the effect of film, for instance: in 2007 video game revenue surpassed film revenue in the Netherlands (Webwereld, 2007). Sources on video game narrative are hard to find, and few currently exist. For this reason, many sources in the second and third chapter are blogs kept by video game producers, critics and others in the business. Video games are rapidly developing and improving, yet this is not always reflected in the attention given to video games, even on these blogs. These blogs often link to other sources as much as possible, and they will also criticise their own line of work when they feel it is necessary. The size of the gaming industry in the Netherlands provides employment to about 3000 people over 330 companies, and the 'genre' of 'serious games' is fairly big in the Netherlands (Meeus, 2014). Several Dutch universities and 'hogescholen' have started offering courses in game studies, mainly focusing

on design, programming and development. This is a good indication of how video games have matured and the impact they have on society.

In setting out the topic and scope of this thesis, I envisioned the field of semiotics to play a large part. However, the debate on ludology and narratology already covered many aspects of video game narrative. In leaving out semiotics, I ended up with fewer relevant sources for my thesis. The field of semiotics alone does not answer the question of where visual novels (or video games in general) can be placed as narrative media, and this is why I chose to discuss ludology and narratology. Therefore, it is important to make note of the role of semiotics in visual novels/video games, regardless of their place within narrative media. Primarily, I derive definitions from the field of semiotics, although, definitions will remain an obstacle. I will review some debates on definitions in the relevant chapters (what is a game?, what is a visual novel?), however some definitions are beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss. Different authors use different definitions, and this makes the contrasting of sources problematic. Daniel Chandler (1994), in his introductory semiotics book, presents some definitions that are useful to provide an overview of semiotics.

> "The term text usually refers to a message which has been recorded in some way (e.g. writing, audio and video-recording) so that it is physically independent of its sender or receiver. A text is an assemblage of signs (such as words, images, sounds and/or gestures) constructed (and interpreted) with reference to the conventions associated with a genre and in a particular medium of communication." (p. 9)

I will not use the term 'text' in the same way as Chandler. Due to this thesis covering video games, I have substituted the word 'text' with words such as 'game' and 'dialogue'. The same still applies as independence from sender and receiver is important. Most in-game text is presented as if it were spoken text, said by a fictional character (with context and a personality of their own). The 'assemblage of signs' also applies: sounds and gestures are included in visual novels by use of soundtracks, sound effects, character design including different 'sprites' (images) for different emotions. The crux of this thesis is described in the final part of Chandler's passage: conventions associated with a genre and medium. The genre is visual novels, or adventure games (more about the name of the genre in chapter 3), and the medium is video games (more on the limits of the genre in chapter 3, and more on interactivity in chapter 4). The last part of Chandlers definition of text (") with reference to the conventions associated with a genre") is relevant to video games as video games/visual novels refer to popular culture and other video games. This is confusing to those who are not interested in video games, as references to other works of literature are confusing to those who are not involved with literature. Other than that, many conventions of written word still apply, but are often applied to video games/visual novels in a new way that fits the medium. We will see that this is the core of the debate between narratologists and ludologists (see chapter 2).

Chandler offers a definition of 'medium', which has been used often in this thesis.

> "The term 'medium' is used in a variety of ways by different theorists, and may include such broad categories as speech and writing or print and broadcasting or relate to specific technical forms within the mass media (radio, television, newspapers, magazines, books, photographs, films and records) or the media of interpersonal communication (telephone, letter, fax, e-mail, video-conferencing, computer-based chat systems)." (p.9)

In relation to video games, I have used 'medium' to refer to 'specific technical forms within the mass media'.

The word 'genre' is used in this thesis, however. Chandler does not offer a very clear definition of this, and often uses 'medium' and 'genre' interchangeably. Therefore, I have used 'genre' only to refer to different genres of video games, dividing the medium of video games into many different genres, such as visual novels. As with different media, different genres also require their own context: as one would expect different vocabularies in movies and in literature, there are also differences in text, style and vocabulary between different genres of video games: compare

educational games with first person shooters. Both require their own form of jargon, with the first using words to calmly explain terms to the player, while the second tries to hype the player up. Obviously there are differences in entertainment value, but that too is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Lastly, in reference to the many blogs presented in this thesis: I did not include page numbering as most blog posts are contained on one page. However, a search within a webpage for a specific quote will bring up the relevant passage.

Chapter 2: Ludology and Narratology

In this chapter, I will explore two fields of study which are vital in understanding video game narrative. These are narratology and ludology. The former examines video games in the same way it deals with other narratives (literature, film, etc.), and the latter proposes that video games are to be examined in a unique way. The field of ludology (also known as game studies, or sometimes even as game theory) is concerned with games in general (not just video games; it also includes 'traditional' table top games/board games), and just one of its many focuses is video game narrative. However, even ludologists themselves have differing ideas on what ludology is, what it should study, and in what way. This is because it is a young field, and it is uncommon to find an article on video games dating back before 2000. A fierce debate on how video games should be studied has developed in just the past two decades, either with narratologists on one side and ludologists on the other, or with ludologists on either side of the debate.

From here I will spend some time on both fields of study and the differences between the two. Later in the chapter I will go into more depth in explaining how there are similarities between the two fields, especially since ludologists and narratologists have tried to combine ideas from both fields together.

1. Narratology

Narratology is an older field of study than ludology. While ludology emerged in the 90s, narratology was already established in the late 60s and 70s, following a 1966 journal issue titled "The structural analysis of narrative", and the name for the field was conceived in 1969. Within narratology, there are broad and narrow definitions of what the field should study: one accepts only narrated (spoken) texts and stories, the other includes any medium that tells a story (even including dance), as reported by Jahn's *Narratology: A Guide to the Theory of Narrative* (2005, paragraph N.2.1.1).

A few basic assumptions form the basis for research in the field (Jenkins, 2004). The first is that the entire spectrum of narrative consists of different disciplines. These range from literature to storytelling, but also cinema, dance and others. The second assumption is that a narrative in one of these disciplines cannot always be easily 'translated' to another discipline: a book needs to be specifically adapted before it can be made into a movie. As Daniel Chandler says in his *Introduction to Semiotics*: "Every medium is constrained by the channels which it utilizes ... Different media and genres provide different frameworks for representing experience, facilitating some forms of expression and inhibiting others." (1994, p.9).
The way video games come into this narratology approach is that video games are simply another discipline within narrative and narration (Jenkins, 2004). This means that games can be examined in the same way as other disciplines, and also that games require their own frame of reference, as per the first supposition of narratology. This means that like literature, dance and poetry, the field of video games requires its own jargon to talk about the discipline in question, but this also means that video games are just another kind of narrative that can be 'translated' into a different discipline (for

instance, a movie based on a video game). Because of these two criteria, video games seem to belong with narratology: presumably the field needs some time to develop a frame of reference for games in order to be able to discuss them.
What constitutes as a genre within narratology, deserving of its own frame of reference? In Jahn's work, he aims to set up a basic taxonomy of narrative genres. He discerns narratives (written/printed and performed) and non-narratives (lyrics, poems). Within written and printed narratives, he includes scripts (plays, film, opera), narrative poems, short stories and novels. He does remark that his diagram is not exhaustive, and that he always leaves the option 'other' for any node in the diagram. Moreover, Jahn is fairly inclusive and notes that radio plays, comic strips and hypertext narratives are as worthy of mention as the other media in his taxonomy (paragraph N2.2.1). This obviously leaves room for video games, and in fact, hypertext narrative was an early term for video game narrative (more on hypertext narrative in chapter 4). Hypertext narrative it is not central to the field of narratology.

Many narratologists seem to be inclusive. They do not dismiss video game narrative in their field of study, however they look at the phenomenon from a background of other genres of narrative and often with an education and academic history from before video games were a major cultural influence. Due to this, video games are hardly included in general papers on narratology, and if they are mentioned, it is rare to see more than one paragraph devoted to the subject. In Jahn's text, he mentions hypertext narrative, but barely examines what constitutes as a hypertext narrative. Marie-Laure Ryan is a scholar with a background in narratology, and has written about narrative, but she focuses on possible worlds, interactivity and other themes that are often linked to video games (from her biography on Game Studies): in other words, she can be seen as a narratologist who shifted her focus to video games. She has been featured on Game Studies, a website for ludology, and she is currently officially an independent scholar, not strongly attached to either narratology or ludology. It is hard to determine whether narratology embraces video game narrative, but every single scholar has their own view and there is no criterion for if narratology 'as a whole' has accepted video game narrative.

2. Ludology

As previously mentioned, ludology is a very young field, dating back just before the 90s. It includes tabletop games, and for this reason there are definitely old articles (written in the 80s) which can technically be seen as ludology, but most of the field was established in the 90s and 2000s, with the video game portion of the field getting attention since the late 90s. Apart from video game narrative, ludology is also concerned with other areas of (video) game design, including programming and game design. The early video game narrative papers come from a partial narratology background (as with Marie-Laure Ryan), but it is not the case that ludology as a whole was derived from narratology. There are some scholars on video game narrative who do not have a background in narratology, but this is due to the focus on video game design that is completely separate from narrative, and these scholars come from computer science backgrounds.

Ludologists argue that while traditional narrative (storytelling, literature) is based on representation (of any world, including any that are different to ours), video games are simulations (Frasca, 2003a). The difference between the two is that simulation can be used to explain, but also to predict the outcome of a situation, while representation aims to accurately recreate a history, a description or a chain of events in the form of a narrative. Whereas simulation does not have to focus on reality, representation must be based on a reality (Frasca, 2003a, p. 223). Frasca explains this by means of an airplane: a representation could be a film or photograph, depicting what an airplane looks like or how it lands, but a simulation could show how it flies, lands or even crashes regardless of an actual

chain of events that happened in (a) reality. Of course, even representation, and the film industry is a good example of this, can depict original and non-realistic chains of events. Frasca's claim is that watching a movie of a flying airplane is different from simulating a flying airplane.

Another reason, according to Frasca, to believe that games are a distinct medium (namely simulation, not representation) is that there has never been much coherent research on board games or video games, and that video games can be explained in more ways than just the default narratology or film theory terms. Referring back to the airplane example: a film of an airplane crashing could be seen as both a representation or a simulation. Yet this is the point that Frasca makes to explain how ludology and narratology are different: the sequence may look the same (the surface form), but the underlying process is completely different: one is a representation of (a) reality, the other is a simulation that more or less coincidentally came about. He also offers a reason why many people do not see the difference between ludology (simulation) and narratology (representation): narratology is so commonplace and has been the standard for so long, people find it hard to adjust to simulation. This is because simulations are capable of conveying things in different ways from narratives, and vice versa. Frasca does concede that games share some elements with film or narrative, and this means that the distinction 'simulation – representation' is a continuum rather than a dichotomy.

The point he makes throughout the article is that simulations are swayed by random occurrences, while representations, in the form of literature or movies, have a set order of events that does not change no matter how often you watch or read the story. This is reasoning from the viewpoint of the player/reader rather than the author/developer: the author has control over the story as long as it is not written down yet. The player/reader, however only has control over the narrative in case of a simulation, not in the case of a representation (however minimal this control may be).

Other claims by Frasca are not as firm: he argues that if you would run a worker's strike (to use his own example) through a simulation, you would get many different conclusions (workers' wages increase, or workers are fired, etc.), whereas if you would run the same scenario through a representation/narrative, you would end up with the same conclusion every time. It remains unclear what this difference actually means: if multiple writers wrote about the same scenario of a strike, we would end up with as many different endings as there are writers. The same goes for the simulations: all rely on (external) factors, not always in the control of the reader/player, but depending on the limits set by the programmer. Frasca clarifies this by claiming that the ending of a narrative is already decided before storytelling even beings, but that the ending of a simulation is dynamic and not predictable until the end of the simulation. There is some truth here: random or pseudo-random events make sure that the simulation is different every time, even if everyone begins with the same scenario. In many examples, there are even scripted events that happen every time, and even then, the outcome of the simulation differs. That is provided that random or pseudo-random events are 'coded' into the game or simulation. Even if they are not, different outcomes are bound to happen. It seems that Frasca is confusing readers/players and authors/developers. Though storytellers (not including authors) can change their story depending on the audience, much like developers' stories can change along with the choices of the player. In short, this is the view on video game narrative held by 'extreme' ludologists, and in my opinion, this led to misunderstandings between narratologists and ludologists: while it may seem that both fields are not reconcilable, I believe that this is more a false dichotomy than an actual dichotomy.

3. False Dichotomy and the Scope of Ludology

It is tempting to say that ludology and narratology have two incompatible views on studying video games. This is especially easy to say after the apparent debates between scholars of the two fields. Moreover, as a field of study that is still trying to establish itself, ludology is far from a clearly defined field either, even leading to debate among ludologists.

The narratology side appears to be slightly more level-headed in its arguments, but we cannot disregard ludology for just that impression. I feel that no side should be disregarded as long as the two sides are more compatible than might seem from the previous paragraphs. Frasca, in a different article from 2003, opens with the common misconception that 'ludologists are supposed to focus on game mechanics and reject any room in the field for analysing games as narrative'. He claims this is a wrong opinion to have about ludology, and similarly, that there are misunderstandings about the position of narratologists regarding the video game debate as well. In this paper, Frasca explains his own viewpoints as leaning heavily towards the ludology side (as was already apparent from the article he wrote earlier that year), but that he does not outright rejects the narratologic explanation. He states that most of the narratologists who dedicate part of their work to video games are all trained in working with narration and representation, and that they have never worked with video games. However, there seems to be a difference between narratologists within the ludology-narratology debate (namely that they seek to explain video game narrative through narratology) and narratologists in Humanities (namely those that study narratology, independent from representation).

Furthermore he goes on to explain the different notions of ludology. Frasca argues that there are two distinct meanings of the term 'ludology'. One meaning concentrates on the gameplay parts of video games (and this actually disregards most areas of video game narrative), the other meaning is extremely broad, and simply is 'the study of games, particularly computer games'. Therefore there are effectively two completely different meanings to the term ludology, and in this thesis, I will use the broadest definition. The first meaning is irrelevant to this paper and the ludology-narratology debate in general (because that meaning of ludology pretends ludology has nothing to do with narrative in the first place). We can conclude from this that it is fairly difficult to define ludology, and that the definition of ludology changes along with the context of the argument, paper or debate. Also since the field is fairly young, it still lacks clear definitions, such as, 'what is a game?'. Obviously, the question 'what is a narrative?' is equally difficult to answer, but at least for the latter scholars have come up with definitions. The second definition I mentioned for ludology ('the study of games, particularly computer games') is very broad and can suffice in almost any context. However, that means that one first needs to determine the exact field of ludology before heading into the ludology-narratology debate, as otherwise everyone involved in this debate has a slightly different notion when hearing the term 'ludology'. This confusion is not per se a consequence of a poorly-structured field of study: Frasca mentions that the usage of the term is young, the field of study is young too and that ludology (as in the definition of 'the study of games, particularly computer games', I will only use this definition from now on) tries to focus on many things at a time. This particular debate obviously focuses on the narrative aspect of games, which means that one has to adjust one's definition of ludology accordingly. As Frasca claims, the term ludology was used since 1982, but the current definition(s) of ludology have been in use since the early 2000s, and different disciplines (narration and gameplay) of ludology have lived their own lives since then.

One very important point that Frasca makes, and a point that is absent from other authors' articles, is that ludologists do not disregard narrative in videogames. In fact, ludologists call for a way to analyse narrative in videogames in a way that is not dependent on narratology. Frasca did not coin

the term ludology, but popularised it, and at the time his intention was to collaborate with the narratologists to come to a better understanding of videogames together: "I already invested my early research years trying to use narratology for videogame study without much success. Yes, I confess: I was a teenage narrativist" (Frasca 2003b, p 4). From this, it also becomes apparent that the two definitions of ludology were once not very different: Frasca quotes Klevjer (2002), who says that narrative in videogames is just 'gift-wrapping', and that "everything other than the pure mechanics of a computer game is essentially alien to its true aesthetic form". Klevjer's quote was derived from Eskelinen (quotation missing from Frasca's text), although it has to be said that this quote was not intended by Eskelinen to be as black-and-white ('radical ludologist'). Frasca, with similar remarks in his earlier paper, mentions that videogames cannot exist without narrative (except for 'abstract' cases such as Tetris, but other sandbox/god-games could qualify as well).

All Frasca does is ensure that ludologists are not 'radicals' in the sense that they want to avoid narratology. From the strong reactions to his early 2003 paper, he either fell into some of the pitfalls of the misconceptions that he rectifies in his later paper, or he genuinely adjusted his views to a more collaborative approach. After another remark on the 'purity' or abstractness of games, Frasca argues that videogames are not devoid of narrative as the appear in other disciplines of narratology (most notably film: cutscenes occur often in games), even though some of the 'radical ludologists' might rather have seen videogames without a narratologic influence (be it film or storytelling). All these notions still do not refer to simulation, which has been completely left out of the debate, but no doubt that it brings forth another few issues.

A conclusion that explains the misunderstandings (lack of definition of ludology, but also a lack of clear definition of narrative) is that the field of ludology is young and fairly small, with some loud voices that popped up as soon as the field of ludology was recognised in the early 2000s (Eskelinen, most notably, but also Klevjer among others). And even though Frasca seems like an extreme ludologist, he calls for more collaboration across fields in his later paper, and this notion is copied by other authors (those featured in chapter 4). As noted early in this chapter, the non-collaborative sentiment is not as common in narratologists, and looking at the debate from a distance, the two sides definitely have common ideas, and it is a debate about 'claiming territory': what to call video game narrative rather than a debate on video game narrative itself. Both sides agree that video games are worth studying, which is not a widely supported sentiment across academia.

Actually, with games increasing in popularity, and new games being released every day (even if most are mobile device games for tablets and smartphones), it is increasingly necessary to include video games in academics. We can even find more and more games that try to look for the boundaries of what games are and what games are not. A fairly large group of games (*SimCity* being an old and popular example, and more recently the long list of *'… Simulator 2013'* games) are simulations in the truest meaning of the word simulation. As we see in games like *Minecraft*, *Tetris*, *Pacman*, and other 'storyless' games, is that the community adds stories of their own based on what they create in the game, but this is another large aspect to gaming (culture) that is best left for another day. These user/player-created stories are inspired by the game, could not have existed without it, but are not in-game narratives.

Recently a game called '*The Stanley Parable*' was released, which is like some linear and branching visual novels (more about this in Chapter 3) which all have very little gameplay. One comment that pops up every now and then on forums is that games such as *the Stanley Parable* (and any game with little gameplay) 'are not games'. This often results in others looking up the definition of what a game is in a dictionary, which does not aid the discussion, but it is exemplary of how vague the meaning of 'game' is, and how often the field is misunderstood or not take seriously enough.

Jenkins (in *Game Design as Narrative Architecture*, 2004), says that not all games tell stories. This argument tells us that even if games are not centred around a story, they can still contribute to the study of narrative in video games: “Some ballets (The Nutcracker for example) tell stories, but storytelling isn't an intrinsic or defining feature of dance.” (p. 119). What Jenkins means is that dance does not have an inherent story to tell, and games behave the same way. Still, like examining stories told via dance, ‘storyless’ games can also be examined for the stories they tell. An example of such a game could be Tetris: blocks falling down without further explanation. Unlike Frasca, Jenkins thinks that games want to provide a narrative in the end, even if that narrative does not always fit in ‘traditional’ narratology terms. Another point made by Jenkins is that video game narrative relies on much more than the story: immersion factors play a large role. This ties in with another argument he brings up: the way in which stories are told in books differs from the way stories are told in traditional storytelling, which again differs from cinema, etc. Therefore, games tell stories in another different way. In the end, Frasca and Jenkins seem to disagree less than expected from their initial statements; Games can be compared to other forms of narrative, but games should not be forced into the same ‘traditional’ narratology jargon, and this brings us back to the false dichotomy of whether something belongs to narratology or ludology. With at least some scholars trying to use portions of both fields, it does seem like there is hardly any distinction between narratology and ludology at all. Again, there is more agreement about video game narrative than about what field it belongs to.

Apart from the narratology-ludology ‘dichotomy’, other fields of study are looking at narrative as well. Psychologist Richard Gerrig’s ‘*Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading*’ (1993) touches on transportation theory and narrative from the viewpoint of a psychologist who also draws on research in linguistics and literature studies. Gerrig starts with a general statement that “in each case, a narrative serves to transport an experiencer away from the here and now.” (p. 3). In Gerrig’s viewpoint, a narrative can be as little as two connected clauses, and in most cases the connection is temporal. He derives this from Labov (1972): “We define a narrative as one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred”. Gerrig does note that even two separate, unconnected clauses can be fundamentally considered narratives and that in fact there is no real difference between what is a narrative and what is not: as soon as someone (an actual person, or a character in a story) refers to a place in just one word (Gerrig’s example: “Texas”), the reader/listener may be transported to Texas. Gerrig calls this the construction of a narrative world.

Narrative worlds can be used in different ways in discussing video games or, more specifically, visual novels. This will be examined more in depth in the next chapter about the genre, but for now it suffices to say that in video games, not just text is dedicated to transporting the reader/player, but that sound, artwork and character design exist for the same purpose.

Narrative worlds can be constructed not just by showing or telling, but the information that is left out also plays a vital part. If done well, the reader will still infer what the writer intended, but the reader should have constructed a clearer or more personal narrative world. This can turn a book into a pageturner, when the reader wants to find out what happens on the next page, and the same principle can be applied to video games (Bruner, 1986).

Visual novels (see Chapter 3) rely on this sometimes by introducing unreliable narrators (either by actually introducing an untruthful character into the story, or by letting the reader/player guess based on descriptions from an invisible third person). In fact, visual novels often consist of a storyline that needs to be completely discovered by the player, and having the player start out with minimal information that then needs to be updated and adjusted for each new piece of information.

Bordering on the principle of giving the reader/player too little information, is the idea of a situation model. A situation model derives information from the narrative as well as from general knowledge about the real world. This needs to be balanced properly as the reader/player cannot always know if they need to apply real-world knowledge to a narrative. Especially in some of the less clear video games (those that are set on a different planet, in a different time or in a completely fictional world), it might be too much to ask the player to fill in the gaps with real-world knowledge, as long as the player does not know that real-world knowledge applies to the given situation. Both the situation model and purposefully leaving out information fit in the broader concept of showing versus telling.

Gerrig (1993) uses both narrative world and situation model interchangeably, as both are related to showing/telling and not presenting all the information that can be given at that moment. And referring to his minimal requirements for a narrative: Gerrig does have some more requirements for what constitutes as a narrative, though these have to do with the experience of being transported:

Someone is (1) transported by (2) some means of transportation (3) as a result of performing certain actions. The traveller (4) goes some distance from his or her world of origin which (5) makes some aspects of the world of origin inaccessible. The traveller (6) returns to the world of origin, somewhat changed by the journey.

Gerrig explains all six parts of the experience: for the first, he suggests that as soon as the reader is transported, they will start to adjust to local customs and conditions. The second, the means of transportation, is simply the medium (text, movie, etc). The third point is about the reader not passively being absorbed by the world, but that the reader has to make an effort to arrive there. The fourth point, that there is some distance between the reader and the world of origin, is about the reader not being able to interact with either world: narrative or original. The fifth point is similar to the fourth, but stresses the problem with the situation model outlined earlier: the reader does not know whether real-world knowledge still applies to the narrative world. The sixth point, about changes made to the reader, accepts changes as little as vague memories to the narrative.

Chapter 3: Visual Novels

In this chapter, I will go into further detail about visual novels. In the previous chapter, we have looked at classifications of storytelling media, video games and the debate that followed. The ideas mentioned from both narratology and ludology can be used to discuss visual novels. In order to discuss the overall topic of what visual novels are, we need to have an idea of visual novels themselves. I will discuss two specific games (*Phoenix Wright:Ace Attorney:Dual Destinies* (Capcom, 2013) and *Zero Escape: Virtue's Last Reward* (Chunsoft/Spike Chunsoft, 2012)) in depth and I will mention two other games briefly (*Hotel Dusk: Room 215*, Cing, 2007 and *Long Live the Queen*, Hanako Games, 2012).

1. How to define Visual Novels?

While this entire thesis is concerned with defining visual novels, this section is dedicated to giving a set of characteristics of visual novels that are most often used to define games as belonging to the visual novel genre. Here I will also address related questions, such as how visual novels differ from other genres, whether visual novels 'are games at all' and what kind of gameplay is involved in visual novels.

A way to get an idea on the size of the genre is by looking at the website *vndb.org*. This is the 'visual novel database', and they keep track of new releases (in English and Japanese, but also other languages in which visual novels are developed). It is also clear that most are in Japanese, with just a

minority available in English (Mandarin Chinese and Korean are other popular languages). New visual novels are released (almost) daily, but often with more than one release per day (with 23 releases on 12-Sep-2014 alone: four in English, nineteen in Japanese). Three out of all 23 were *not* classified as 18+, and reasons for this include sexual content, an area of visual novels I will not be discussing for several reasons (such as barely any focus on a story at all, but more on that when I briefly discuss 'eroge', 'erotic games'), and other 18+ games include violence and other graphic themes. For example, the first two games discussed this chapter are both rated 16 by PEGI ('Pan European Game Information'), an official European organisation concerned with games and age rating. Illustrated by the 23 releases on one day: the genre is big, but this includes all visual novels that are made by amateurs or are otherwise poorly developed. In a sense, as there are many people who write short stories and upload them to the internet, there are also many people who write visual novels and upload those to the internet. For this reason, I will limit myself to a few examples of visual novels: famous series from large developers (in the case of *Ace Attorney* and *Zero Escape*, Capcom and Spike/Chunsoft, as well as *Hotel Dusk*, from Cing) or those that are offered on (online) platforms with a good reputation such as Steam (*Long Live the Queen*).

A typical visual novel is set up as follows: a character is displayed, with a box of text around the character. This box of text holds the character's speech, but also 'your own' speech and often also thoughts. Where more than two characters are present, the character displayed changes based on who is talking, and often text from different characters is denoted with different colours and a smaller box near the text box with the name of the talking character. The protagonist him/herself is often not displayed, as the player usually sees through his/her eyes. Sometimes choices pop up for the player. Voice acting is rare and often limited to common interjections.

The image on the next page is an example of a typical scene in a visual novel: the box holds the dialogue of protagonist Phoenix Wright, who is pictured immediately above his text.

Figure 1: Screenshot from *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney: Dual Destinies*.

Atmosphere plays a big part in visual novels for the sake of immersion and influencing the choices to be made by the player. To achieve this, visual novels include soundtracks, sound effects and background images.

The storyline itself is often either linear or branching. Linear means that there is one story to be followed from beginning to end without many options to bypass parts or to branch off. Branching means that there are several different possible outcomes of the story, based on player choices.

In Japan, where most visual novels are made, there is a distinction between 'adventure game' and 'visual novel'. Even in the West (mainly English speaking countries) the term 'adventure game' is used, but this term fell into disuse decades ago, and the distinction between the two is largely lost.

By visual novels in this thesis I mean both visual novels and adventure games (as in the Japanese definitions), and the two terms are used largely synonymous nowadays. One difference between the two that is often used to discern them, is that adventure games often involve puzzles (as a plot device to prevent the player from moving to the next area too quickly, for instance) and thereby include more gameplay than 'traditional' visual novels. Visual novels, then, rely on text and text alone, according to the strictest definition. As said, the two terms are largely synonymous nowadays and I will include adventure games in my own definition of visual novel. The first three games that I will describe later in this chapter can both be considered adventure games, albeit that Virtue's Last Reward has much more adventure game-typical gameplay than Phoenix Wright does. The latter does have some puzzle solving, but the puzzles often revolve around text, making it very easy to say that it can be called a typical puzzle solving adventure game, as well as a text-reliant visual novel.

There are a couple of genres that are close to visual novels or have ties with it, and I want to take some time to discuss these, and why I will (or will not) include them in this thesis. Dating simulators, Eroge, 'Sound Novel' and 'Kinetic Novel', genre names derived from stackexchange. The latter three are words usually only used in Japan as subgenres of visual novels. Sound Novels are games that prioritise the atmosphere (where the 'sound' of the title comes from) over the text itself. This term is not often used because nearly every modern visual novel incorporates sound and atmosphere. Kinetic Novels are 'games' without any player input at all. The other two genres, dating simulators and eroge, are genres that are also often recognised in the West. Dating simulators often have extensive gameplay, and at the same time do not feature one story, but allow the player to create their own love story. Lastly, eroge is short for 'erotic game' and this includes basically any visual novel (or any game at all) with sexual content. Some of these games feature a good story and good gameplay but still have sexual content, while others are exclusively focused on sexual content. The sources I have used do not take eroge into account and therefore I have decided to not include them in this thesis.

Many visual novels have been developed for Nintendo's DS (and subsequent 3DS) handheld gaming system. This console has two screens, one of which is a touch screen. This allows for more puzzle opportunities and a split between screens (such as text and characters on the top screen, inventory or map on the bottom screen). Visual novels are also available for Sony's PSP (and subsequent PSP Vita), but this console does not have the two separate screens. One similarity is that both consoles have been developed by Japanese companies (once again confirming the popularity of visual novels in Japan).

I will now take a closer look at two recent visual novels: *Virtue's Last Reward* by Spike Chunsoft from 2012 and Capcom's *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney: Dual Destinies*, to give clearer examples of visual novels, which will also be used in Chapter 4, where some specific elements of visual novels will be examined.

1. *Virtue's Last Reward*

Virtue's Last Reward (VLR) was developed by Chunsoft/Spike and was released for the 3DS in 2012. This game is a sequel to 2009's *Nine Hours, Nine Persons, Nine Doors*. VLR was very well received. It received several awards in 2012 for Best Handheld Game (GameSpot), Best 3DS/DS Story (IGN), and was nominated for Best Narrative (Game Developers Choice Awards). The game is also voice acted in its entirety with distinct voices for each of the characters. However, in the European version, the voices are in Japanese while the text is in English.

There are two different forms of gameplay involved. The first is the 'novel' part, in which the player cannot do much other than clicking through the story. In the 3DS version of the game, the top screen

is limited to the words and actions (and gestures, thanks to the character models) of the other characters, while the bottom screen is just for the protagonist's ('your') thoughts. The bottom screen, as a touch screen, is also used for choices (the player can simply press their desired choice). The other part is 'escape', in which you have to make your way out of a room, which makes this is a very classic example of the 'adventure game'. There is limited communication between you and the other characters in the same room, and other characters function mainly as hint giving (story) devices, and whether they give any hints at all can be elected in the options menu. This means that the player can completely rely on him/herself to solve the puzzles to escape the rooms. The fact that the game involves puzzles at all is not rare (it is quite common for the puzzle/adventure type games within the visual novel genre), but the way the game makes a very clear distinction between the two types of gameplay is somewhat rare (title cards are used to indicate a new novel section or escape section is starting).

The most interesting part of VLR is its plot. This is also why it was nominated for the aforementioned awards. In VLR, the player follows Sigma, who is trapped with eight other people in an immense facility that has only one door leading to the exit. This is also the way its prequel, *Nine Hours, Nine Persons, Nine Doors*, was set up, and both revolve around the way to open that specific door. The nine people have a bracelet with a number on it, representing a number of points ('Bracelet Points', BP) and as soon as one person reaches nine points, they can use the bracelet to open the door and escape. The way to obtain extra points is by playing a game that is much like the prisoner's dilemma: in the game, three people (two people play together as one team, one person plays alone) have to choose either 'ally' or 'betray': if both pick ally, both get two points. If both pick betray, the points do not change, but if one pics ally, and the other picks betray, the betrayer gets three points while the ally loses two points. The bracelets also work to prevent cheating: they contain a poison that will be injected when a person goes down to zero points, or tries to cheat the game in other ways (entering doors they are not supposed to enter). All this is organised by Zero, who explains the game to the players at the beginning and is the one to announce the results of the prisoner's dilemma type game. Meanwhile, the nine people have to gain access to the prisoner's dilemma game by solving puzzles in rooms and obtaining key cards to the ally/betray voting booths. In this way, the puzzle solving is separated entirely from the plot-heavy sections of the game, and in fact there is very little plot-related information that the player obtains during the puzzle sections of the game. The rest of the game is trying to reach nine points, while other people do not reach nine points, but at the same time keeping everyone alive (eg. not betraying them when they could reach zero points). The characters all speak to the player to advise him on what to choose, on the workings of the game itself and to find ways on how to leave the game without killing anyone else or leaving anyone trapped in the facility. The exit door only opens once, for less than a minute, and once closed it cannot be reopened.

Apart from the choice 'ally' or 'betray', the player also has the choice to go look for the key cards in different rooms. Every time there is a set of three doors, leading to different rooms with different puzzles, but in every room Sigma will be paired up with different people. This is where the plot gets even more interesting: after choosing one option, and leaving the other option(s), the player gets to finish that branch of the storyline. After completing that, the player has to 'go back in time' to go through all other possible storyline branches, and in each branch, the player learns something critical about the game's plot, until the player reaches the 20th branch in which all the information comes together. Until the player realises they have to revisit every part of the game, the game feels like a typical branching game with different possible outcomes.

Most of VLR is the 'choose-your-own-adventure' type visual novel: a branching storyline and the player has some influence over the course of the game. However, the player is forced back to do all the other storylines, which eventually makes this a fairly linear story in the end. The order in which the player goes through all the separate branches, though, is left to the player mostly. Some parts can only be unlocked by completing other branches first, but while this seems like a branching story line, every player starts at the same point and ends at the same point – namely the branch in which the entire story comes together. This also illustrates how many visual novels (including those that can be classified as adventure games) seem branching and seem like choose-your-own-adventure type games, but in the end come down to one single story line. This also happens *in Another Code: Two Memories* (a 2005 DS game from developer Cing: one of the earliest visual novels to be released for the DS and to exploit the touch screen that was novel at the time), where puzzles must be solved and the player has some influence over the order in which the puzzles can be solved, but it is all part of one big storyline. Another common feature in Another Code: finding small objects, such as keys or something that is used as proof to show something to someone, that are used later in the storyline ('point-and-click').

As noted by Amanda Lange (2014, posted as user '*secondtruth*'), the choices that the player has to make (who do I join when I go to the next room and do I choose betray or ally) are heavily influenced by the game itself. The game developers realised that they can push the player into choosing a certain way. During the very first prisoner's dilemma choice, the character that accompanies the player is pushing the player into choosing betray, presumably because no player would be naturally inclined to choose betray by themselves. This indicates that the game is trying to make the player distrust the nature of the game or the other characters, and make the player cynical which only serves to increase immersion (is this person telling the truth? How can I know? Can I know?).

2. *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney: Dual Destinies*

This is the fifth game in the series (which explains the possibly confusing title: the first game was named *Phoenix Wright* (name of the protagonist): *Ace Attorney*), and it is one of the better known visual novels. The series was developed by Capcom, with the first game released in 2001 and *Dual Destinies*, currently the latest game, released in 2012. Like its predecessors, *Dual Destinies* received very positive reviews. It won IGN's Best 3DS Adventure Game award in 2013. This game is linear: the player makes choices, but wrong choices will lead back the original question, allowing the player to try over, until the player reaches the one possible conclusion to the case.

The objective of the game is to solve a murder mystery as the defence attorney, and get your client (who is always wrongly accused) a not guilty verdict. The gameplay in all *Ace Attorney* games is divided into two phases: investigation and courtroom. The investigation phase has a fairly typical adventure game setup: there are four actions: talk with the character displayed on the top screen (a witness, the detective, etc), examine the scene and look for hidden objects or obtain extra information about the scene, present a certain piece of evidence already in your inventory to the character displayed on the top screen, or move to a different scene. By looking around, talking to people and showing them a piece of evidence when needed, you get all the information about the case you need for the other phase of the game: the courtroom phase. In this phase, you need the information and evidence gathered during the investigation phase to disprove statements by the prosecutor and the witnesses in order to prove your client not guilty. The game also features elaborate plot twists and humour.

Dual Destinies (and the four previous games in the series) is extremely linear, with no branching allowed at any time. This is achieved in several ways: the first is the investigation-courtroom flow of

the game, with often three of these cycles per case (three investigation phases, interrupted by two courtroom phases with one last court room phase to tie the story together). This means that every time a new phase starts, every player has to have the exact same information and evidence. However, even during the investigation phase, there are several points where you need one specific piece of evidence or information to move on to get another character to give you some other piece of information, effectively working as a checkpoint to make sure all players are 'synchronised' again at that point. Also, at the point where the player has presented too much irrelevant evidence in the courtroom phase, the player will trigger a 'game over' screen, but from that point the player can just reload the game from the last checkpoint. On top of that, there are no points in the courtroom sessions where presenting one piece of evidence triggers one dialogue, and presenting another (equally relevant) piece of evidence triggers another. There is only one way of progressing through the story, be it in the courtroom or during the investigation.

3. *Hotel Dusk:Room 215* and other examples

A third game I would like to draw attention to is *Hotel Dusk: Room 215*. It is a Cing developed game from 2007 for the Nintendo DS, and it has a much larger focus on looking around and finding items than to text. However, while the room is visual, all the information about the items you pick up is given to you in text, and is hardly ever 'shown' to you (as opposed to 'told' from show-and-tell). This game has less ties to visual novels as explained in the first paragraph, but some of the basic layout elements are still there: a character displayed on one screen, a box of text to show what they are saying. *Hotel Dusk* features two other gameplay elements to draw the player into the game: questions asked by other characters, and 'test-style' questions to check whether the player has been paying attention during play. *Hotel Dusk* is a linear game: as with Phoenix Wright, the player makes choices but wrong choices lead back to the original question (or a game over screen).

The questions asked by other characters are important in the sense that if the player gets them wrong, they are forced to restart the question session. Every chapter ends with the player being grilled with questions from one of the other characters staying in *Hotel Dusk*, and winning their trust after getting all questions right. Some characters are not seen any more after this, while others play vital roles in the story later on. The test-style questions are completely different: these are questions about basic facts of the story ('what is the name of the room where…', 'what did you find in the drawer in this person's desk') and completely break immersion as the question are not coming from one of the characters, but are separately asked by 'the game' itself. Also, the questions are a very blunt way of making sure the player has enough knowledge about the events in the game to progress through: as with the other two games mentioned (*Virtue's Last Reward* and *Ace Attorney* both), the player needs to be knowledgeable of story events in order to complete the story, but only *Hotel Dusk* asks these questions outright, forcing people to stop being immersed.

Hotel Dusk is also remarkable for its use of the Nintendo DS: the player needs to turn the console 90 degrees to hold it like a booklet. Furthermore, the Nintendo DS has two screens connected by a hinge, and closing the DS will trigger sleep mode. This function is used in one puzzle where the player needs to turn something on the top screen upside down. A quick google search returns that many players found this needlessly complicated even at the time, but the function of closing the DS for sleep mode has disappeared on the Nintendo 2DS, which also plays DS games. Instead, players now need to flick a switch for sleep mode to trigger the success state of the puzzle. The gesture of closing the DS to turn something upside down was a stretch, but it would be almost impossible to figure out on the new system. As Daniel Chandler mentions (1994, p. 9): "… the more frequently and fluently a medium is used, the more 'transparent' or 'invisible' to its users it tends to become. For most routine purposes, awareness of a medium may hamper its effectiveness as a means to an end.

Indeed, it is typically when the medium acquires transparency that its potential to fulfil its primary function is greatest.". Needless to say, this confused many to such an extent (and moreover, setting the DS to sleep mode to solve a puzzle is very counterintuitive to begin with), and it forced the medium itself on the players to such an extent that this breaks immersion as with the test-style questions. This was just one example in which *Hotel Dusk* is not user-friendly, and it seems to be a complication more than a creative use of the medium.

A last game I want to mention is *Long Live the Queen*. Out of the four games discussed, this is the only Western-developed game (Hanako Games, 2012). The point of this game is that the player chooses certain skills to develop over the course of a week (in-game week, that is) and at the end of the week, a story event takes place. Depending on which skills have been trained during that week and all prior weeks, the story events have different outcomes. This game has a clear goal: the player must keep the main character alive for long enough that she can be crowned queen in the 40th week. There are two skills that can be trained per week, and there are 21 skills total, which means that obviously not all can be trained. Also, even if a skill is trained and that skill comes up at the end of the week, it might not be trained enough to trigger the 'successful' outcome of the story event for that week. The game is forthright over whether the player passed or failed 'skill tests', and often, a failed test (or several failed tests in succession in the same week) results in death for the main character, and the game is to be started again. However, because the order of the story events stays the same, the player can plan ahead for which skills to train.

One example of a story event would be a foreign nobleman visiting the castle of the main character, after which skills such as 'composure', 'elegance' and 'presence' are tested, and if, say, two are failed, then the player misses out on an opportunity that proves valuable later in the game. In other cases, a war is imminent between 'your' kingdom and a foreign kingdom, and the player needs to have 'world history', 'foreign intelligence' and 'military: strategy' trained in order to pass the tests. In this cases, it is easier to see how failing tests can result in death. Only when the player makes it through all 40 weeks is when the player wins the game. Still, as with most visual novels, in between story events, the player is given choices that are separate from skills that influence the story. All in all, the player has significant influence over the outcome of story events and the story as a whole, and the game carries on after making a 'bad' choice (either in skill training or in-game story choices), even if the consequence is death.

It is hard to tell whether this game is linear or branching. At first glance, it is branching, because of the many different ways of developing character, however it is obvious that the game wants the player to reach the end (coronation) and there is only one way to reach that (suggesting it is a linear game after all). However, most enjoyment in this game comes from making wrong choices and playing those out until the inevitable death screen. The game also encourages looking for all different death screens: the player can look at all the different unlocked death screens in the main menu. This makes the game look branching again, and as we will see in the next chapter, one can make a case for *Long Live the Queen* as a branching game.

4. Gameplay in Visual Novels

I will take the time to look at the broader issue of gameplay in visual novels, having mentioned the various ways in which visual novels involve players in the story (*Hotel Dusk's* test-style questions, *Ace Attorney's* courtroom sessions).

First of all, like most definitions in the previous chapter, gameplay is a term with as many definitions as there are gamers. My definition of gameplay is broad, as I also consider *Hotel Dusk's* un-immersive questions as gameplay. Clicking through text, what many visual novels consist entirely of, is not

gameplay to me. This raises another question: what is a game (or as most people ask: what is not a game?). This question is obviously hard to answer and I will not go into this, but in any online discussion about visual novels, the point that 'visual novels are not games' pops up. About so-called 'non-games', Brian Crecente interviews Orteil, a video game developer who, in his own words, creates 'non-games'. Orteil is responsible for a game called '*cookie clicker'*, in which the player only tries to amass as many cookies as possible, using cookies as a currency to buy upgrades with which the player can get more cookies. There is no amount at which a player wins, and after only a few clicks, the game generates cookies, rendering the player obsolete, and the game plays itself. Orteil also created '*Nested'*, where the player clicks on words to open up a word web. Clicking on one of the words in the word web opens up new word webs, and so on. The player starts with 'universe', which splits into 24 galactic superclusters, of which the first opens up into 24 galaxies, and goes into smaller entities until the player arrives at planets, cities, kitchens, fridges, sugar, glucose, molecules, atoms and back into universe (Nested to be found at http://orteil.dashnet.org/nested). To use Orteil's own quote:

> "*Nested* has pretty much no interactivity, and *Cookie Clicker* almost plays itself … Then again, if you're having fun using them, isn't that kind of a game?""

Other similar game developers talk about how there is no big difference between their non-games and MMORPGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games: large online roleplaying games such as *World of Warcraft*), as some popular MMORPGs are also reduced to "clicking for levels with only minor benefits and people will still play them". Whether these are games or not, or whether there is gameplay involved or not, is an almost impossible question because of some of these avant-garde game developers, but it shows how visual novels qualify as games, even the visual novels that do not involve (the) player (choices) at all.

Raph Koster (2012 b) gives a common definition of 'game' : 'a form of play which has rules and a goal'. This definition is incomplete based on the previous paragraph, where games without goals definitely qualify as games. For example, is the popular open world/building game *Minecraft* not a game as it has no goal? Based on these simple objections, Koster goes on to propose a new definition: "Playing a game is the act of solving statistically varied challenge situations presented by an opponent who may or may not be algorithmic within a framework that is a defined systemic model." He chose this definition to include as much as possible: sports, board games and video games. In this definition, playing a game is solving challenges, created by the game or an opponent, and these challenges have to be similar, but slightly different from each other ('statistically varied'), but are limited to the rules of the game ('algorithmic within a framework that is a defined systemic model'). This definition leaves room for non-competitive games, such as visual novels, however Koster says that 'When we see a game with poor feedback on your actions or choices, we call it a bad game — but a game nonetheless. There may be a threshold where a complete lack of feedback makes something not a game', in other words, that a game has to include feedback to the player in order to be a game. This does include visual novels that are simply about clicking through text (player action: click – feedback: next page) but this obviously also leaves room for reading a novel on a Kindle (player action: touch right arrow – feedback: next page). Whether this was intended is unclear, although Koster acknowledges the problem with the definition. It is also important to note how no definition (on what a game is or on feedback) includes the result of the game as a prerequisite. This is because players often set their own goals when playing 'goalless' games, including a 2008 Nintendo Wii title called 'Wii Music', which has player play virtual instruments or conduct. The game makes a note of how well you did, but people complained about this, because

players felt that the score served no purpose and turned the game into a 'regular' game instead of a game that lets players be the judge!

Similarly, Koster (2012 b) finds that narrative is a form of feedback, not a game mechanic. Again, players often create their own narrative when the game provides none. In these cases, the game/challenge (referring back to Kosters definition of game: 'statistically varied challenge situations') is presented as a black box, and the game itself is about figuring out the rules to that black box. Feedback is necessary to determine whether the player succeeded. Kosters (2012 b) points can be summarised as such:

> "Cut the input, and you have a screensaver. Cut the problem inside the black box, and you have a slideshow. Cut the feedback, and you have something ridiculously confusing that no one will tolerate."

Without input, it can hardly be called a game (the criticism of *Cookie Clicker*). Without the problem in the black box, the player has nothing to do while playing (the criticism of many visual novels), and without feedback, the player cannot know how to improve.

Chapter 4: Answering the Question

In this chapter, I will formulate an answer to the main question: 'What is the role of visual novels as a narrative medium?'. I will use information presented in the previous chapters (narratology & ludology and visual novels), but this chapter is mainly dedicated to introducing new topics that bear on previously outlined subjects.

1. Interactivity and choice

In the previous chapters, the word 'interactivity' has been mentioned without definition. It is a typical example of a term that would be defined differently by each person you ask. In the following paragraph, I will spend some time on what interactivity entails, and more specifically how it is manipulated in visual novels in order to present a better experience. While the previous chapters spoke of interactivity as an improvement to the experience, I will first present Dave Morris's case, who places a critical remark with this notion. The latter part of the paragraph is dedicated to choice in visual novels, often a result of interactivity.

Dave Morris (2012) makes a case for limiting interactivity in video games. He argues on Mirabilis that if you want full control over a story, you would be best off becoming an author yourself: "If you could bring yourself to pause the action just before Holmes grapples Moriarty, and decide who will go off the ledge, you can't have been that enthralled." He questions the statement that 'more interactivity is better', and he provides a good reason for this. After all, a good story means that the player/reader will be surprised and enjoyed. In the visual novels that were discussed in the previous chapter, the same case holds. In *Virtue's Last Reward*, an unknown mystery character Zero is responsible for the facility, and the eight characters other than the main character are surprising and all have their own plot points and even plot twists. If the player could choose the entire ending, there is a good possibility that the plot would not turn out as coherent as it was in the actual game, leaving loose ends. In *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*, the player may assume that the defendant in the court case is not guilty. With the outcome (almost) a given, does a player even need to step in? In *Hotel Dusk*, all other characters hold secrets akin to VLR's characters. In *Long Live the Queen*, the player gets remarkably much space to develop the character, but the actual events that unfold are beyond the player. The player has enough ways to create a character to their liking that hopefully survives the

story events. Morris, as will be examined later, is not against interactivity, but he is just critical of giving the player more power than the original writer.

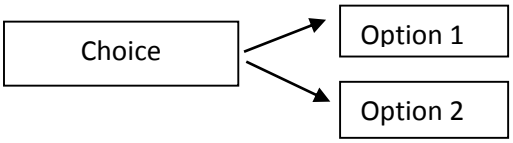
One way in which video games (and in particular visual novels) can prevent the player from taking control and deciding the outcome of the story is by making the main character into a character that is not in charge of the situation him/herself. Sigma (in VLR) is powerless in the entire facility, as Zero makes the rules. Phoenix Wright is at the mercy of the judge, who decides who may speak and moreover Phoenix Wright is often a step behind the prosecution (who has had more time and personnel to prepare their case). On top of that, in *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*, the court case is about figuring out the course of events that led to the murder. A player cannot even step in: everything has already happened and it is all about trying to understand what happened earlier.

Instead of giving the player full control over a story, it is better to give them some influence over the story. Or as Morris says, "Literary academics are fond of psychoanalysing characters, and it's a small step from there to giving them advice. … Of course, characters in a story … don't have to take your advice." In other words, game developers have to look for ways to give some power to the players, but never let them decide the final outcome: giving advice rather than telling a character what to do. This creates new angles for the game developers to keep their characters in the story: pushing players to take a certain decision, and then pointing out after it is too late to change the decision that they took the wrong choice. This is a particularly often used trick in *Phoenix Wright*: you, as the main character, are pressured into approaching the case from a certain angle, misinterpreting things and saying things that will later be used against you in the court case. Or another example: early on in the case it seems like a murder was committed in a closed off room. The only ones present are the defendant and the victim. The main character (and the player) are pressured into disproving that, and once disproven, the prosecution presents evidence that the crime was not committed in the room at all, but rather in the hallway leading into the room, again incriminating the defendant: the game 'takes the advice' of the player, but this is wrong/misinterpreted advice only to create another angle to approach the case/game from.

In short, Morris makes a case for choice in games, involving the player but not giving them full control over the story. An author or game developer can create more interesting situations if the player is not in full control but can only influence the story, with that influence sometimes (purposefully) misunderstood. However, Joel Goodwin presents a different opinion: he does not think games improve when players are given a voice. He summarises this as "We crave the weight of consequence yet revel in its destruction.", or: we (players) like to think of the consequences, but as long as we are aware of the fact that real-world consequences will never follow and that we will never regret/be haunted by our choices, we love destroying the decision: "Player guilt is so easily destroyed".

This destroying of choices happens in more than one way. The first obvious one is that no player immediately chooses to be the 'developer's puppet'. In order to formulate a second way in which players destroy choices, Goodwin explores the kind of choices that players get when playing games.

Goodwin introduces the 'twine', a word for a point in a game where the player needs to choose:



He uses these twines to analyse choices in games and their actual consequence. In many games, it is hard to see the consequence of a choice clearly: something might backfire, the player might have too little information to make a good choice (a tactic often used in Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney: the prosecution has had more time to prepare its case and therefore will trick the defence/player into saying things that they will regret later on in the case, simply because the defence did not have the time and resources to look into the case as well as the prosecution). Using these twines and their condensed choices, Goodwin tries to reduce the story events to 'fail states' and 'success states'. Goodwin acknowledges there are twines with only fail states and no success states, as can be seen in almost all of the games used as examples in the previous chapter. In *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*, one choice leads to an immediate game over screen, while the other leads to a situation in which the judge is almost ready to hand down his verdict in the prosecution's favour. A fail state clearly does not mean game over. A game can require a fail state in order to get to a later success state. The same happens in VLR with almost every prisoner's dilemma game: if you ally, you might lose points, while if you betray, someone might lose trust in you. In *Long Live the Queen*, the twines are extremely large as there are 2x21 possibilities for skills that can be trained, with the player training skills forty times (for a total of 40x2x21=1680 possible outcomes, of which a large number is not viable in game) and there are many fail states to one success state. Lastly, in *Hotel Dusk*, only because questions are asked in a very unimmersive way can you find questions with clear fail and success states. Up to this point, we see examples of 'craving the weight of the consequence'. Next is 'revelling in its destruction'.

In all of the above example games, the player can rewind twines. In most cases, this is even done automatically: in *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*, after choosing an immediate fail state, the player is reverted to the twine to select one of the remaining options. In some cases, there were only two choices to begin with, and this means the player is automatically pushed in the right direction. In some cases, however, the player's original choice was right but the game gives you the option to revisit your choice anyway, which is a creative way to break the cycle of 'choose wrong -> choose again, choose right -> advance', turning it into 'choose wrong -> opportunity to choose again, choose right -> opportunity to choose again'. Anyhow, if it is always possible to restart the game anyway from a previous saving point, why bother at all with choice? This is actually not the point that Goodwin makes, but it is a possible conclusion. Goodwin adds, coinciding with Ryan's (1998) findings on hypertext stories, that this is the point of a hypertext story to begin with. "We are so comfortable with the concept of multiple narratives that we rarely distinguish between "an instance of narrative" and the complete picture, the hypertext story." To take another example of *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*: in a twine with two choices, choosing the wrong one makes the player experience both consequences. A player that chose the success state in the first instance will not have experienced both the fail state and the success state. The player remembers both the fail state and the success state, and for the player, both states are plausible endings to the story. In other words, the player remembers the hypertext story, and not both instances of narrative as separate narratives. The same happens in *Long Live the Queen*: the player is even encouraged to look for all different endings, as already mentioned in chapter 3. In all of these cases, it is important to distinguish two overarching categories of motivations for choices: does the player need to find the correct choice, or can the player choose their own consequence. In *VLR*, the player can choose their own consequence, and the game progresses from there (until the player discovers they need to progress through every single twine, but even then the player can choose which ending they want to see first). In the other games, and this is especially visible in *Hotel Dusk,* the player needs to find the correct choice. In *Phoenix Wright*, the player gets a funny dialogue after choosing wrong, in *Long Live the Queen* the player

usually only finds that they chose wrong well after the initial choice, while in *Hotel Dusk*, a wrong choice leads to an almost immediate game over screen.

While VLR intends that the player visit every single twine and finds all different endings, there is also a flaw in this. Goodwin calls this the 'retread problem' (retread: revisiting twines). In fact, Goodwin finds that not just in games such as VLR, but in most games that offer choices, players revisit that point in the story to find out what had happened if they had chosen differently. And here we find that it is not just that there are no real-life consequences to a choice, but the given that players will retread makes it that "we crave the weight of consequence yet revel in its destruction". Essentially, by being able to revisit the twines, we lose the weight of the consequence of the initial choice, and therefore this is destroying the consequences, yet players like this.

2. What is and what if

Bordering on the topic of interactivity is immersion, but instead of focusing on the immersion facilitated by the medium/game, 'what is and what if' focuses on the immersion that comes from within the player. Now 'what is and what if' is hardly a scientific name to give to a phenomenon, but in this case it stands for two separate things that are used by people to immerse themselves in a narrative.

'What is' entails the notion of a narrative, no matter how primitively enacted, that is very close to reality: the player will have experienced this situation (or a situation that closely resembles it). In the example of Susan Engel (2005, p. 518): three children who enact a telephone conversation between one of the children and his parents, using a broken phone and a toy banana for phones. Even though the conversation is clearly staged and the children are aware of that, they still act as if it is real.

'What if' is the notion of a narrative that is very far removed from reality: it is highly unlikely that the player has ever been in a situation like the situation presented to them. In this case, an example could be two children pretending to fly and having to warn animals that they have to seek shelter because rain is coming (Engel, 2005, p. 519). In this case, the children use extra sentences such as 'these are my wings, these are yours' and 'we're in the sky now' to denote what is happening, and actual props do not suffice all the time (they could improvise wings, they could not improvise being in the air).

These two terms apply to any narrative, including visual novels. Obviously, video games and visual novels have very different 'props' to indicate what is going on, for stories that are in the 'what is' sphere and for stories that are in the 'what if' sphere. Engel also notes that it is possible for stories to go from one sphere to another and back again, and this can be seen in the Ace Attorney games: one scene is played out in the law office, with co-workers talking to each other, and the next scene is investigating a crime scene at a space agency.

Engel, who coined the terms, focuses on pretend play and children's development in her article, but it applies to any sort of narrative, including visual novels. She also specifically mentions (spoken) narratives: "But spoken stories allow children even greater power in exploring fictive worlds. Verbal narratives allow a story teller to slide from one kind of reality to another, to contrast different constructions of the same actions or events, and to rearrange events." Once a narrative incorporates very impossible things (such as magic, or far-future technology), narrative is often used to describe what is happening. Let us take a magically floating object for example. In pretend play, one would need to physically pick the object up and hold it in the air. It might be enough to suggest that the object is floating, but more often narrative play is used to literally say that the object is in fact floating due to a magic spell, for instance.

Visual novels already take care of immersion for a large part. Music, sound effects, character design, visuals and all of the text are already designed to transport the player into the world of the game. However, the player is still 'simply looking at a screen'. Now in the context of this thesis I hope it is clear enough that it is impossible to make such a claim, but clinically that is what it looks like. This is the 'what is', and the 'what if' is all that is added to it. As said, it is the 'immersion' factor that comes from within the player. In a sense, 'what is and what if' resembles pragmatics' mental spaces, in which speech acts involving conditionals, negatives, etc. conjure up a mental space which links the actual 'tangible' speech act to the conditional/negative: a speech act such as 'I don't like that' will first make the listener access the mental space of 'to like that' and then the mental space of 'to not like that' (Fauconnier, 1981). With 'what is and what if', any mention of the narrative will first bring up the 'mental space' of what it actually is, and secondly the 'mental space' of what it represents. As with mental spaces, 'what is and what if' is handled almost naturally by the human mind – although much research is needed in this area.

Non-interactive narratives (such as books) rely solely on words. Storytelling is slightly more interactive, as the audience can interact with the storyteller, but still relies heavily on words. Movies have a distinct visual element and use pretend play together with words. These narrative forms all lack interactivity to the extent of games: only games can only progress (through a story) when the player is involved. Games have a visual element: in many cases, words are not even needed to frame the narrative (or lack thereof: Pacman, Tetris, but many genres can work without words: puzzle games, shooting games, racing games: as long as it is clear what the game wants the player to do).

Visual novels, on the other hand, rely on words. However, they can also use images to clarify points (in the way storytelling can also rely on props). To come back to the terms introduced in this chapter: pretend play (using images/objects) is used together with narrative play (written text). Visual novels are sometimes set in unrealistic settings. *Phoenix Wright*, for instance, takes place in and around a mostly present-day courtroom (actually, the story starts in the year 2016 (aceattorney.wikia Timelines), and as the game originally came out in 2001 (aceattorney.wikia: Phoenix Wright:Ace Attorney) , the game is set in the future, but this has almost no influence on the storyline, except for the way in which cases have to reach a verdict within three days). *Virtue's Last Reward*, however, is set in an extremely outlandish facility, and characters (and by extension, the player) have no way of knowing when and where they are. Players still know what is going on and can (re)act because the narrative is introduced to them with both words and objects (show and tell). Also, when a setting is so outlandish that only showing it would be confusing (for instance, a machine that the player obviously needs to progress, but is too complicated to be self-explanatory), and using only text would be too abstract, a combination of image and text is used to accurately point the player in the right direction.

The point is that settings and narratives in visual novels are introduced in two ways. Narrative play (words) is used throughout the entire game: text-heaviness is a striking feature of visual novels. On the other hand, visuals are used to introduce location, a character's emotions, and are used for puzzles.

3. P-responses

As outlined in the chapter on visual novels, one of the methods most often used to add gameplay to visual novels is to ask questions to the player. One way is to ask questions about what has passed, the 'did you understand the previous section' questions. The other is to present choices to the player about what is going to happen in the next section of the story, and this is the way players have influence over the narrative and the progression of the story in many visual novels. These often

involve dilemmas: neither option seems particularly good for the outcome. Sometimes they feel like empty questions, irrelevant to the problems at hand, but then turn out to have a significant influence on the progression later on. No matter how the questions in the second category are asked, the answer given by the player is influenced by two things. The first being the psyche of the player and what they would do in that given situation, but the progression of the story thus far and how the choices are emotionally brought to the attention to the player are equally important.

On this topic, Gerrig and Polichak (2002) discuss p-responses (participatory responses). This is the name given to the responses motivated by story events. They divide these into two categories: automatic/reflexive (responses as if it were a reflex: yelling 'watch out' at a movie character) and complex (using information presented in the story to predict the outcome). In visual novels, we are concerned with the complex p-responses: in Ace Attorney, the player has to derive the actual course of events from the evidence and testimony given, and in *Virtue's Last Reward*, the player's choices determine the storyline branch that is activated, but the questions and the consequences of the possible answers are obvious (enter one door with characters A, B and C? Or enter the other door with characters D, E and F? Ally with character F, or betray character F?). Something that explains why visual novels do not incorporate automatic p-responses, is that the text-based games allow the player to progress in their own tempo. This means that it would be extremely obvious if games, that usually allow the player to click through text as they want, suddenly demand an answer within a few seconds or else something else happens. While these questions are more often used in other games (*Spec Ops: the Line*, a Jagex FPS game from 2012. Kill one person or the other within a certain time limit, or else you will be shot at yourself. Even though both options are obviously bad, everyone will want to prevent the last thing to happen), they do not fit with the pacing of most visual novels (especially the 'adventure games' subgenre, as 'true' visual novels often do not include choices at all). However, there is one example of a timed choice, and this moment occurs in Hotel Dusk (see chapter 3): at one point, the player enters a room that is slowly filled with a gas that will make the player faint, failing the game and having to restart. Now the puzzle in that room has a very liberal timer, with a couple of warnings before game over, so I cannot speak of any automatic p-responses as in Gerrig and Polichak (2002): a timer does not equal immediate action required. And the consequence of failing the puzzle in *Hotel Dusk* only forces the player to restart from where the player has last saved, which is another immersion breaker: as long as the player remembers that they can save the game and restart from wherever they want, the 'fail the game' option is powerless (but this has been discussed). This is partially circumvented in *Virtue's Last Reward*, where regardless of the player's choice, the game will continue with the consequence of the player's choice. This is also the strength of the choice in *Spec Ops: the Line*: whatever the player does, the game will continue.

With these examples in mind, it is clear that p-responses demand action from the player. While the automatic p-responses are hard to trigger (if not impossible), complex p-responses are handily used in the visual novels that include the player's choices in the outcome of the story. This presumes that the player is concerned with the consequence of their behaviour. There seems to be a dichotomy between two groups of players, based on how players approach choices. The first is the player who is fully aware that they are playing a game and that there are no real-world consequences of their choices. The second player is aware of the consequence, and treats the in-game consequence exactly as grave as any real-world consequence. Both groups of player can be equally immersed in a storyline, but they approach situations differently. This does not take into account how a player wants to play a character: a player from the second category might be playing a reckless character, making the player seem like a player from the first category, however in this case they are as immersed as can be. Eliciting p-responses from both kinds of players will yield different results.

4. Transportation Theory

In the second chapter I briefly touched on the topic of transportation theory. In Chapter 2, I mentioned Richard Gerrig (1993) who studies narrative as a psychologist. In that text, he discusses transportation theory as a way of connecting the real world with the narrative world: “Someone is (1) transported by (2) some means of transportation (3) as a result of performing certain actions. The traveller (4) goes some distance from his or her world of origin which (5) makes some aspects of the world of origin inaccessible. The traveller (6) returns to the world of origin, somewhat changed by the journey”. In this paragraph, I will elaborate on this topic.

As for what transportation theory is and what it sets out to do, Green, Brock and Kaufman (2004) provide a simple definition: "Transportation theory provides a lens for understanding the concept of media enjoyment and furnishes increased understanding of why and how enjoyment occurs in response to media" (p. 312). The term ‘enjoyment’ is highly subjective, and does not mean that the reader/player will be happy after transportation: sad movies also qualify for ‘enjoyment’ if they succeed in their purpose. This means that ‘enjoyment’ is also a term to explain to what extent the narrative involves its audience. Green, Brock and Kaufman did experiments to determine whether transportation and enjoyment are indeed connected (while acknowledging that ‘enjoyment’ is a vague term): their research shows that they are connected, based on experiments involving questionnaires and self-reporting. In short, in the case of transportation, the reader/player will feel ‘enjoyment’, but this means fulfilment rather than actual happiness in most cases.

Transportation can occur with almost all media, however all four authors (Gerrig in his 1993 article and Green, Brock and Kaufman in their 2004 one) acknowledge that some narratives are better at this than others. This does not have to do with the medium, but rather with the quality of the narrative and the invisibility of the medium. Poorly written stories and inconsistent storylines will make it hard to transport readers, but not impossible. Similarly, a medium that is ‘visible’, in that it is hard to use and requires reader/player attention to understand, will be a burden on readers and players and will have a negative influence on transportation. In the four visual novels discussed in Chapter 3, we see this occurring in *Hotel Dusk*. As was mentioned in that paragraph, the player needed to switch their console to sleep mode in order to solve a puzzle. In the same game we saw that the developers asked direct questions to the players to make sure that they understood the story, which also made the medium visible.

Visual novels rely on transportation because they require the player to identify themselves with a fictional character, making decisions for them and as we have seen in the paragraph on P-responses, the choices players make are motivated by the storyline itself, in other words, by transportation. Another effect of transportation is that one can enjoy the game as an escape from the self while there is no real threat from the real world or from inside the game: the safety of narrative, even though the real world or the narrative world may be threatening reinforces enjoyment (Nell, p. 17). This does not limit the game developers’ creativity and it allows them to create surreal situations. In both VLR and *Phoenix Wright*, the player is asked to identify with the main character who undergoes dangerous situations in-game, but this has no bearing on a real world situation, and the safety of the medium itself also remains constant. The power of narrative is that even though the player is always safe, they still feel uneasy through playing the game (again: enjoyment is achieved, but this does not have to be synonymous with ‘feeling good’).

Most of Green, Brock and Kaufmans article (2004) focuses on non-interactive media, but they include a small paragraph on interactivity. They say that the ‘privileged access’ to the character’s mind is a catalyst for transportation, and it functions as an extra way to move away from the self. The pitfall of

interactive media is that the medium is more visible than with other media: choice screens, menus, etcetera. Or in a non-video game interactive medium: all the extra pages to turn in a choose-your-own-adventure book. To sum things up: interactive media allow for more transportation and more escaping, but they are more visible and can ruin the experience.

In short, transportation theory ties many topics in this thesis together. A longer description of the field is offered by Green, Brock and Kaufman to illustrate this:

> "Specifically, transportation theory contributes to the conceptual understanding of enjoyment by helping to specify mechanisms underlying enjoyment, including (a) the phenomenological experience of enjoyment through immersion in a narrative world, (b) enjoyment through beneficial consequences of media exposure, and (c) the circumstances under which enjoyment is enhanced or reduced." (p. 312)

In other words, transportation theory helps in understanding enjoyment, immersion, and improving enjoyment/immersion.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this thesis, I have visited several different fields of study to find out more about wildly differing phenomena. One phenomenon was central to this thesis: the visual novel itself. In order to answer the question ('what is the role of visual novels as a narrative medium?'), we have looked at the fields of study involved in chapter 2, at examples and gameplay in chapter 3, and at several different ideas and their application in chapter 4.

Whether the field of video game narrative is to be studied by ludologists or narratologists is something that is not easily decided. Ludologists typically argue that video games belong to their field of study, even if that field of study is mainly concerned with other areas of game development and design. Narratologists argue that video game narrative is one branch of narrative, and therefore belongs to narratology. My judgment is that it either depends on the point of view of the author and their affiliation or that labelling does not matter. If the author chooses to discuss video game narrative to explain how gameplay works, it could be either field of study after all, and we have seen authors borrow terms from authors that are affiliated with the other field of study.

As seen in chapter 3, the term game can mean many different things. In that chapter I have looked at 'non-games'; games that try to widen the boundary of the definition of game (like avant-garde art tries to raise a discussion about what art is). In that chapter we have also seen how difficult it is to make an inclusive definition of game. Lastly, we have seen Raph Koster suggest that narrative is feedback instead of a mechanic: this does suggest that narrative is something different in games than in other media.

In chapter 4, there were four different paragraphs that introduced terms to tell visual novels apart from other narrative. Interactivity and choice is provided to the player, albeit limited in order to make the player still adhere to the story. Moreover, players have been found to keep playing until they have discovered all possible twines (a hypertext narrative). Furthermore, immersion is provided to the player in the form of music, sound effects, character design and obviously the text itself, which is an obvious difference between visual novels and other media. Lastly, transportation theory provides an explanation for the way visual novels involve players: enjoyment, immersion, identifying with a character, transportation away from the self.

As for the role of visual novels as a narrative medium, there are multiple ways to approach this question. The easiest would be to use the diagram by Jahn (2005) introduced in chapter 2: visual novels are a subgenre of written/printed/performed narrative, along with narrative poems, short stories, novels and so on. However, interpreting the question as I intended it (how do visual novels compare to other narratives? Are visual novels narratives?), the diagram only covers the basics. As we have encountered, many authors of recent articles about narrative feel the need to include video games even if they only dedicate a paragraph, but that is not commonplace as illustrated by the low number of sources I have managed to find for this thesis.

The field of video games is enormous uncharted territory. Still, video games are getting more and more exposure (especially at *gamestudies.org*), but their place in academia is still contested, while the library of video games expands rapidly and the phenomenon of gaming is not a novelty anymore. Especially in the Netherlands, a genre of 'serious games', games made for education and (job) training, is gaining traction, and learning more about how people approach video games and how video games can teach people is vital. That was a small side goal of this thesis: directing more attention towards video games in academia. The fact that I have chosen to examine visual novels was partially done to limit the scope of this thesis and partially because I enjoy visual novels, but it is also a genre that exists on the boundary between what people usually see as video games and what is a written story (leading to 'this is not a game' debates). Investigating how visual novels/video games are different from 'traditional' media and how they provide enjoyment, insight or education is needed.

This leads to further possible research in this area. An examination such as mine could be performed on serious games, especially because of their educational value. Furthermore, literature studies can be applied to visual novels/video games, and in fact, there is still work to be done on the boundary of linguistics, ludology and psychology in how people learn best, now that we have interactive media to aid us.

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