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GAMES, NARRATIVES & REPETITION

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Main points from Interactive Narratives Lecture:

1. The fantasy of interacting *within* a story presumes vast freedom of choice/agency

2. The most effective interactive stories have very limited choice/agency

We want to be inside the narrative – to role-play – but perhaps our role as participant in interactive narratives is more complex.

In linear/conventional narrative works, we identify with characters, but we aren't them.

Can we interactive with narratives, while not expecting total character immersion? (Which always disappoints).

Two things I 'played' at Christmas:

1. **Nancy Drew & the Ghost of Thornton Hall.**

A point & click adventure game from 2013.

Limited Map. A house with 6 rooms, a graveyard, the pathway between them.

Three characters to talk to.

New spaces and characters are unlocked as the game progresses.

The map changes.

You move back and forth between the spaces MANY times.

Pleasure in the familiarity of the spaces.

Pleasure in see new things in the familiar.

A clue found in one part of the map, opens up a new element in another part.

2. Black Mirror: Bandersnatch

'Interactive Film' on Netflix, 2018

A choice-based interactive experience that tells the story of a games designer making a choice-based game.

It has a limited, temporal "map". Stefan's home (kitchen, bedroom), the game company's office, the psychiatrist's office, Colin's apartment.

When you 'complete' a version of the story, you are sent back to an earlier stage, this happens 3-4 times before you can finish, plus there are other 'loops' built into the story.

Pleasure in seeing subtle/large changes in sequences already seen.

Pleasure in discovering new possibilities in the familiar.

Repetition in Games:

Bad: "Backtracking" as a way to extend the life of a map/environment, force the playing to travel through it again.

Good: The theory of the 'Gameplay Loop', that all games are made up of a series of actions/responses that are essentially repeated in new environments or with greater intensity.

First Person shooters, platformers, puzzle games but also 'narrative games'

Papers Please, Her Story, Firewatch

Irreversibility Vs Repetition

In linear fixed narratives choices matter, have significance and weight, actions can't be undone.

"Knowledge gained through a previous play throws up a deep problem…"

Stephen Poole, ***Trigger Happy***.

Or does it?

Repetition has always been a fundamental component of narrative.

Archetypes and story constructions repeat endlessly.

Children love to consume the same story repeatedly. (Familiarity is pleasurable)

Repetition of 'text' in Philosophy (Derrida, etc).

True Repetition is impossible – there is always difference, even if the text is identical we have changed (knowledge, emotion, experience).

Theatre – rehearsal is repetition – performance is repetition. Life is repetition!

So – we are fascinated by repetition/difference – reflected in narratives.

- In particular the idea of alternative choices/versions.

It's a Wonderful Life, 1943

Foregrounding repetition – a primary tool of Modernist strategies to disrupt narrative.

Nouveau Roman – Alain Robbe-Grillet.

Last Year in Marienbad, 1961

A story about déjà vu, about time-loops, being stuck in an eternal, repeating present.

Television – A commercial, industrial process that only exists because of repetition.

The Prisoner, late 1960s

The protagonist is trapped in a village (another eternal present, it has no history), forced to reperform a loop of conflict between him and No 6.

The episode A, B & C presents a loop within a loop. Three versions of the same 'event', with different outcomes.

"Meta" narratives built on the protagonists self-reflexivity. All aware we're in a story.

Groundhog Day (1993), Run Lola Run (1998), Edge of Tomorrow (2014), Happy Death Day, The Good Place, Russian Doll

Characters self-aware they are caught in narrative loops.

Loops as metaphors for our flawed, broken habits and patterns.

Awareness of 'videogame' narrative aesthetic.

Small/random changes in behavior have major consequences (Butterfly Effect)

Change is positive! Break the loop!

The viewer gets pleasure from observing difference and repetition (as we do in our own lives).

Reassurance (life goes on) and Intrigue (Why have things changed?)

Narratives based on repetition force the viewer/reader/player to pay attention, to look for differences, clues for change. A form of interactivity not so different from gameplay.