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Melissa Somerdin

*University of Missouri, St. Louis*

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## The Game Debate: Video Games as Innovative Storytelling

### Keywords

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Melissa Somerdin  
University of Missouri, St. Louis

### The Game Debate: Video Games as Innovative Storytelling

Video games are a popular source of entertainment for people of all ages, and both scholars and fans debate whether or not they can go beyond simply being games to become a legitimate medium of literature. Just as a book, depending on the genre, can present a wide variety of information, a game developer can include platform levels (*Super Mario Bros.*), puzzles (*Tetris*), fighting (*Street Fighter*), or narratives (*Final Fantasy*). The stories in games are found textually in dialogue, speech, or prose, or within cinematic narratives called cutscenes (Domsch 31). These storytelling sections generally alternate with gameplay segments, and depending on the writer's intent, one may be more prominent than the other; a game more focused on playing may spend little time on exposition, while one with a storytelling goal may have non-interactive events unfold for fifteen minutes at a time. This may seem obvious for some, but for many unfamiliar with the gaming realm, the fact that narrative games exist can sound astonishing. The question then becomes whether or not video games offer the literary world something new and legitimate to work with. I argue that they do and therefore should not be overlooked and viewed simply as juvenile, mindless entertainment.

Between the constant, rapid advance of technology and the evolution of the philosophy of art, new storytelling mediums such as cameras for cinema and computers for animation have developed over the past few centuries; however, such innovative modes of expression were not immediately regarded as worthy to the critical eye, and it was not until art criticism itself developed that new forms were accepted as legitimate literary vehicles. This journey to open-armed reception is in order for video games as well. Due to their consistent media-and-user interactivity and the inclusion of player agency, video games offer to storytelling enhanced narrative characteristics as well as new, unique ones. These strengthened qualities consist of the suspension of disbelief and emotional immersion concepts, while the innovative ones are the Future Narrative genre—which allows players to experience different

possible story endings—and the potential narrative twists the physical medium can offer.

Although scholars have assessed storytelling and video games, few in-depth analyses of specific games exist to support their contentions about narrative's importance in the game medium; therefore, in arguing my thesis, I will utilize scholars' broad investigations to analyze Kotaro Uchikoshi's narrative-based *Zero Escape* series. Its first two volumes, *9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors* (abbreviated *999*) and *Virtue's Last Reward*, focus on storytelling with the predominant gameplay relying solely on nodal—or “fork in the road”—structure; therefore, the series serves as a perfect model for games' innovative characteristics. While its recently released third volume, *Zero Time Dilemma*, also has these qualities, I will concentrate on *999* and *Virtue's Last Reward*.

Before delving into the innovative storytelling qualities of video games, it is crucial to first establish the distinction between traditional narrative mediums and video games. While “gameplay” is the obvious difference, it is still important to define formally what a video game is within the spectrum of media in terms of its activity or passivity. Sebastian Domsch accomplishes this quite well in his book *Storytelling: Agency and Narrative in Video Games*, categorizing media in terms of its relationship between the creator and the audience and whether or not the medium is nodal (7). He borrows the term from Bode and Dietrich's text *Future Narratives*, which states, “A node is a situation that allows for more than one continuation” (vii). In terms of media, a vehicle that is actively nodal allows the audience to make choices that alter the outcome, while one that is passive prohibits outside interference in its rules. Crossing these two categories are those of “static” and “dynamic,” with the former depending on the user for temporality and movement (books and paintings require an active viewer to “work”), and the latter being entirely independent (movies and music can play without an active listener) (Domsch 7). By bringing in nodes, the static category claims tabletop games and choose-your-own-adventure books, and the dynamic category has video games. For while video games require an active user to fulfill their full potential of gameplay, they still include dynamic elements such as artificial intelligence (AI), which allows for non-playable characters (NPCs) to move and act independently from the player. Thus, video games can be categorized as dynamic, actively nodal media. This label implies games have a special relationship between the agent and user—or game and player—that gives the latter much more agency

than any other form of media can offer. Within the parameters of prescribed programming or rules, players can make decisions in nodal situations in order to pursue whichever path they desire.

This nodal agency generates the interactivity of video games. Depending on the game's genre, choice is offered to players in a variety of ways. Generally the most frequently used engine is what one would find in action or adventure games, in which players can fight, explore, and speak to NPCs; however, nodes appear in other forms as well. Similar to a choose-your-own-adventure book, decisions for the action or dialogue of the playable character are offered to players. These nodes can be found primarily in visual novels, which are interactive fiction games consisting of mostly narration and some interactive elements. Because *Zero Escape* is categorized as one of these visual novels, its interactivity resides in dialogue as well as puzzles. Throughout the game, long prose segments with character dialogue and plot developments are presented. These segments alternate with puzzle portions in which players must use meticulous problem-solving to escape from rooms and progress through the story. During both of these sections, players are intermittently given dialogue choices for the protagonist—Junpei in *999* and Sigma in *Virtue's Last Reward*. It is with this interactivity that *Zero Escape* and video games as a whole either enhance or offer the four aforementioned opportunities for storytelling: a stronger suspension of disbelief, emotional immersion, the Future Narrative, and narrative reversal.

The suspension of disbelief is a concept all fictive narratives strive to accomplish. The phrase was coined by Romantic-era poet and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria*, and although he deploys it with regard to his and William Wordsworth's poetry, today it is applied to fiction in general. This is a simple task to accomplish for tales taking place in the 'real' world, but for ones of the fantasy or science fiction genres, authors must use more effort in order to stay consistent. Despite the events in a story being impossible in *our* world, within the context and natural laws of the plot's setting, they must at least be probable and believable. *Zero Escape* accomplishes this credibility quite well. The surface story of both games is that nine seemingly random people are kidnapped, placed in a boat (*999*) or warehouse (*Virtue's Last Reward*), and forced to play the "Nonary Game," a game requiring players to seek a way out of rooms with puzzles in order to escape. Neither game reveals the facilities' exteriors until the end, but players quickly learn both take place in a parallel, fictional version

of the real world through historical or geographical details.

This grounding becomes useful as the games later introduce science fiction concepts such as time travel and telepathy. The basis for these outlandish ideas stems from two actual theories about reality: morphic resonance and the many-worlds interpretation of quantum physics, which I will break down as simply as possible. Morphic resonance is a concept experimented with and explored by biochemist Rupert Sheldrake, who proposes that what is essentially a telepathy-like collective unconsciousness links the natural universe through morphogenetic fields. Unconsciously, organisms constantly inherit memories, which can then be used to explain epiphanies, or moments in which one just simply “knows” something despite never having experienced it. For example, Harvard University’s William McDougall had rats escape from a tank, and each generation of rats made fewer and fewer mistakes in the process. When scientists in Australia tried duplicating the experiment, their rats made fewer mistakes from the start. Presumably, the collective unconsciousness of Sheldrake’s morphic resonance was at work here, and the rats in Australia “inherited” the memories of those at Harvard (“More on Morphogenetic Fields”). *Zero Escape* takes this concept several steps further by connecting it to the many-worlds interpretation of quantum physics. The quantum theory states that every nodal situation branches off into other paths of events which then split into more possible paths of events, and that all these extensions exist simultaneously. Essentially, an infinite number of parallel timelines or worlds exist (as opposed to a time loop, in which only one infinitely *repeating* timeline exists). *Zero Escape* then proposes that, by manipulating the morphogenetic field, morphic resonance can be used as a means of time travel. Rather than physically transporting bodies, however, the game suggests human consciousnesses can be transported over time. As an example, someone could “send” his or her memory into a past nodal situation, teach himself or herself to “choose” differently at that node, and thus create a new branch, timeline, or possible future.

Explaining this concept outside of its context is convoluted, but when playing the game, it is presented in such a way that not only suspends disbelief but also creates legitimate belief. Because of how seamlessly the real-life, scientific, and story aspects blend together, the idea becomes extremely convincing for players such as myself. This concept being an actual possible means of time travel

is probably not likely, but during and immediately after playing the game, it almost feels probable. Although the story introduces radical concepts such as time travel and telepathy into what clearly begins as a realistic setting, the game grounds them in real-life scientific theories in order to ward off player skepticism. Just as with traditional storytelling, game narratives also strive for the suspension of disbelief.

Alongside utilizing the same literary strategies as traditional storytelling, video games can also create a suspension of disbelief through the concept of the avatar. Avatars are the characters that users play as, and depending on the genre, they can come in one of two forms: wet clay to be shaped by the player or a pre-made statue. As scholars Sabine Trepte and Leonard Reinecke explain the former, “In *The Sims 2*, players are not only able to change their avatar’s appearance, but also personality traits. Especially in [Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games] (e.g., *World of Warcraft*, *Eve Online*), users are able to choose from a variety of features in order to manipulate the appearance, character, skills, and in some games even the ancestry of their avatars” (171). Players can make these characters appear however they want, whether as a reflection or idealized version of themselves or simply whatever they find aesthetically pleasing or ‘cool.’ This is a feature that is unique to video games; however, the “pre-made statue” characters are essentially what one would encounter in any other traditional narrative medium. What becomes innovative is the fact that players control these characters, making the player figuratively become the main character. This duality is exemplified by how people typically speak of their game playing: “I found this item” or “This enemy attacked *me*.” While the character is obviously not literally the player, it is still the embodiment of the player within the realm of the game and thus the medium through which the player participates in nodal situations. The fact that players themselves actively step into the shoes and take the role of avatars helps break down the wall between the story and real life.

This concept of the game avatar then lends itself to emotional immersion, which, due to their interactive qualities, games accomplish in a manner greater than traditional storytelling media can. Scholars writing on the topic often stress the importance of this advantage. With exponential advances in technology in recent years, these qualities have only grown with nodes, realism, and even physical

immersion through movement or voice, thus creating an atmosphere players can potentially relate to and thus sympathize with (Tavinor 26-27). A generally “good” quality of art or literature is the ability to evoke emotion, and video games present an innovative way to achieve that goal (Adams 72). As an example, Aaron Smuts claims that by giving players the responsibility of decision, popular war-themed games such as *Metal Gear Solid* can better convey the themes of their narratives. Another scholar, Ernest Adams, makes a similar point about the powerful experience of war games in particular, noting that he felt the “immediate and visceral experience of the challenge” faced by the Soviets in a World War II game played from the Russian perspective (72). Grant Tavinor discusses this emotional phenomenon from a psychological level. He asserts, “Emotion and action are close cognitive bedfellows. This should lead us to suspect that the role of emotion in interactive fictions will be distinctive... The nature of videogames as interactive fictions determines the type of emotional responses we have toward them” (Tavinor 36). Tavinor cites the prevalent emotions as being frustration, anger, fear, and elation these all can easily be attributed to the dynamic and sometimes even demanding aspects of gameplay. While books can elicit similar empathetic reactions, the literal interactivity of video games facilitates and strengthens them.

*Zero Escape* takes advantage of the game medium to give its players a similar emotionally immersive experience. Alongside puzzles, the series thrives on nodes in the form of dialogue choices, which then have a direct impact on outcomes. Several are minor nodal situations that do not alter anything in the story besides a character’s reaction, so they have little emotional effect. There are, however, other instances in which a decision can completely alter the plot direction, and this places a lot of responsibility on players. In both *Zero Escape* games, players are periodically given the choice of which doors to go through, and they then witness the scenario of the one they chose. Whatever events occur behind other doors go unseen; in some cases, this has a drastic effect on the game’s outcome. For example, in *999*, if players do not go into the door containing a special bookmark, they will not be able to have Junpei give it to Clover later on. Giving the bookmark to Clover initiates a conversation that ultimately makes her realize her brother is alive and has not actually been murdered by one of the other characters, as previously believed. If the player does not have the bookmark, then depending on



other choices made, Clover vengefully kills everyone. When I experienced the game as a player, knowing my own choices led to this tragic ending made the result more horrifying than if I had been passively reading the story. This added a lot of weight and stress onto each decision I made in subsequent playthroughs, and I thereafter constantly questioned myself at each node.

*Virtue's Last Reward* establishes the emotional weight of each nodal situation in the game immediately. While it has both benign dialogue decisions and potentially dangerous ones like 999, *Virtue's Last Reward* also applies game theory in some nodes that imposes stress onto players, making them question the morals of their decisions as well as the trustworthiness of other characters. As defined by *Merriam-Webster*, game theory is “the analysis of a situation involving conflicting interests (as in business or military strategy) in terms of gains and losses among opposing players.” An example of game theory is the Prisoner’s Dilemma, wherein two crime partners—A and B—are imprisoned, placed in separate cells, and offered an opportunity to confess. If A and B both stay silent, they are both imprisoned for two years. If A confesses while B stays silent, A is imprisoned for one year, while B is imprisoned for fifteen. If both confess, they are both imprisoned for ten years. *Virtue's Last Reward* utilizes the same “ally or betray” situation, but it uses different numbers, dubs it the “AB Game,” and also heavily increases the stakes. The characters have digital watches displaying numbers (a parallel to the prisoners’ years), and throughout the game, they must participate in several AB Games. If a character accumulates nine points, he or she can escape from the facility the group is being held in; however, there are two catches: 1) if a character reaches or falls below zero points, he or she dies; 2) the escape route can only be used once and will then be closed forever. With such drawbacks, the characters become wary of one another, especially since they all have only just met. This feeling of distrust reaches the player as well, and with each AB Game decision, he or she knows lives are on the line. It is incredibly intimidating and stressful, especially as players eventually must betray or be betrayed by characters they grow fond of. Characters often react emotionally to being betrayed as well, such as Phi, who disdainfully says to the protagonist, “When someone betrays your trust, it feels like a part of you dies. For me I guess it was the part that cared” (*Virtue's Last Reward*). When I heard it, the line packed a powerful emotional punch as I realized the character I respected most had then lost all respect for me. Because players are

making these decisions themselves in these games, the emotional reaction becomes much greater than when experiencing more passive media like books or film.

In addition to enhancing preexisting storytelling concepts, video games also introduce new ones, such as a promising medium for Future Narratives. As discussed by Bode and Dietrich, Future Narratives make several possible outcomes available, whereas traditional Past Narratives only have one, which cannot be interfered with by users. Recalling its definition, a node is a junction leading to multiple pathways. If at least one is present in a narrative, “then we call it a ‘Future Narrative’ (FN), in contradistinction to narratives that have ‘only’ events—they are ‘Past Narratives’ (PN)” (Bode & Dietrich vii). As Domsch argues, “As conveyors of narrative, video games constantly negotiate between the openness necessary for agency and narrative demands for some form of closure. The range between these two poles is where they are to be understood as FNs” (5). As argued earlier, few forms of media can successfully give users the option to choose paths in a given situation, but the interactivity of video games allows it. Rather than simply theorizing multiple possible timelines of the narrative, they can actually stage those futures. This is the essence of the Future Narrative. Bode and Dietrich claim that “by virtue of operating with nodes, [Future Narratives] are able to preserve essential features of future time, viz. openness, indeterminacy, potentiality, the possibility of multiple continuations, and so on and so forth” (74).

Because of its heavy use of influential nodes, *Zero Escape* is perhaps the perfect example of the Future Narrative model. Not only do the games include nodal situations, but the story also acknowledges them within the context of the many-worlds interpretation of quantum physics. As explained earlier, the many-worlds theory suggests that every event in time is a fork in the road to other paths of events, and all these timeline extensions exist parallel to one another. In *Virtue’s Last Reward*, Phi hypothesizes why the characters are being forced to play the Nonary Game, which is ultimately to prevent a world-ending pandemic by using the morphogenetic field to send information to the past and create a new timeline branch free of the disease. First, however, she explains the many-worlds concept by telling Sigma to make any kind of movement. The player is given several different options, ranging from crossing his arms, clapping, moonwalking, and more. Assuming the player chooses arm-crossing,

Phi summarizes:

You crossed your arms just now, right? But you could have chosen to put your hands on your hips, or clap. Now maybe there are other Sigmas, in other worlds, who did all of those things. All of these worlds and realities are branching off from one another. The choices you could have made branched off from the moment you decided what you were going to do just now. (*Virtue's Last Reward*)

Coincidentally, if a player desires to do so, he or she may go back, replay the scene, and choose a different movement option, thereby making another possible branch, or “future.” This is precisely what a Future Narrative is, albeit one consonant with quantum mechanics. In terms of *Zero Escape*, 999 has six possible endings, while *Virtue's Last Reward* has twenty. In order to complete the games and unlock all their narrative segments and mysteries, players must go through every ending. Each of these endings is a possible future to be explored by the player depending on decisions made while playing, which is precisely what a Future Narrative is by Bode and Dietrich's definition.

There are, however, two problems that arise with regard to this openness of Future Narratives. The first is that the methods through which narrative is presented in video games—dialogue and exposition in *Zero Escape*—heighten the divide between narrative and gameplay. As Domsch explains, “All passive narrative forms are in themselves experienced as passive and therefore identical to the media from which they are appropriated (film, text, audio), but they can, and usually are, contextualized in an actively nodal way, since they are forms in an actively nodal structure” (31). The other issue is that, due to technological limitations, these futures are fully preprogrammed and prewritten by authors, scriptwriters, and game designers, so there is no true indeterminacy as with a Future Narrative; the futures already exist within the programming before they are realized or experienced by players (Bode & Dietrich 50). Within the boundaries of current technology, it is impossible to achieve that level of infinite randomness; however, with advances, perhaps these obstacles could be overcome, allowing for complete agency for players and indeterminacy for the narrative—just like real life. Video games such as *Zero Escape* in particular serve as a foundational start to this innovative genre of storytelling. In fact,

such steps are already being taken by game developers toward story-relevant indeterminacy, as exhibited in *Zero Escape*'s recent third installment, *Zero Time Dilemma*. At certain nodes throughout the game, a "random" factor has been incorporated into the story. For example, the context of one decision is a case of Russian roulette. Through the character Diana, the player has the option to either shoot or not shoot Sigma. If he or she chooses to shoot, whether or not a bullet actually emerges is entirely arbitrary, based on a random number generator (RNG) algorithms, and each possible action has its own unique outcome. While this is not yet pure indeterminacy, it is still a step in that direction.

The other innovative storytelling characteristic of video games lies in the physical state of the medium. As previously mentioned, advances in technology have already brought about interesting ways to get involved in games beyond simply holding a controller and moving one's fingers. Controllers might be motion sensitive for driving or fighting simulations, allowing players to utilize the remotes in a fashion similar to real life. Xbox 360 Kinect games allow players' movements to be recognized in dancing games. Nintendo 3DS AR cards use the console's camera to "add" interactive figures such as dragons onto real-life surfaces. These are all opportunities traditional media does not offer, and although they have not yet been utilized as ways to add unique twists to narratives, they definitely have the potential to.

*Zero Escape* is one of the few video game series that takes full advantage of the medium for storytelling in this way, particularly in *999*. The game resides on the Nintendo DS console, which has the unique feature of having two screens—one on the top and one on the bottom. An iOS version of the game exists as well, but it splits the iPhone screen in half to achieve the same effect. Typically this feature is used by having one screen display a menu or map, while the other is where the action takes place, such as in *Pokémon* games. Perhaps because it is a visual novel, *999* uses the function differently, which ultimately ends up creating a plot twist that could never be accomplished so well in traditional storytelling media. Throughout the game, the bottom screen is used for third-person narration as well as the puzzle segments; meanwhile, the top screen is where the dialogue takes place. Because the protagonist is Junpei, the player makes decisions as Junpei, the narration looks into Junpei's mind, and the player interacts with puzzles on the bottom screen. There is no doubt that

the literary perspective of the game is third-person and omniscient to Junpei. This is how the game is witnessed by the player for at least twenty hours of gameplay.

As the surface of the game's plot is dismantled, however, the perspective begins to change to first-person, but still omniscient to Junpei. As it turns out, the true reason the nine characters are kidnapped is to save a young girl, Akane, from the past. Years prior to the game's events, the first Nonary Game takes place, in which several children are kidnapped for a scientific experiment regarding morphogenetic fields. Half of them are placed on a boat, and the other half are put in a building in Nevada. The groups are determined based on the children's relationship to one another, and if they are close like a brother and sister, they are separated. Theoretically, because of their strong emotional bonds to one another, the siblings' morphic resonance is stronger than normal, allowing them to communicate telepathically with one another in order to solve puzzles and escape from the facilities. A mistake is made, however, and Akane is placed in the same location as her brother, therefore hindering their attempt to escape because he cannot "send" her outside information about the puzzles from the opposite location. This becomes life-threatening as Akane eventually finds herself locked in an initiated incinerator and unable to solve the escape puzzle. Because Akane is a dear childhood friend of Junpei, the game's current events—the second Nonary Game—exist as an attempt to access the morphogenetic fields across time and help her solve the puzzle in order to save her. As this plot twist is exposed to players, another one appears as the bottom screen's third-person narration suddenly switches to first-person. At this point, the narration reads:

[I] was watching. I had watched everything that was reflected in his eyes.  
 I was listening. Every sound that vibrated in his eardrums, I heard. Smell,  
 taste, touch... I felt everything he felt. I knew. I knew everything about  
 him. What he was thinking, what he was feeling, what he was sensing...  
 All of his feelings and worries and fears became mine... My mind, my  
 consciousness, was inside of him. Through the morphic fieldset we were  
 resonant, and we were as one. I was him, and at the same time, I was an  
 observer. (*9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors*)

This shift in point-of-view reveals that the entire “third-person” narration of the game is actually coming from the eyes of the young Akane of the past. The perspective change is emphasized in two ways: 1) with the first “I” being surrounded by actual in-text brackets, which are used throughout the game when new characters or concepts are revealed, and 2) when it eventually becomes time to solve the incinerator’s puzzle, and that puzzle—a Sudoku spread—is displayed upside-down in correlation to the illustration of Akane in the top screen, therefore equating the player’s gameplay to her actions.

The plot reversal is especially astonishing in hindsight to players, as they may realize that since the young Akane has been witnessing the events of the game unfold, she has been watching all the horrors take place as well. This is particularly relevant in terms of some peculiar imagery and description choices used in the beginning of the game. In the early events, one of the characters breaks the rules of the Nonary Game and is killed for it through the detonation of an ingested bomb. Snake’s dead body is later discovered briefly in a similar situation, during which the “third-person” narration reads, “The blood coating almost made it look like raw pizza dough covered in tomato sauce” (*9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors*). When Junpei ultimately inspects Snake’s mutilated corpse, the narration continues:

Chunks of flesh, torn from the body, sat in the blood like tiny islands in a great, red sea. A vast, ragged hole had been torn in the torso, and what remained of his intestines spilled out of it like fresh spaghetti. Smaller chunks of meat had splattered against the wall, and become stuck there as they dried. (*9 Persons, 9 Hours, 9 Doors*)

The gore is reported in comparison to food, which is rather disturbing on its own already; however, once the player finds out that the twelve-year-old Akane is narrating the story, it becomes even more horrific and brings in some heavy themes of the loss of innocence on her part. While a simple point-of-view reversal such as this could be accomplished in traditional media like novels as well, its flabbergasting effect would not be nearly as powerful as in a video game like *Zero Escape* due to how immersive it becomes and the fact that the player exists in the game through the avatar.

Because of their unique interactive qualities and use of nodes, video games have much to offer to the literary realm, whether through enhanced traditional storytelling techniques or new, innovative

ones. Their immersive characteristics help strengthen the suspension of disbelief and emotional immersion as well as offer new opportunities like the Future Narrative and medium-based plot reversals. Perhaps the next step in recognizing video games' innovation for storytelling rests in the hands of game developers and critics alike. Developers should produce and advertise more games with the aim of narrative in mind, and critics who are well-versed in the literary field must analyze what already exists and what may exist in the future. By embracing games' innovative qualities, we can transcend traditional narrative boundaries and create truly ultimate storytelling experiences. 🌿

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