



# Branching Story Line Narration in Modern Video Games and Its Potential

**Harsha A G**

Assistant Professor and Research Scholar, Jain (Deemed to be University) Bangalore

**Dr. Nikunj Trivedi**

Associate Professor and Research Guide, Department of English, Jain (Deemed to be University) Bangalore

## **Abstract:**

Narration is a medium which has evolved alongside the advancement in technology. Narration has seen a transition from early cave art and oral narration, to the modern written and visual narratives. Movies revolutionized the way narratives could be consumed and became a marvel of contemporary society. The rise of branching story line narration in video games could become a replacement to visual narration. The impact of technological advances on narration in the past and the contemporary advances in technology that has impacted branching story line narration. This article will explore the current state of branching story line narration, its potential and the limitations.

**Keywords: Branching story line narration, NPC, Virtual Reality, AI, Procedural generation, Linear Narration.**

Narratives in English Literature was strictly bound to traditional written medium, although written tradition was not the first to emerge. Literature has seen many forms, depending on the evolution of technology and has moved from oral tradition to written tradition, and to the modern digital narration. English Literature studies were confined to written tradition; modern literary studies have moved away from this. Modern literary studies have emerged in movies, comics, video games etc. Narration in movies seemed to be revolutionary because of the fact that most movies required multiple actors and many others in the process of production. Apart from that, the narrative style of movies has moving visuals and audio which is absent in written tradition. But both movies and written traditions follow the same format of narration. Narration is linear and follows the format of exposition, rising action, climax and denouement.

Video games derive similarities with movies, in the fact that they use visuals, audio and have multiple authors (multiple people in the process of production). Video games have traditionally created a unique style of narration in which the player (reader role) has control of the character's actions. This feature alone makes video games a unique style of narration, with the ability to form new styles of narration, which isn't possible in any other medium. Video games being a recent phenomenon, lack substantial research as narrative literature. Juul describes that video games are more an interactive medium than a narrative medium. Juul goes on to say if video games focus more on narration, then the essence of what makes it a video game is lost. But the criticism of the quantity of narration and interaction required to constitute a game is debatable. Narration focused games like *Detroit Being Human*, *This War of Mine...* have been successful and disprove Juul's theory that video games are strictly interactive. It is difficult to determine what percentage of a game should constitute narration and extensive research is required before drawing conclusions. But what most scholars agree on, is the fact that video games are narratives. This article will focus on the branching story line narration which has been explored by Jonas Carlquist.

The storyline of a computer game is often a branching one, which complicates the game's ability to tell a compelling story in the way we are used to. The term "branching storyline" is thus not easy to define. (PSCGNG Abstract)

Carlquist in his article focused on the problems branching story line narration posed in the creation of a game. Especially, his criticism on the definition of how a branching narrative is to be created. Most branching story line video games use something which can be called as pseudo choice for players, which have little to no impact on the outcome of the story. The end result of the story will remain the same for all players. On the other hand, there are substantial examples of video games which have mastered this new medium. *Detroit: Become Human* employs branching story line narration by making every choice of the player have an impact on how the narration ends. The game has around 40 endings which are unique and another 40 which have an overlap. The player's choices also impacts the way the narration progresses (this means that a player can't play the complete narration in one run). Each time a player plays the game, the narration will take a different path depending on player choices.

This however complicates the complicated pre-existent process of creating a game. Unlike books, most video games do not have a single author. Each part of the game is assigned to a specialist in a particular field. This includes audio, backgrounds, characters, coding etc. Often directed by a head or a board, which decides how the game is made. Branching story line narration is like creating multiple video games within a single game. To make it simple, if the player is given choices A, B and C in the beginning of the game. Depending on the choice, the developers will have to create three different types of narration to facilitate the choice made. Larger video game developers have the budget to fund these projects. Smaller video game developers or independent game developers will have a hard time creating a branching narrative. However, with the advancement in software technology like unreal engine, unity... There is an erosion of the labour

intensive tendency of the industry. However, in the current scenario most games give players pseudo choices, to make it look like the players have some control of the narration.

Janet Murray in her book theorised that video games might be the next big step in narration. Similar to that of television, video games seem to be the next step into the evolution of narration. She focuses on the fact that players are a part of the narration. However, she made this assumption based on the video games that were available at the time when she published her book *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. Video games in the 90s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century depended on linear narration because of the limitations in technology.

I find myself anticipating a new kind of storyteller, one who is half hacker, half bard. (HOTH 23)

Branching story line narration could be revolutionised with the integration of VR technology (Currently, its in the nascent stages). If the VR technology promised by tech companies comes to fruition, VR video games could potentially replace all other forms of narration in popularity.

Because it promises users, a close to life experience, except without the limitations of real life. Anime series like *Sword Art Online* and the movie *Ready Player One* explore the potential of VR technology along side the downsides of the technology. Branching story line narration can be combined with VR tech to provide a hyper-realistic experience to users, blurring the line between real and virtual. In real life people go through the process of choices and the subsequent random consequences (Video games try to replicate this, but fail to do so because the consequences are scripted and not random. This could change with the integration of AI technology). An example of this would be to walk down the stairs everyday at the same time of the day. The person could encounter different people and encounter different consequences each day. In linear games NPCs always follow a set pattern of narration which doesn't give players a choice to change narration and consequences of the protagonists actions. But in a branching story line narration NPCs based on the actions and choices of the players will change the behaviour and dialogue of the NPCs, changes to the environment etc. In the future if human consciousness can be transferred into the virtual world, it might become the pinnacle of human and technological advancement. As it would potentially mean humans have the ability to create a universe of their making, rather than live in an existing universe (Human consciousness and the virtual world is a topic which has to be explored separately), Regardless of the progress made in current branching story line narration, the branching in narration is limited and completely dependant on the imagination of the developers. A choice made by the player will not have an endless number of consequences but a set number. It is essentially weaving multiple linear narratives into one massive narration to give it the effect of a branching narration. In the future with the integration of AI technology, this limitation can be overcome to give players a real world experience in the virtual world. Currently, there are games which have procedurally generated worlds, which ensures a unique experience to every player (But the procedurally generated worlds and dialogues have their own set of limitations, leaning on the fact that it uses material in random combinations that is embedded in the game). With AI technology this limitation can be overcome by using filtered data from a larger database to create narratives derived from the real world. The procedurally generated worlds using this method will have numerous

glitches and moral implications, which has to be explored in detail. AI technology is a controversial invention, even in its nascent form. Numerous scientists theorize that AI will eventually try to replace organic life after it becomes sentient and realises that it is superior to all organic life. Therefore, before AI technology is used to create procedural narratives and worlds for video games, scientists will have to address issues that emerge from AI technology.

Visual novels like video games employ branching story line narration to give readers the illusion of control and choice. Same as video games, visual novels don't always employ branching story line narration and is more of a choice made by the developers. Visual novels lack the gameplay element and moving animation (some visual novels do have moving visuals, but isn't as elaborate as video games) which gives video games the feeling of immersion.

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. (VGIS 81)

Somerdin views the potential of narrative video games within the boundaries of video games. But narrative video games have to be pitched against other narrative mediums, to understand the innovation in narration, video games bring to the table.

### **Moral Limitations**

Game developers in the past and even in the present limit certain actions, to ensure that games don't transgress the more sensitive moral norms and rules of society. Rockstar games in their games don't allow players to kill or harm any children. If killing children was an option in the game, the morality of it will fall in the hands of the players. Even in branching story line narrative games, players are bound by the moral principles that the developers chose to follow. Game developers actively avoid themes such as rape and incest in mainstream games (partly due to the age of consumer base), whereas the same themes are used in a rather controversial way in unconventional games (games that are pornographic in nature). Apart from the moral limitations, games have limitation based on the laws of particular countries, to avoid getting banned from that particular market. Essentially, like all narratives, games also are tailored keeping in mind the socio-political and economic aspects of society. Because of this fact, video games might never truly become a virtual mirror of reality, but a carefully structured representation of reality. The other major limitation in video game narratives, is the fact that most video games are developed by the West.

Although, it can be argued that there will always be bias in any form of narrative. The lack of representation from the orient will have major implications because of the bias, considering branching story line narration

might become the most popular form of narration in the future.

Hollywood already dominates international entertainment space and has limited oriental representation. If narrative video games become one of the most popular form of entertainment in the near future, it'll further increase the representation gap between the orient and oxidant. Most video game companies are located in western countries and the workforce is largely Caucasian. This might be due to the delay in IT technology in oriental countries.

### **Conclusion:**

Branching story line narration might become the dominant narrative form in the future because of its potential to give players choices, with a near to life experience. With the fusion of AI and VR technology, branching story line narration might become the pinnacle of narration. The disadvantages, limitations, moral implications of AI and VR technology will have to be considered. For it could make or break the literary evolution of mankind.

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