PLAYING FOR THE PLOT: BLINDNESS, AGENCY, AND THE APPEAL OF NARRATIVE ORGANIZATION IN HEAVY RAIN

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Introduction: Characteristics of Crime Fiction

The main appeal of crime fiction lies in its treatment of narrative organization, in particular, its application of the double stories of crime and investigation. Centered on the search for answers to the who? how? and why? questions, works of crime fiction revolve around the resolution of an enigma, and it isn't until the very end that the interrelatedness of the various clues is revealed and the gap between the two stories is bridged. Enthusiasts of crime fiction read for the plot; every word on the page adds to the anticipation of the final revelation, and the longer that instant can be pushed back, the stronger the concluding moment of illumination will be. Bayard (2000) argues that "this game-playing dimension is essential to the construction of blindness, which is all the more powerful when the veil is lifted at the last

possible moment" (p. 20). Solving the mystery or murder is a type of game, and like any good game, it is built on rules, in this case, "fair play" rules of narrative organization (Pyrhönen, 2010, p.). Works of crime fiction have to give the reader, or in the case of videogames, the player, a fair chance to solve the enigma before the narrative comes to an end and everything is resolved. In literary works, this type of fair play is achieved by "showing readers the clues needed for solving the case, while simultaneously confusing [and blinding] them as to the correct meaning of these clues" (Pyrhönen, 2010, p. 46). Solving the murder or finding the key to the puzzle should be a difficult but possible task, and in all cases, the process should appear evident in retrospect.

Drawing on literary theory about crime fiction, especially classic detective fiction, this article examines how the videogame *Heavy Rain* takes crime fiction's practice of reading for the plot and amplifies its appeal by putting the player in charge of four different story threads. In their own way, each of the four playable characters (Ethan Mars, Scott Shelby, Norman Jayden, and Madison Paige) work towards stopping a serial killer known as the Origami killer and saving his latest victim, Shaun, the son of protagonist Ethan Mars. The end result is a well-designed work of crime fiction that successfully combines the analytical skills related to reading practices with player agency, all the while managing to stay true to the genre and blind the player for most of the experience. In their quest to find the killer, players are given the ability to make meaningful choices in regards to character actions, including selecting dialogue topics or thoughts from a series of choices that appear above the characters' heads and performing quick time events.

Figure 1: Screenshot showing the two dialogue options "clients?" and "repair." (Source: Heavy Rain; Copyright: Sony Computer Entertainment 2010)

Figure 2: Screenshot showing an example of a quick time event. Players have to hold down the buttons indicated on the screen. (Source: Heavy Rain; Copyright: Sony Computer Entertainment 2010)

These elements of play shape players' experience of the game by giving them influence over the actions of characters and the development of the narrative. Throughout the game players are

presented with different choice idioms and *Heavy Rain* "has been praised for the dilemmas that it presents to the player, usually through the use of two equally undesirable outcomes" (Mawhorter, P., & Mateas, M., & Wardrip-Fruin, N., & Jhala, A., 2014). Although they exert some control over the on-screen actions, players don't have full insight into the minds of the characters and in accordance with the norms of crime fiction, are repeatedly blinded and misled. In other words, despite players' assumption that they are playing the game, in the end, the game ends up playing them.

Unpacking the Experience of Blindness

With a narrative focused on stopping a serial killer and finding a kidnapped child, *Heavy Rain* easily lends itself to a variety of analyses from the perspective of crime fiction. Many elements contribute to the overall suspense of *Heavy Rain*. The best example of blindness however, is the sudden revelation at the end of the game that detective Scott Shelby, one of the main characters, is in fact the Origami killer. As this is the most notable and well executed surprise of the game, I've chosen to engage in a close reading of the experience of blindness and focus on how *Heavy Rain* successfully keeps Shelby's true identity hidden from the player until the very end. When playing as Shelby, players are encouraged to think they are helping with the investigation and working towards solving the murders, when in reality they are covering up the criminal's tracks and collecting evidence that might incriminate Shelby. Having the investigator turn out to be the killer is not a new trope in crime fiction. Worpole (1984) points out that the popularity of the genre is due to its clever use of semiology "in which nothing is what it appears to be and everything is a shifting world of signs and meanings" (p. 27). Misleading readers about the identity of characters is quite common, yet by inviting players to unknowingly act out incriminating actions and blind them as to their true meaning, the game adds a new twist to the genre. Indeed, because so much

of the game revolves around players' sense of control over the development of the plot, the revelation that one of the main protagonists is the killer comes as a double shock. Not only were players wrong in thinking that Shelby was one of the good guys, they were also wrong in thinking that they knew the character's motivations. Both the character of Shelby and the actions players performed while playing him were not always what they appeared to be.

In *Rules of Play*, Salen and Zimmerman (2004) identify four types of interactivity that describe a player's level of engagement with a game: Cognitive interactivity, functional interactivity, explicit interactivity, and beyond-the-object interactivity. In *Heavy Rain*, the first and third modes are used alongside conventional narrative devices to shape the player's experience of play and push back the final resolution. In addition to interactivity, the game carefully uses the concept of agency to confer upon players a sense of control while at the same time misleading their attention. In an observation about what distinguishes games from written texts, Perlin (2004) states that "by telling us a story, [the novel] asks us to set aside our right to make choices – our agency. […] A game does not force us to relinquish our agency. In fact, the game depends on it. […] While you're actually playing the game, the very effectiveness of the experience depends on you becoming [the character]" (pp. 13-4). For the construct of blindness to be effective, players must believe they are in charge of characters' actions otherwise there is no purpose in creating an elaborate deception. And it is this perception of player agency and the notion that the choices one makes are meaningful, that make story-driven games so appealing.

Nixon and Bizzocchi (2014) have previously pointed out that *Heavy Rain* successfully uses interactivity to foster character identification and encourage players to fully immerse themselves in the universe of the game. This article partly builds on their observations and examines how *Heavy Rain* thoughtfully

balances agency and blindness, so as to create an enjoyable gaming experience that involves a certain level of deceit, yet does not rob players of their sense of control. I've identified three distinct ways in which *Heavy Rain* successfully pushes back the final shocking revelation by incorporating the concepts of distraction and blindness alongside empowering interactive actions. First, blindness is used together with cognitive interactivity to divert players' attention away from the investigation and towards Shelby's backstory. Second, blindness and distraction are used in connection with explicit interactivity to distract the player from the story of the investigation and instead emphasize quick time events and Shelby's hero-like character. Third, fragmentation is used to make it harder for players to pick up on the interrelatedness of clues and recognize incomplete scenes.

Blindness and Cognitive Interactivity

In the words of Salen and Zimmerman (2004), cognitive interactivity refers to "the psychological, emotional, and intellectual participation between a person and a system" (p. 59). It's a form of interpretive interactivity that focuses on the player's mental engagement with the game. Early on, detective Shelby visits Lauren, the mother of one of the Origami killer's victims, and introduces himself as a private investigator who was hired by the families of the victims to help apprehend the killer. While not much else is revealed about his background, this simple backstory is enough to shape players' consciousness about the character's function in the story and blind them as to his true intentions. Steven Jones (2008) makes a similar observation about the persuasive power of backstories and explains that "even when a player is only half-conscious of them, such story elements […] partly determine the mood and feel of the gameplay experience" (p. 85). Indeed the knowledge that Shelby is a detective, that is a problem-solver rather than part of the

problem, shapes how players approach playing the character and sets the tone for the remainder of the game.

Figure 3: Shelby introduces himself to the mother of one of the victims. (Source: Heavy Rain; Copyright: Sony Computer Entertainment 2010)

When she first meets Shelby, Lauren, who works as a prostitute, assumes he is a new client. The detective quickly disproves this notion by stating his name and function and proceeding to ask a series of questions about the disappearance of Lauren's son. As short as it is, this introduction invites players to think positively of Shelby by distinguishing him from the less desirable characters that are Lauren's clients, and it also provides them with a clear goal in the game, namely finding the Origami killer and providing justice for the victims. There is no reason for players to doubt Scott Shelby's integrity at this stage in the narrative, which is why the game is able to effectively use cognitive participation to create blindness and divert the player's attention from the story of the crime to Shelby's backstory. By employing psychological participation in this way, *Heavy Rain* does exactly what a well designed work of crime fiction is supposed to do: It prevents players from seeing the bigger picture by producing a type of "psychic blindness" that influences how

the narrative and its characters are perceived (Bayard, 2000, p. 19). As a player, one of my first reactions when playing as Shelby was to make narrative choices and take actions that fitted the persona of a detective. I selected choices based on what outcome I anticipated to be most useful to a detective and did so mostly because of how the backstory framed Shelby.

Explicit Interactivity and Distraction

The initial blindness established through cognitive interactivity is reinforced via the use of explicit interactivity in an effort to engage the player on two planes, and deepen the immersive experience of play. Explicit interactivity is the type of interaction we most commonly think about in connection with videogames and involves using the joystick to make characters move and pressing buttons to enact actions or choices (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 60). Active participation of this type changes the conventional crime fiction experience of being misled because players, unlike readers, have an expectation of agency. In traditional mystery novels, such as the classic detective novel, crimes are solvable and there is always a logical explanation for the killer's behavior and motivation. This is why readers can peacefully abandon themselves to the mysteries of the novel – they know that eventually everything will be resolved and order will be restored (Malmgren, 1997). There is a certain pleasure in being passively misled and then realizing how all the clues fit together. By making crime fiction interactive, *Heavy Rain* challenges the assumption of peaceful deception. A certain tension comes about from pitting the concept of agency against the incomplete presentation and trickery associated with the crime fiction genre. In *Heavy Rain*, players may not be able to change who the killer is, but their interactive engagement with the game is directly related to how certain parts of the narrative unfold and this ability to make meaningful choices keeps them on edge. Indeed, because their choices can have severe consequences, such as the death of a main character, players

cannot afford to fully surrender themselves to the mysteries of the narrative. They are constantly left wondering whether they could have taken a different action which would have prevented an undesirable turn of events.

Before delving deeper into the analysis of how explicit interactivity is used to encourage blindness, a few words about *Heavy Rain*'s choice idioms and alternate story paths are in order. As Murray (1997) explains, "there is a distinction between playing a creative role within an authored environment and having authorship of the environment itself" (p. 152). While the *Heavy Rain* developers created alternative scenarios for each episode, and many possible endings to the game, as a player one could envision hundreds of other scenarios and endings, none of which can be acted out. Players can thus only operate within the limited freedom given to them by the makers of the game. In an interview for Gamasutra, Guillaume de Fondaumiere, co-CEO of Quantic Dream, stated that *Heavy Rain* doesn't use a typical success or failure mechanism, but that "depending on [one's] actions, something different is going to unfold; something different is going to happen" (in Sheffiled). This means that even if a player fails to press the correct buttons during a quick time event or chooses not to act during an action scene, the game will move on and the narrative will unfold based on the player's choices, effectively enhancing the player's sense of agency and control. While there may be no failure or game over in the traditional sense, completing the quick time event with the least amount of mistakes is generally the desirable options since it is the one with the most predictable outcome. Additionally, some of the choices players are confronted with can be labeled as either good or bad, where good choices are popularly viewed as successes and bad or immoral choices as failures. And lastly, although it is possible in some scenes to remain inactive or unresponsive to the prompts, this type of behavior defeats the intended purpose of the game since the player is not actually

trying to solve the crime or make progress in the investigation, but playing with other motives in mind (Mawhorter et al., 2014). This article takes alternate choices into consideration when discussing the construction of blindness in *Heavy Rain*, but assumes that players are playing with diegetic or semi-diegetic motives in mind and are trying their best to complete the game's interactive components.

To reinforce the initial blindness established through cognitive interactivity *Heavy Rain* uses explicit interactivity to build up dramatic tension and distract the player from the investigation. Various early chapters stand out by the way in which they distract players from both the story of the investigation and the story of the crime by highlighting the hero-like nature of detective Shelby rather than his detective skills. In *Sleazy Place*, players have the option to perform a series of quick time events to save Lauren, from an abusive client. By inviting players to act out the scene rather than watch it, the game increases their sense of agency and invites them to actively participate in the conceptualization of Shelby as a good guy who stands up to injustice. The fight scene flows naturally as part of the narrative, yet when considered within the broader story of the investigation, it is just a distraction. Completing it is highly exciting and results in Lauren being appreciative, but it does not provide the player with additional clues.

Figure 4: Fight scene from the chapter Sleazy Place. (Source: Heavy Rain; Copyright: Sony Computer Entertainment 2010)

In the chapter titled *Hassan's Shop*, the player is once again given the opportunity to play the hero when in control of Shelby. A number of narrative choices in this chapter lead to a positive outcome where Shelby saves the clerk either by knocking the criminal unconscious or by talking him out of robbing the store. Having the true criminal "conceal [his] oppositional status by pretending to [be a helper]" or hero is a common trope in crime fiction and is used to blind not only the player but other in-game characters as well (Malmgren, 2010, p. 155).
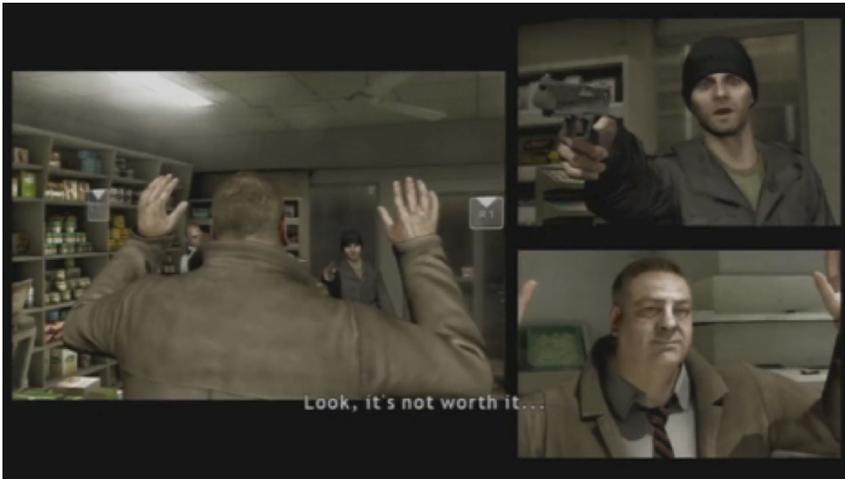
Figure 5: Shelby calming down the robber in the chapter Hassan's Shop. (Source: Heavy Rain; Copyright: Sony Computer Entertainment 2010)

The interactive moments in *Hassan's Shop* appear meaningful in the context of that scene, yet their overall contribution to the story of the investigation is negligible and this chapter too, is mostly a distraction. Like in the previous example, skill and reaction time are important for the successful completion of the action scene and quick time events, but in most alternate endings for this chapter, how the player saves Hassan has no bearing on the development of the story of the investigation – for example, the player is given the shoebox with a clue whether he saves Hassan by calming down the robber or by allowing Shelby to get shot during the confrontation. Explicit interactivity here is used primarily as a form of distraction from the investigation and to delay the inevitable discovery of a clue. The dialogue options during the confrontation test the player's ability to think ingeniously, but rather than advance the story of the investigation, they merely reinforce the idea that Shelby is a noble detective. Indeed, while the discovery of the clue seems to be a promising step in the development of the story of the investigation, the game does not invite the player to examine the shoebox, but instead switches to a cutscene where Hassan

thanks Shelby for his help, placing the detective and his heroic act at the forefront of the narrative. After playing through this chapter, I felt that my main accomplishment was saving Hassan, not finding the shoebox. The series of quick time events in this chapter built up dramatic tension and focused my attention on the action rather than the story, thereby deepening the experience of distraction and psychic blindness.

Tension between Agency and Fragmentation

A third way in which *Heavy Rain* successfully distracts players from Shelby's identity and confounds them as to the true meaning of clues is via the use fragmentation. According to Pyrhönen (2010) fragmentation "both permits a progressive recovery of past events and retards a comprehension of these same events. It tests readers' ability to combine the narrated pieces with one another, a task that is made difficult by their achronological and incomplete presentation" (p. 50). A first manifestation of fragmentation is found in the structure of *Heavy Rain*'s narrative. The existence of four distinct story-threads, where the characters each have their own approach to saving Shaun and stopping the Origami killer, complicates the story of the investigation by requiring the player to keep track of multiple plotlines. This task is especially challenging for players who do not play the game for long stretches of time. If one were to only play one or two chapters per day, a significant amount of time would pass before one gets back to a particular character's storyline, thus making it much harder to recognize how various narrative parts fit together.

A second important observation about *Heavy Rain*'s narrative structure in connection with fragmentation is that clues relevant to Shelby's implication in the Origami murders tend to be buried in-between distracting scenes and revealed towards the end of chapters, right before the narrative switches over to another character. This particular presentation makes it more difficult

for the player to recognize the relevance of a particular clue or recall its discovery during the next Shelby chapter. In the episode *Suicide Baby* for example, players have to first perform a series of tangential actions such as saving Susan from her suicide attempt and feeding her baby, before finally being led to another clue. However, once they are in possession of the mysterious cell phone that Susan believes is somehow related to the Origami killer, no investigation-related interaction is possible. Shelby tries to turn on the phone and right after this attempt, he exits the house and the narrative switches over to another storyline. This scenario is similar to the one in *Hassan's Shop*. In both instances a clue is revealed to the player, but the chapter concludes before any progress is made in the investigation. *Heavy Rain* purposely fragments the narrative in this way to delay the ability of players to make connections between the clues collected across the various storylines. By cutting off the experience right before Shelby should technically begin to realize how the pieces of the puzzle fit together, the game successfully manages to postpone the revelation of the detective's true identity and keeps the players guessing.

Out of the various narrative devices *Heavy Rain* uses to blind, distract, and confuse the player, the use of incomplete presentation is probably the most difficult to detect. When incomplete presentation is applied, the player believes that he is experiencing a particular scene in its totality when in reality, important narrative links are subtly left out. In a game based on interactive choices, where players can control not only characters' movements, but also make decisions about how chapters play out, detecting instances of incomplete presentation is especially difficult. *Heavy Rain* works hard to make players believe that their actions always matter by placing them in situations where their ability to successfully complete quick time events can have severe repercussion. If players fail to complete the quick time events during Madison's fight with the doctor for

example, Madison dies and her character is no longer playable. This is a very powerful moment in the game and in this instant the player is indeed experiencing the scene in its totality. By confirming the player's agency over the development of the story throughout most of the game, *Heavy Rain* is able to successfully blind the player in a few select instances.

Figure 6: Failure to properly execute the quick time events in the chapter The Doc leads to the death of Madison Paige. (Source: Heavy Rain; Copyright: Sony Computer Entertainment 2010)

Incomplete presentations are often hidden in-between dramatic scenes or followed by quick time events as this placement makes it harder for players to notice them. The chapter titled *Manfred* is an example of a noticeable incomplete presentation. Shelby and Lauren go to Manfred's office to question him about a possible piece of evidence. After a brief conversation, Manfred disappears in his back office. When he fails to come back after a few minutes have past, Shelby goes to check on him and finds him dead. Something clearly happened to Manfred in the time interval between the discussion with Shelby and his death, but the action took place "off stage" and the player is left wondering what happened in the absent scene. From a playing perspective, it

appears the player is in control of Shelby's actions during the entirety of this chapter, yet this assumption is false. There is a second, less obvious, incomplete presentation in this chapter and it is only when this one is divulged that the player is able to reorder the story fragments and reconstruct the scene of Manfred's murder. Several chapters later, when the player realizes that Shelby is the Origami killer, a recollection scene clears up the incomplete presentation from the *Manfred* chapter. After watching the flashback, players are led to realize that during the brief instance in which the camera was focused on Lauren, they were in fact not in control of the detective's actions. Shelby was off-screen during that short moment, which explains how he was able to sneak to the backroom and kill Manfred.

Figure 7: Shelby is standing in the store with Lauren. He is still visible in the shot.
(Source: Heavy Rain; Copyright: Sony Computer Entertainment 2010)

Figure 8: For a few seconds the camera focuses exclusively on Lauren. Shelby is no longer visible in the background. (Source: Heavy Rain; Copyright: Sony Computer Entertainment 2010)

Incomplete presentations such as this one are difficult to detect during a first playthrough of the game because of how well they are integrated into the narrative and cinematic cutscenes. Additionally, the brevity of the scene in which the camera switched from the wide angle to the close-up of Lauren doesn't suggest a clear interruption of the player's interactive experience, and therefore doesn't give cause for suspicion. Players are led to think that Shelby is standing in the background and that they will resume their control of the character any minute. In this chapter, *Heavy Rain* cleverly uses players' perceived sense of agency over the Shelby character to squeeze in an incomplete presentation that prevents them from recognizing what is actually happening. When examined more closely however, it becomes evident that the scene in Manfred's store provides just enough information to where in retrospect players are capable of recognizing where they were blinded and distracted.

Conclusion

This article examines how, in accordance with the norms of crime fiction, *Heavy Rain* includes blindness, distraction, and fragmentation to increase suspense and play with players' sense of agency and control. While there are many ways of approaching the topic of crime fiction in connection with *Heavy Rain*, I chose to focus on how the game effectively delays the surprising revelation that detective Scott Shelby, one of the main characters, is in fact the killer the player has been trying to apprehend all along. Three distinct ways in which the game successfully postpones this concluding moment of illumination are identified. First, blindness and cognitive interactivity are used together to divert players' attention away from the investigation and towards Shelby's backstory as a friendly detective. Secondly, distraction is used in conjunction with explicit interactivity to emphasize action-packed quick time events and Shelby's hero-like character, thereby shifting the focus away from the investigation. Thirdly, fragmentation and incomplete presentation are used to make it more difficult for players to pick up on the interrelatedness of clues and notice incomplete scenes. Overall, the game respects crime fiction's fair play rules of narrative organization. It scatters meaningful clues and hints throughout the game all the while making it challenging for players to put together the various pieces of the puzzle. The interrelatedness of the various clues only becomes evident in the final chapters, making *Heavy Rain* a well-designed interactive work of crime fiction that effectively uses its medium to enhance the shock of the final revelation and challenge the player's assumed sense of agency and control.

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