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ANALYZING ‘INTERACTIVE NARRATIVE’ IN MOBILE INTERACTIVE STORY GAMES

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to analyze interaction patterns in four mobile interactive story games. Seeing as the mobile gaming industry is currently at its highest point, it is not surprising to find that mobile gaming has become a rather popular form of entertainment. The games which are analyzed in this paper are *Episode: Choose Your Story* by Episode Interactive, *Choices: Stories You Play* by Pixelberry Studios, *Chapters: Interactive Stories* by CrazyMaple Studio, and *My Story: Choose Your Own Path* by Nanobit. The data was collected between April and July in 2019, and the main focus of the research was to thoroughly explore the first chapters of the stories which are immediately available to new players upon installing the games, and consequentially explain the elements and the structure of interactive narrative in these apps.

All data was analyzed, and a representative amount of textual and visual samples is provided in the paper. Narrative devices typically found in this genre are mentioned, defined, and followed by examples. Interactive game elements are described in detail. Furthermore, the economic aspect and the viability of the freemium model are also discussed.

Key words: discourse analysis, interactive story, mobile games, popular culture, interactivity, narrative, fiction, storytelling

1. Introduction

This paper is going to analyze and discuss mobile interactive story games. For my research, I have chosen the four most popular units which were listed on the chart of the top 250 highest grossing apps on App Store on May 20, 2019. These apps are, in their consequential order, *Episode: Choose Your Story* by Episode Interactive, *Choices: Stories You Play* by Pixelberry Studios, *Chapters: Interactive Stories* by CrazyMaple Studio, and *My Story: Choose Your Own Path* by Nanobit. I am going to present interactive stories, compare the aforementioned games individually, and analyze possible reasons why such games have recently gained popularity. In the same vein, the cultural aspect as a consequence of globalization and its role in these games will also be discussed.

In regard to textual samples, they will be collected from the first chapters of stories offered to new players immediately upon installing and opening the games. The titles of these stories are: *The K*ss List* (*Episode*[1]), *The Royal Romance* (*Choices*), *Truth or Dare* (*Chapters*), and *Dear Mona* (*Nanobit*). All four stories belong to the romance genre and follow the same storytelling pattern, which offers a great amount of comparable material. Due to the position of these stories and the fact that they are the first interactive content available to new players, and seeing that it is in developers' interest to retain as many users as possible, it can be assumed that these are the stories which present the apps in their best light and make them stand out on the app market.

2. The effect of globalization on popular culture

It is important to note at this early point in the paper the effect of globalization on popular culture, which resultantly also affects not only mobile interactive story games, but video and mobile games in general. When games are described as "globalized", what is commonly meant is that they have been adapted to fit American wants and needs. "So much of what we know as globalization is, in both source and character, undeniably American." (Berger & Huntington, 2002, p.324) App stores like Apple App Store and Google Play Store are products of American companies, and most mobile games, regardless of their producers' country of origin, are adapted primarily for the American audience. The games I am analyzing

[1] To improve the flow, *Episode: Choose Your Story* will be referred to as *Episode* further in the text, and the other app names will be shortened in the same recognizable manner.

in this paper not only use primarily American English, but also employ locations in the United States. The first chapter of *The Royal Romance* takes place in a fictional kingdom of Cordonia and New York City, *Dear Mona* happens entirely in Montville, state of New York, while the plot of *Truth or Dare* plays out in Chicago. *The K*ss List* does not specify the location where Kentwood Academy is situated, but it can be presumed due to its Americanized name that *Episode* follows the same pattern.

Figure 1. A screenshot from *Choices*. Retrieved April 19, 2019.

Figure 2. A screenshot from *Chapters*. Retrieved April 22, 2019.

Surprisingly, not all companies which produce interactive story games originate from the United States. *Episode*, *Choices*, and *Chapters*, three of the highest grossing apps, are all American – but *My Story* is not. *My Story*'s company, Nanobit, has headquarters in Croatia, but the company's app offers stories primarily in American English. There are two reasons I am going to present to explain such practice. The first one is the game's target audience, which is American for most interactive story games due to their vast economic power. Newzoo's 2019 Global Games Market Report provides data for total revenue in the game

market listed by countries, and the United States is first on the list with a colossal number – 36,869 million dollars in June 2019 (Newzoo). With that taken into account, it is not surprising to see a Croatian app choosing English as their primary language, not only because of the small number of Croatian speakers and the size of the international market, but also because of benefits of arbitrage. Arbitrage is one of the principal methods of trading where companies earn money by "buying cheap and selling dear by moving goods around in space." (Carey, 2009, p.167) Naturally, game producers are not buying cheap stocks and selling them for profit. This economic (and economical) practice means that game companies choose to have their headquarters in countries where the cost of production is low and where they can offer smaller salaries to their employees, and then sell their product in countries with the high cost of living index, making more profit in return. For successful designers of interactive story games who choose to do this, it is a very viable model of business since it gives companies more resources and time to experiment with their apps thanks to their lower cost of production, while American companies often do not have that luxury. Nanobit is not the only company taking advantage of this – a myriad of similar apps have appeared on the market ever since interactive story games have proved to be lucrative, and a small number of them could easily end up achieving success in a short time. Some of the popular apps are already losing players due to an irregular schedule of uploading new story chapters or expensive premium[2] content. The constant struggle to reach or stay on the top results in a harsh competition among the apps, which consequentially oftentimes decide to either implement new, exciting features or to copy them from some other app. Most of these features are then shown in the first chapter of the story in order to show players everything the game offers and convince them to stay.

But why are interactive story games so popular in the first place? The answer may lie in the millions of dollars being continuously spent on marketing. "With the rise of social media and online networks being used by hundreds of millions of people around the world, the cultural online behaviours are evolving rapidly and with powerful effect." (Barbulet, 2013, p.422) The fact that people spend so much time on social media which are financed through individually tailored advertisements means that all games need good marketing strategies. In ads for mobile interactive story games, players get to experience a trailer-like simulation of the real gameplay, and sometimes even get a chance to interact with the advertisement as they

[2] "Premium content" refers to blocks of narratives which players get to read only by spending in-game currencies, specifically gems or diamonds, which I will talk about later in the paper (see chapter 5.4., Virtual Economy).

would in the app. Occasionally, the content of those ads does not even match the in-game content, but by the time the player has realized it, they are already addicted to the game and opt to stay.

Figure 3. Facebook advertisement for *Choices*. Retrieved July 2, 2019.

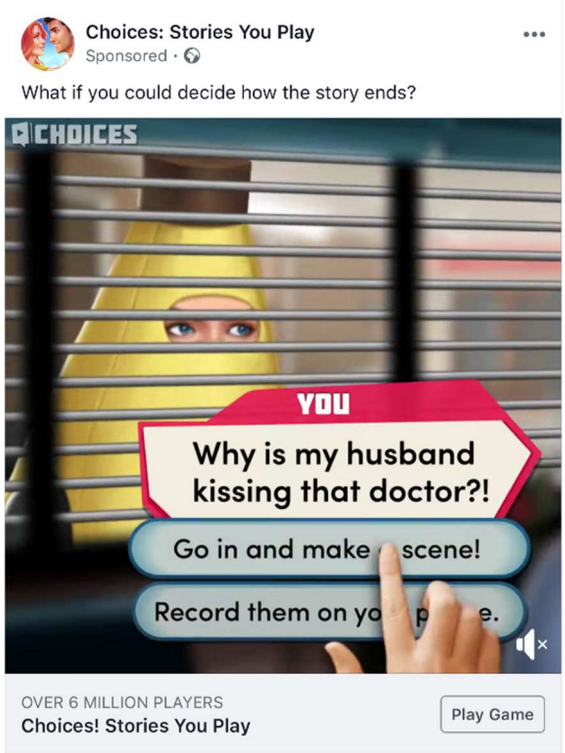


Figure 4. Facebook advertisement for *Choices*. Retrieved July 2, 2019.

Another key part of their popularity is the mere availability of mobile games. With smartphones that "now have processing power on par with computers" (Schrock, 2015, p.1236) and that are always within reach, fun interactive story games are only a few clicks (or rather, taps) away. The format of in-game chapters[3] which allows players to finish them in 10 to 15 minutes makes the games playable almost anywhere and anytime, e.g. in or while waiting for public transport. The games do not take too much time or investment, but they do offer entertainment and a perfect cure for some idle time "through frequent short bursts rather than longer immersive interactions" (Schrock, 2015, p.1237). It has been scientifically proven that people now "have more difficulty focusing for long periods of time" and can no longer get through a long book as easily as before (Riley & Rosen, 2011). It is then not surprising to

[3] Chapters in games like this imitate the form of books, but they are also highly similar to the model of TV series. This will be explained more thoroughly later in the paper (see chapter 3: Interactive Narrative).

find that games where players assume the control and decide how much time they wish to spend are becoming increasingly popular.

The idea that "digital entertainment, from video games to simulation rides, is now a central feature of popular culture" (Darley, 2000), written on the cover of *Visual Digital Culture*, notably depicts the current ubiquity of digital games. What used to be a hobby of a relatively limited number of people is now a booming industry which offers something of interest to everyone. Eight years ago, 68 percent of Americans played video games (Riley & Rosen, 2011, p.81). But when the game industry just started developing, its intended consumers were not as diverse as today. For example, in 1997, young males made up the primary audience for the interactive multimedia narrative (Garrand, 1997, p.78). Merely five years later in 2002, Berger and Huntington recognized the issue with these statistics: “Women are key economic actors and fundamental to economic development. The problem is that their economic contributions are not rewarded as they should be.” (Berger & Huntington, 2002, p.341) Not surprisingly, it was not long before several gaming companies recognized women’s financial power and started developing games intended primarily for the female audience. And it was just in time to take the antecedent order by storm – the economic power of women in the 21st century is greater than ever, which boosted, among other, the market for female-oriented games as well. In 2019, almost two-thirds of gamers are of the female gender, or to be more precise, 63% of them (Mediakix). It is impossible to deny the fact that game producers have been forced to make an enormous adjustment from a previously primarily male market in order to retain high profits.

What role does this play for interactive story games? To correctly comprehend why this game type appeals so greatly to the female audience, it should be noted that most of the content which they offer belongs to the romance genre. In fact, a parallel can be drawn between interactive story games and the so-called chick-lit novels, often introduced as light romance novels for women. As Riley and Rosen write (2011, p.25), chick-lit novels allow women “vicariously to experience the stressful argy-bargy of the modern female experience”. According to the authors, women of today constantly suffer from the pressure of “trying to have it all” and are conflicted between wanting to be liberated, independent and professionally successful, but also wanting to keep their man and remain toned and sexy (Riley & Rosen, 2011, p.25), or just generally live in accordance to what their culture expects them to be. The appeal of interactive story games is evident and undeniable — they offer their players the ability to explore other lives just like they would by reading a romance book. The

main difference is that here they get to control the story whenever the game asks them to decide what they want to do, which for some makes it much more appealing. The main love interest might be a lead singer in a band, or a sensitive billionaire, or a blast from the past who still has feelings for the player character; the common thread that connects all these stories is that players are always given a choice. Players can reject the character pursuing them without any real repercussion; and if they decide they want to play out certain fantasies, such as getting involved in intimate relationships with multiple characters during one playthrough[4], there is nobody to stop them or judge them.

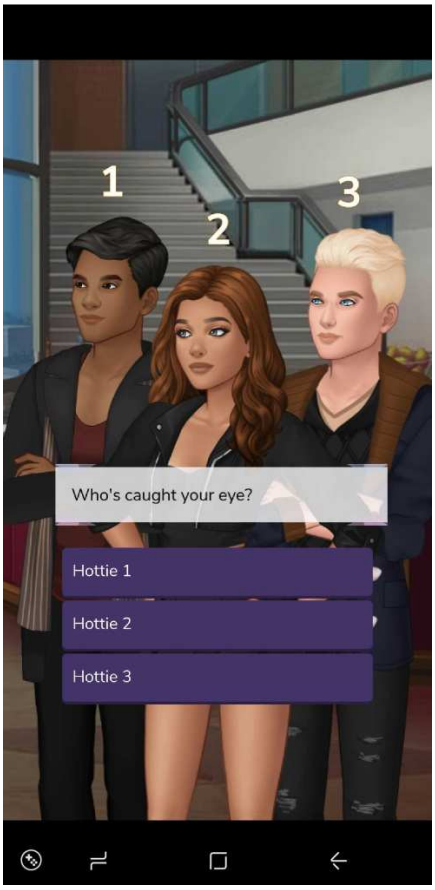


Figure 5. A screenshot from *Episode*. Retrieved April 21, 2019.

Figure 6. A screenshot from *Chapters*. Retrieved April 22, 2019.

"From Greek mythology to daytime soaps, it is clear that sex — or the drive to have it— will make a person do almost anything. Paris' abduction of the lovely Helen of Troy led King Menelaus to begin the Trojan War. So, like games, sex has the unusual ability to make

[4] One playthrough counts as reading the story from the beginning to the end, while multiple playthroughs would usually include rereading the story in order to see different dialogues which ensue when players pick a choice different from the one they made originally.

people do things that are not necessarily in their best long-term interest." (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011, p.15) Interactive story games greatly take advantage of this, which might be surprising considering the fact that three of our analyzed games are for players aged twelve and above. But it is often enough to merely suggest the idea of sex to tempt players into paying for content with an in-game currency (which real money is exchanged for).

To clarify the above, I will use an example from *Chapters*, even though it is the only game which declares its content as intended for people older than sixteen. In their story called *Truth or Dare*, players take the role of a nice, meek girl who takes freshly baked cookies to welcome her new neighbor. The neighbor reacts harshly and yells at her, but later realizes that he overreacted and decides to apologize. The player then has an option to accept his apology for 17 gems[5], ask him to make it up to her for 12 gems, or completely reject his apology for free. Here we can see a common psychological trick that interactive story games use where players are presented with multiple options and where one of them is obviously the most viable – in this case, it is the one for 12 gems. When subjected to this choice, most players are going to believe that the cheaper premium option is better than the more expensive one, and perhaps be even more inclined to buy it than if the more expensive option was not offered in the first place. Additional interactive options thus provide both a greater experience for the players and better monetization [6]options for the company behind the game.

The free option is, naturally, the worst option presented to the player. If that were not the case, app users would never be inclined to spend their hard-earned money on games like this. The goal of every interactive story game is to make the player identify with their character, and then gradually encourage them to unlock the better offered paths for them. And that is the main appeal - when immersed in an interactive story game, players are no longer just readers and spectators, but sensualists. (Darley, 2000, p.173) This means that they no longer receive information passively, as if when reading a book or watching a movie; instead, they find themselves completely immersed in the story to the point of inserting their own personality in the personality of the main character. And while a lack of characterization might be a major flaw in other types of media, in this one it becomes almost a requirement; making the main character too well-drawn might even result in losing the player's interest and their motivation to play the story until its end.

[5] "Gems" refers to *Chapters*'s in-game virtual currency, which is bought by real money. I am going to explain this in more detail in one of the later sections.
[6] Monetization in mobile games means the way they make money.

Finally, in order to wrap up this section, it is important to note that interactive story games actually transcend traditional media. Players of interactive story games not only get to play the mobile game, but also interact with Instagram stories and Facebook posts while waiting for an update. It is not only a great marketing tool which introduces new players to the world of interactive story games, but it is also a deliberate strategy which keeps the old players loyal to the app. Informing players of any upcoming stories, offering giveaways and prizes for participation and posting amusing content somewhat related to the game's content makes sure that the followers will keep playing the game even if the publishing schedule gets disrupted.

3. Interactive narrative

In the previous section, I explained the extrinsic reasons for the success of interactive story games. Now I am going to proceed with answering questions regarding the games' composition, namely: what is interactive narrative, the gist of their content and the main element of these games? And what is exactly interactive in this medium? But in order to properly focus on this part of interactive story games, it is crucial to explain what the term interactivity in games conveys in general. "This means that the player has an element of control and – within certain limits – is able to act upon that which appears within the audio-visual field of the screen" (Darley, 2000, p.31). Not only that, but interactivity also "involves a kind of relative or regulated agency: the constraints of the game allow the player to choose between a limited number of options" (Darley, 2000, p.164). Immersion has always been an important part of every kind of art and media; all games constantly strive to achieve "greater and greater levels of illusion" and to produce "an experience that is as if one were actually taking part" (Darley, 2000, p.31). Interactive story games follow the same pattern. When players first enter the game, they are presented with the game's user interface. In most interactive story games and in all four of our samples, this interface loosely resembles a bookshelf; the player decides on the book by collecting and sorting out the information they gather from the book's description, cover, and genre.

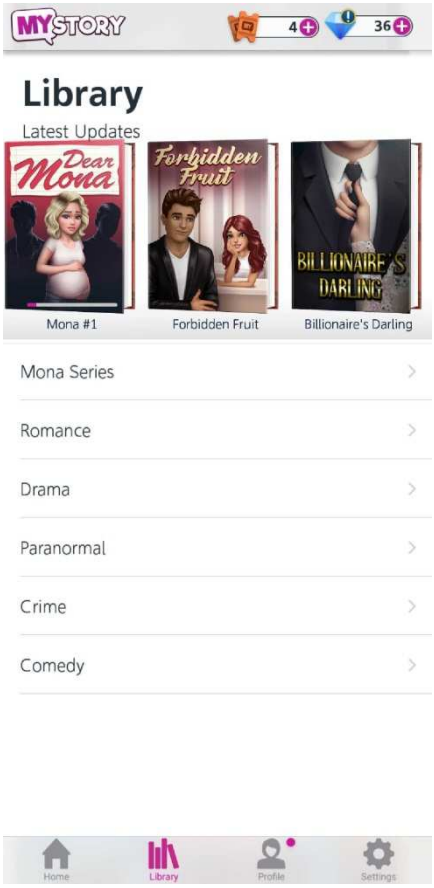


Figure 7. A screenshot from *My Story*. Retrieved April 30, 2019.

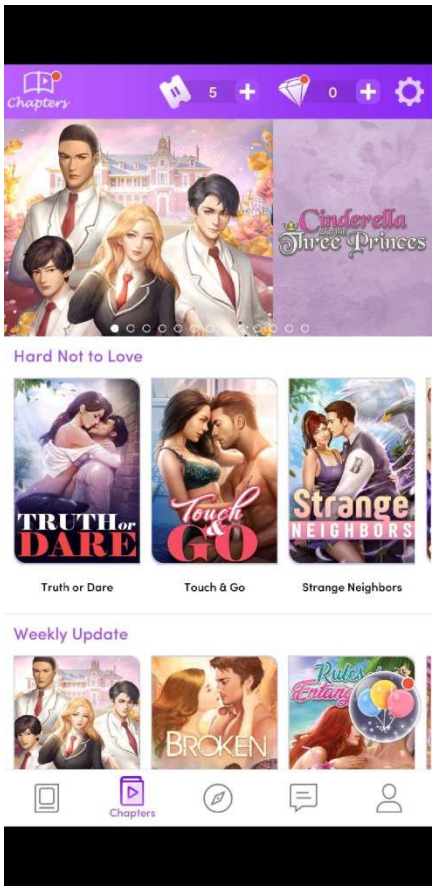


Figure 8. A screenshot from *Chapters*. Retrieved April 22, 2019.

As I mentioned in the previous section, this medium possesses characteristics of both video games and books, but another popular medium it often copies off are TV drama series. The stories are divided into chapters, but those chapters rarely come out at the same time, instead following a usually defined schedule of one to three chapters per week. The stories usually have fifteen to thirty chapters, although it is not rare to see a story which has more or less, or a series of books resembling seasons in TV series (for example, both *Dear Mona* and *The Royal Romance* are the first book in their corresponding series). Like books, the stories focus on the textual narrative to tell the story, but are not limited in this manner. Music plays an important role, depicting tension by a simple change of a musical number or a sudden silence. Art has an even bigger part - there are scenes which depict the background surrounding the characters, characters which are either animated or express their emotions in small bubbles over the text, and short cutscenes which make the whole experience even more enjoyable. For example, in *Dear Mona*, the protagonist is telling a story to her daughter a few years in the future by reading her a letter, and *My Story* decided to illustrate this experience by

showing players an animation of an envelope floating through the air and opening while a female voiceover is reading the story.

Figure 9. A screenshot from *My Story*. Retrieved April 30, 2019.

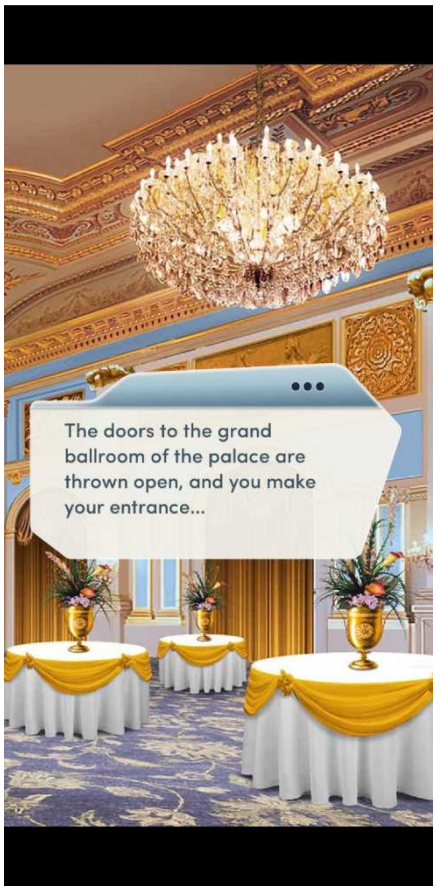
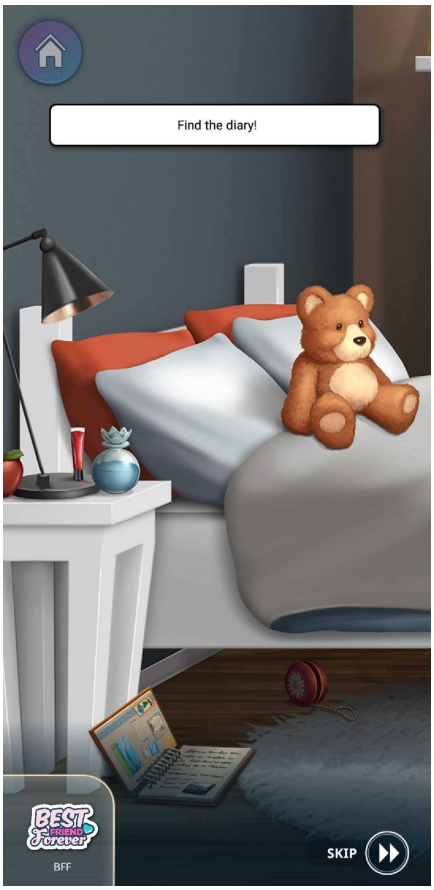
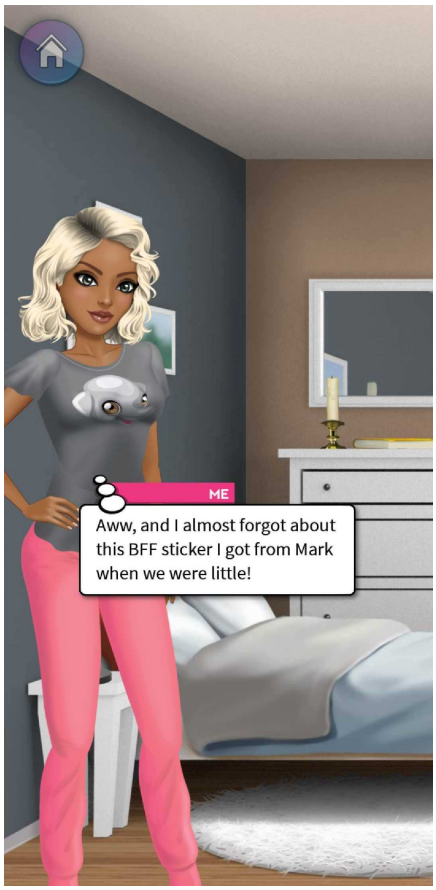


Figure 10. A screenshot from *Choices*. Retrieved April 19, 2019.

But interactivity is also "a cognitive process where individuals seek a congruency between potential actions and the relationships maintained through that technology" (Schrock, 2015, p.1231). This means that not only do players want to make choices, but they want their choices to visibly affect the storyline and to possess at least semblance of control. Occasionally, it is not enough for the text to respond to players' input immediately after the choice they made. For example, if the player chose the beach as their wedding venue, they will expect to see the results of this choice a few chapters later, which might not always be a viable option. This problem will be further discussed in the section of this paper which deals with branching.

Another important question is this: how are interactive narratives actually produced? As Ryan defines it, it is “through a collaboration between the machine and the user - or, to be more precise, through a manipulation by the machine of human-produced data in response to the users’ input." (Ryan, 2009, p.43) This means that the game “reacts” to the player’s contribution following the already programmed material and provides content which matches their choices. Of course, if the player had an option to go left or right, chose left and then the game made them go right anyway, the player would conclude that the game is rigged and probably quit. "In a narrative game, story is meant to enhance gameplay, while in a playable story, gameplay is meant to produce a story. The concepts of narrative game and playable story reflect, in their opposition, the distinction made by the French sociologist Roger Caillois between two types of game: ludus and paidia" (Ryan, 2009, p.45). The interactive story type of game clearly belongs to the ludus games, which are “strictly controlled by pre-existing rules accepted by the participants as part of a basic game contract, lead to clearly defined states of winning or losing, and their pleasure resides in the thrill of competition and in the satisfaction of solving problems.” (Ryan, 2009, p.46) Narrativization is an important part of ludus games because it provides problems that players can solve. Of course, this is mostly an illusion – even if the player makes all the wrong choices, the game will try to get them back on the right track by forcibly making decisions for them or by gently pushing them back to the main storyline. It is essential to mention that an element of competition is still present in interactive story games, but since all games in this genre try to appeal to a large number of people in order to improve their monetization, the mini-games are always going to be short and easy – barely enough to present a challenge.





Figures 11 and 12. Consecutive screenshots from *My Story*. Retrieved April 30, 2019.

There is another division of interactive narrative which Ryan mentions. "Existing forms of interactive narrative can be broadly divided into bottom-up, emergent systems that create stories during the run of the program (…) and top-down systems that rely on prescripted content. The former can be played many times, with different results, while the latter are meant for a single traversal, since the story does not renew itself." (Ryan, 2009, 51) Not surprisingly, interactive story games are top-down systems which heavily rely on their prescripted content. Although players will never see 100% of the written content through a single playthrough, several playthroughs could make it possible, at least if the amount of in-game branching is not too daunting.

As Bateman writes, there are many theoretical concerns about "whether the two poles – interaction, involving freedom of choice and action on the part of participants, and narrative, involving a generally authored narrative arc with plot points and resolutions – are compatible." (Bateman, 1998, p.8). The problem he has with mixing the two is that providing players with the opportunity to do whatever they want results in a very low possibility of a

satisfying narrative. But players who love interactive story games are actually largely aware of this, and do not ask for stories where they get to make choices every few lines. “They acknowledge that the main draw of these kinds of games is that you are the hero, you are the one who makes many of the choices and who drives the plot.” (Ostenson, 2013, p.76) This is repeated and emboldened through different story vehicles, but it can especially be seen in mobile interactive story games. Of course, this adds another set of problems in creating a successful narrative. “If the player is the protagonist, it is also difficult for the writer to develop him or her as a complex character” (Garrand, 1997, p.70). It would be exhausting to offer a choice every time the player character was expected to respond, but as I mentioned before, it is also not in the best interest of game producers to completely define the character. Instead, choices are often offered when a prewritten reply could aggravate the player. In *Choices*, in the game *The Royal Romance*, your rival insults you. The player is offered three choices to choose from, which range from nice, angry to flirty. If the player did not get the possibility to react the way they wanted to, they might scowl at the lack of interaction and quit the game. The player might also want to react differently from the three offered options, but would be forced to choose the one which is the closest to their desired reply. “Granting the participant full autonomy of authorial choices satisfies desires for agency but sacrifices a meaningful arc; conversely, limiting the user’s choices, as in some hypertext fiction, maintains a more focused narrative trajectory, but the choice mechanisms are horribly intrusive and limiting.” (Ruston, 2010, p.103)

Figures 13, 14 and 15. Consecutive screenshots from *Choices* (option 2). Retrieved April 19, 2019.

But how much does hypertext fiction relate to interactive story games? So much that it could be called their older model. It is a genre “that limits the user's agency to selecting an item from a menu of possible choices” (Ryan, 2009, p.44), so a parallel can easily be drawn. But hypertext is actually extremely lacking when it comes to creating narrative meaning and helping players immerse themselves in a fictional world. Due to its great number of possible choices and randomized sequences, it often lacks a clear narrative. Ryan defines narrative as a “linear, causal sequence of events” which can be “read in many different orders. Unless the user's choices are severely restricted, it is highly unlikely that they will produce a sequence that respects narrative logic" (Ryan, 2009, p.44). A logically shaped narrative, such as the one found in fiction books, greatly matters to interactive story game players. In fact, it could be said that interactivity in these games is supposed to enhance the story, and not tear it apart. The delicate balance can be achieved by offering and encouraging “imaginative engagement with the narrative. The invitation for you to step into someone else’s shoes is therefore not so much an attempt to encourage cultural cross-dressing or even cognitive tourism, as it is an incentive to reflect upon just how that (other) place might relate to your own.” (Perry, 1998, p.128) This is why the narrative part has to be well thought of, and why all the typical

narrative conventions, such as the plot and the characters, play such an important part in interactive story games.

4. Written discourse/Narrative

What is the role of narrative in interactive story games? To properly answer this question, I will proceed to mention several different definitions of what constitutes a narrative. I already mentioned Ryan's definition in the previous paragraph, and Campbell sees narrative very similarly, defining it as "a written representation of a sequence of events" (1987, p.79). One problem with this definition is that it is very strict; narrative does not necessarily have to be written, and the linear sequence of events might not actually correspond with their account (even though the definition of narrative is closer to being an account of events, and not necessarily a linear sequence of them). Bateman does not limit stories to a single medium, but instead observes that narrative allows "distinct and multiple forms of expressions" (1998, p.1), as long as they mainly serve to tell a story. This is why he calls narrative a transmedial phenomenon. Gee, for example, sees narrative as a broader term than Campbell and states that it "uses the organization of discourse to manipulate images or themes rooted in the life world or world view of the person using the language" (1991, p.35). This would mean that the author of the story is in charge of the narrative, but, curiously, does not allow the readers, listeners, or spectators to project their own world views onto it.

The main elements of a narrative are "construction of a storyworld, individuating agents, objects and their spatial arrangements", "contingency, including accidents and the deliberate actions of agents", and "linkages between physical states and goals, emotions, intentions so as to produce coherence, motivation, closure and intelligibility" (Bateman, 1998, p.7). Or to put it in Garrand's words: "the beginning of the story must set up the character, the setting, and what the character wants – the goal to be achieved or the problem to be solved. Once this is established, the writer can introduce obstacles to the character's achieving the goal" (1997, p.68). All these elements are clearly included in interactive story games. All the characters in the stories I am analyzing start off at a specific place (very often an American city or town, as I discussed earlier), and are all people who have easily relatable objectives, like falling in love, becoming popular or achieving their lifetime career goals. Every one of their characters has something unexpected happen to them: in *Episode*'s story *The K*ss List*, a

feisty rich girl used to getting everything she wants moves to another town where the local popular girl challenges her to a competition; in *Choices*' story *The Royal Romance*, a poor waitress suddenly becomes part of the royal entourage and has an option to seduce a prince; in *Chapters*' story *Truth or Dare*, a nice single woman gets an attractive new neighbor whom she cannot stand; and in *My Story*'s story *Dear Mona*, an innocent teenager finally starts dating her childhood friend only for him to mysteriously disappear at the end of the chapter.

Figure 16. A screenshot from *Episode*. Retrieved April 21, 2019.

Figure 17. A screenshot from *Choices*. Retrieved April 19, 2019.

I have already explained the function of chapters in interactive story games, but they are merely a cog in their structural framework. Gee claims that, in order for us to properly interpret a narrative, it should be "grounded in the structure of the story in terms of idea units, lines, stanzas, strophes, and parts" (Gee 1991, p.31) which "cut a narrative into blocks of hierarchically related pieces of information" (Gee 1991, p.26). Single idea units and lines are easy to recognize in-game since they are conveniently put into decorative dialogue boxes, but defining a stanza might be a trickier challenge.

> A stanza is a group of lines about a single topic; each stanza captures a single "vignette". Each stanza is a particular "take" on a character, action, event, claim, or piece of information, and each involves a shift of focal participants, focal events, or a change in the time or framing of events from the preceding stanza. Each stanza represents a particular perspective, not in the sense of who is doing the seeing, but in terms of what is seen; it represents an image, what the "camera" is focused on, a "scene". (Gee 1991, p.22-23)

Therefore, since all interactive story games contain graphical scenes or backgrounds which change whenever the characters are done talking, it can be claimed that each chapter consists of multiple stanzas, and each new stanza can be recognized when any visible change in the background occurs. As Garrand defines it, “a scene is an action that takes place in one location; a sequence is a series of scenes built around one concept or event. In a tightly structured script, each scene has a mini-goal or plot point that sets up and leads the audience into the next scene, eventually building the sequence.” (Garrand, 1997, p.68) This sequence (or a chapter) provides a meaningful story arc which has its own beginning, middle and ending, and which always properly fits in with the rest of the story.

Previously in the text, I mentioned hypertext fiction as a sort of predecessor to interactive games, but that the main problem with it was that it lacked a structured narrative. Of course, mobile interactive story games are not the first medium to achieve this; other forms of interactive narratives played with similar ideas before mobile phones even existed. For example, Newman's article mentions "Choose Your Own Adventure" books, which can be easily compared to mobile interactive story games of today (1988). These books followed a narrative like regular books, but at certain points readers had to make a choice, and turn the page according to the page number written in the parentheses. Campbell described these interactive novels “as a kind of story-game mutant, combining narrative conventions (plot, description, characters, etc.) with the participatory functions normally associated with game playing” (1987, p.76). In them, the user was positioned as “a “performer” of the narrative—like an actor interpreting a role or a musician playing a score, contributing [their] own idiosyncratic inflections and absorbing the experience into [their] own personal database of memories” (Kinder, 2002, p.4-6). This is precisely what was lacking in Gee’s description of

narrative - the element of readers contributing to the story - and what interactive story games took a step further.[7]

After Choose Your Own Adventure books came interactive fiction games, which were games that featured no graphics, but instead offered "copious amounts of descriptive text", and where players interacted "with the game world through simple, typed commands ("go north" or "examine the egg" or "enter the forest") (Ostenson, 2013, p.72). One of those games was *Alter Ego*, a game where the player is controls their character from infancy to old age, constantly forced to make decisions which affect their character's narrative path and stats[8]. Problems of hypertext fiction were no longer relevant because of the game's design – the character's life was divided into seven stages, and even though players randomly chose which sequences they wanted to play and in which order, the game still somehow managed to make narrative sense.

This brings me to the next part of this thesis: the analysis of deeper layers of the interactive story medium. In the next section, I am going to focus on certain narrative devices and narrative structure - primarily cohesion and story branching. I will also make a short mention of certain semiotic elements which are present in the game, such as color coding and camera movement.[9]

4.1. Cohesion

What is cohesion, and how is it accomplished in interactive story games? Cohesion is defined as "the way in which the lines and stanzas of a text are linked to or interrelated to each other", and it is "achieved by a variety of linguistic devices" (Gee 1991, p.26). In the medium where sentences usually should not be longer than approximately fifteen words because of the limited size of the dialogue box, ellipsis and conjunctions are one of the most used devices. Ellipsis, "the omission of one or more words in a sentence" (Sadler, 1979, p.261), is not only used because of the lack of space, but also to depict characters' emotional

[7] In interactive story games, the user became even more important in creating both the narrative and the character, since the games also allow them to customize the character's looks and clothes. I will comment on this in one of the future sections.
[8] In this case, "stats" refers to statistics which are affected by the player's choices and actions. In this game, for example, players could collect "Intellectual" and "Physical" points which affected their gameplay.
[9] These will be based purely on a subjective interpretation, since I am far from an expert in this area.

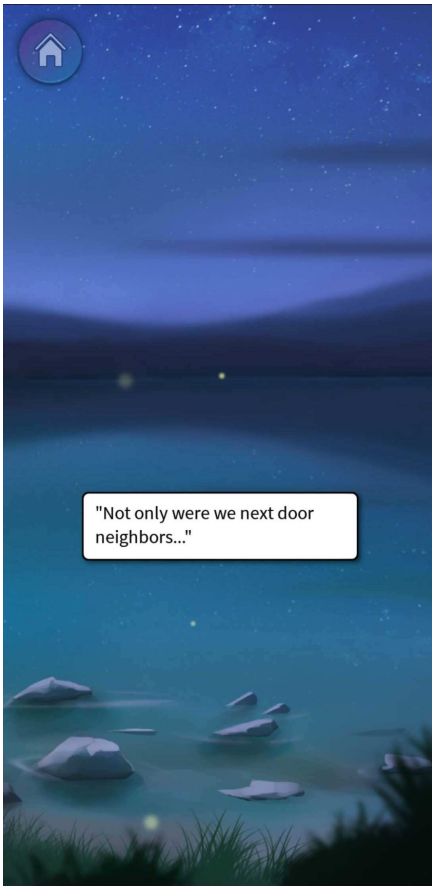
state. In a heartwarming scene in *Dear Mona* where neither one of the characters wants to be the first to confess their feelings, stuttering "Because…" is a great way to show their insecurities. Using ellipsis like this also makes fictional texts more similar to conversations which occur in real life - it is very rare to have informal conversations where verbs and phrases are not omitted a single time. Another example occurs in *The K*ss List* where a secondary character makes a demeaning comment on the protagonist's appearance: "She's cute, but she dressed like a dud." Although here it is obvious that the author wanted the character to use informal expressions, such sentence structures can leave the wrong impression when not used as a part of a dialogue.

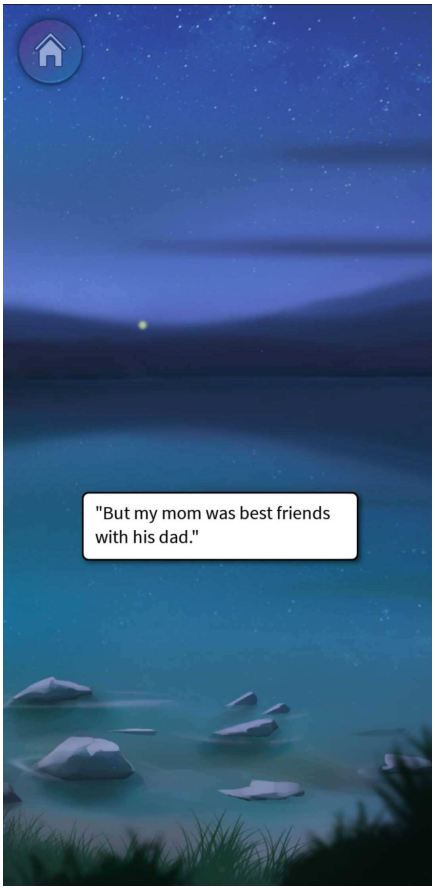
Figure 18. A screenshot from *Episode*. Retrieved April 21, 2019.

Figure 19. A screenshot from *My Story*. Retrieved April 30, 2019.

Interactive story games actually have three main ways of telling the story. The first one is through dialogue boxes, which, as it can be guessed from their name, present the dialogue currently going on between the characters on the mobile screen. The second one is through thinking boxes, which are usually reserved for the current protagonist's thoughts and

shown in cartoonish thought bubbles. The last one is through narration boxes. This narrative device is used to alert players of any passage of time, explain plot elements which might be hard to present through regular gameplay and dialogues, and finally, to demonstrate actions happening on screen which the game might not be able to depict otherwise, mostly due to its lack of appropriate animations and special effects. Narrative sequences which consist of several narrative boxes in a row can easily become tedious to read, especially if there is nothing else happening onscreen. The games often try to achieve cohesion in such cases by separating sentences into several lines rather than one. Instead of cluttering the scene, these types of broken-down sentences can actually improve the storytelling by making the reader pause at the right places. A great example can once again be found in *Dear Mona* when the protagonist is writing a letter to her future daughter. While describing her childhood best friend, the sentence "Not only were we next door neighbors, but my mom was best friends with his dad." is separated in two. Both halves of the sentence offer new information to the reader, and by fragmenting it into two clauses, the game wants to make sure that the reader does not end up feeling overwhelmed.





Figures 20 and 21. Consecutive screenshots from *My Story*. Retrieved July 2, 2019.

As I mentioned already, narrative boxes also serve the purpose of alerting the players of the time passage in the game. The bridge between the scenes is usually built by making the backgrounds fade in at the beginning and fade out at the ending. But if a lot of time has passed between the scenes or if the game producers want to emphasize that two scenes are happening at the same time, common phrases are used such as “meanwhile” and “a few hours later”. Another way that the passage of time can be depicted is with “camera movement” (where the background is shown slowly from left to right, as if imitating real camera motions), or by animating certain details on the screen, such as petals falling down or leaves ruffling in the wind.

Narrative events do not only have a logic of connection, but also a logic of hierarchy. There are “major events in narratives as *kernels* (events that advance the plot by raising and satisfying questions) and the minor events as *satellites* (events that can be deleted without disturbing the logic of the plot)” (Campbell, 1987, p.82). In interactive narrative stories, kernels are parts of the main plot which never changes, no matter what the player chooses. In *Truth or Dare*, the protagonist will always end up fighting with her neighbor, despite players possibly choosing to accept his apology, and the protagonist of *Dear Mona* will always end up sleeping with both love interests, even if players decided to keep dating only one of them. The reason for this is simple - there would be no story otherwise. Meanwhile, a great example of satellites are premium choices, since most of them do not affect the storyline so greatly that the story could not continue without them, but they still offer fun additional content. All the deviation from the main storyline is represented under one name, and this will be my focus in the next paragraph: branching.

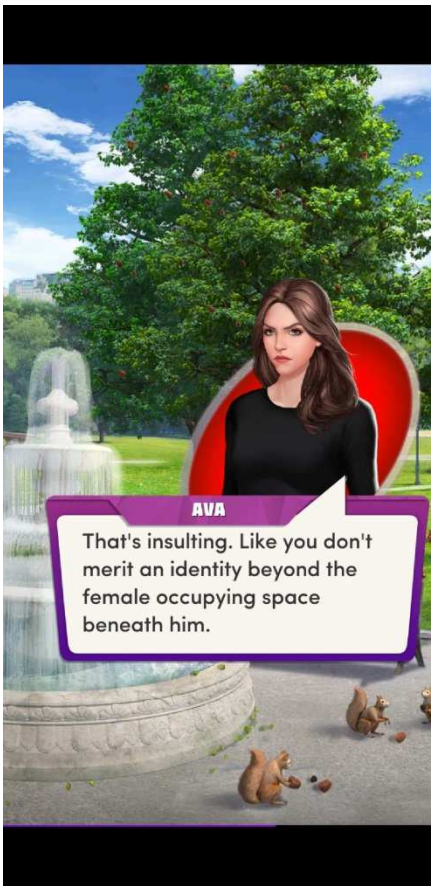


Figure 22. A screenshot from *Chapters*. Retrieved April 22, 2019.

Figure 23. A screenshot from *My Story*. Retrieved April 30, 2019.

4.2. Branching

Branching is actually the most important in-game feature which separates interactive story games from book or movie narratives. The name stems from the fact that the structure of interactive story games often resembles a tree with branches that regularly intertwine and then divide again. "The players' progression is a journey along a path that is already traced and that leads to a fixed destination, or to several destinations when the system offers branching points." (Ryan, 2009, 51) Branching points in interactive story games are called choices, and when players reach this part of the story, they are expected to make a decision. Most chapters offer at least a couple of choices to justify the interactive part of the game, but some of them offer a dozen or even more. The more choices players have, the more interactive the game appears. Understandably, "all interactivity is also an illusion because the rules established by the designers of the text necessarily limit the user's options. Interactivity thus tends to

function as a normative term — either fetishized as the ultimate pleasure or demonized as a deceptive fiction." (Kinder, 2002, p.4) Choices that players make are often irrelevant for the main plotline, but relevant for the characterization of their player character. Players are thrown into different situations, and they are rarely able to strongly affect the course of the story; but they get to choose how their character reacts to these situations, or where they want to go on a date. In fact, the main protagonist's personality is often as bland as the story allows it to be so that players can properly immerse themselves in the narrative.

> In an interactive piece, the player expects to be a character in the story or at least to have significant control over the characters. The degree of this control is one of the first issues that must be decided in a program. There are three basic story elements or groups of elements that the player is allowed to control: scenes, actions, or all behavior. If the player controls scenes, then he or she will decide which path the story will take – but once launched on that path, the characters function independently until the next branching point. (Garrand, 1987, p.68)

Choices which allow players to control scenes are, for example, when a character is looking for someone inside the house. Players could be offered two options, a living room or a kitchen, and only one of them will be the right answer. Actions are common premium (paid) choices where the player chooses what they want to do, like go on a date or stay home. They can also be regular choices, and such case can be seen in *The Royal Romance*, where the protagonist decides whether she wants to climb up the cliff or jump in the ocean. Behavior choices are the most common ones, and here the player decides what and how they want to say something. For instance, when confessing love to their longtime crush in the first chapter of *Dear Mona*, players have the option to either ease into it or blurt it out. As can be seen from the examples, most of these choices will not affect the storyline to a greater extent: if they do not find the character in the kitchen, they will go to the living room; if they do not go on a date, their love interest will not suddenly forget all about them because that would completely alter the storyline; and whether they blurt it out or ease it into it, the end result is the same – they still confess their feelings.

Figure 24. A screenshot from *My Story*. Retrieved April 30, 2019.

Figure 25. A screenshot from *Choices*. Retrieved April 19, 2019.

This kind of interactive storytelling is called linear structure with scene branching, and Garrand compares it to “a desert highway that has a few detours; however, the detours always route the traveler back to the same highway. The player can make a few limited choices as to how certain scenes will play out, but he or she is always returned to the main story line” (Garrand, 1997, p.72). Even though players would like to believe otherwise, linear structure with scene branching is the one that is most used in interactive story games. If it were not, both the number of choices and the amount of content would increase exponentially every time the player made a choice, which is “too much material for a writer to present or a viewer to access” (Garrand, 1997, p.72). But to make the readers believe the story is less linear than it actually is, hierarchical branching is occasionally used, which allows the story to “develop in totally different directions depending on the viewer's choice at a preset decision point” (Garrand, 1997, p.72). “This structure is commonly used at the end of a program. The viewer is left feeling in greater control over the narrative, and branching explosion is obviously

limited because the story ends." (Garrand, 1997, p.72) In the last chapter, stories often offer several different endings depending on what the players chose. In romantic stories, this usually depends on their choice of romantic interest and whether they want to pursue them. If the player finished playing the story, but then chose to play it again and made completely different decisions, they might feel as if they read two completely different stories. A higher amount of choices greatly helps the illusion of hierarchical or parallel branching.

Finally, parallel structure is the one "in which several versions of the same story are played out parallel to each other. Depending on the player's choices, he or she can move from one path to another. This structure offers players the option of multiple paths without the problem of branching explosion that happens with hierarchical branching" (Garrand, 1997, p.72). This kind of branching is often seen in stories with multiple love interests, when a player is offered two or three possible ways to spend their evening. A player might get to choose between going to the cinema with one love interest, going to dinner with another, or staying home and skipping the events entirely. These choices can affect a larger part of the chapter or even the entire chapter, but later give players a chance to switch and pursue the other love interest if that is what they desire. These decisions might also add variables to the game and create a variable-state environment (Garrand, 1997, p.74). Instead of creating hierarchical branching, it is possible for the program to remember that the player decided to confess to your best friend that you are in love with him in Chapter Six, and for him to refer to it ten chapters later. This way, many possible outcomes become possible, and a few lines of branching can go a long way. "In short, the environment responds to the player, much as it does in real life. A variable-state environment can take into account hundreds of actions, as opposed to just the A or B choices in branching. And when different options are chosen, each interaction will produce different responses. Varying combinations of interactions will yield still other responses" (Garrand, 1997, p.74). Using variables within certain branches makes the players believe that their choices actually matter, all while slightly improving the storyline they are reading.

4.3. Semiotic elements

Although there are many storytelling devices which interactive story games use to enhance the story, I would like to shortly mention the most eminent ones. I have already taken

notice of the meaning of the camera movement and animated scenes, but there are also color-coded texts, specific text formatting, sound, and vibration. I am going to only briefly describe each element, but please keep in mind that this does not diminish their role in storytelling.

Sound is used to indicate changes in the mood, warn players when a dramatic event is coming, alert them to changes in time and space and improve the general experience of the story. For example, "just changing the music would change the mood from romantic to suspenseful" (Garrand, 1997, p.78), and possibly even alert the players that the game was about to introduce a dramatic element. Even the absence of sound could paint the scene in a new light and add a chilling element. The whole experience can sometimes be followed by short phone vibrations. Vibration is usually reserved for important messages or tutorials, but it is also used to indicate the player character has just received a text message.

In *Choices* and *Chapters*, color plays an important role in depicting emotion. Characters in these two apps are not present on the screen all the time as in *Episode* and *My Story*, but appear only when talking, and their character sprite[10] is placed within a geometrical shape (in *Choices*, it is a hexagon, and in *Chapters*, it is an oval-shaped circle). Since animations are rarely depicted, to embolden the characters' emotions and small changes in their facial expressions, the inside of the geometrical shapes are often colored. In the first chapters, there are four noticeable colors for both apps; red, yellow, blue and beige for *Chapters*, and red, orange, blue and dark blue for *Choices*. Red symbolizes anger and irritation in both games, but this is where all the similarities stop. Yellow in *Chapters'* stories is used for happiness or jovial, carefree tone, while orange in Choices means surprise or shock. Blue carries diametrically opposite meanings – in *Chapters* it symbolizes sadness, while in *Choices* it symbolizes happiness. Beige and dark blue stand for general dialogue which is not characterized by any strong emotion, but rather a lack of it.

[10] Sprite is a small picture of the full character's body. It might be animated, but it is not necessary.

Figure 26. A screenshot from *Chapters*. Retrieved on April 22, 2019.

Figure 27. A screenshot from *Choices*. Retrieved on April 19, 2019.

Text formatting also tells us a lot about the story. Thoughts are always shown in specifically shaped thought bubbles in *Chapters*, *Episode* and *My Story*, but in *Choices* they are marked by brackets, while in *Chapters* they are also written in italics. *Choices* uses dark red and bold text for Tutorial messages, while *Episode* uses colored text and bold editing in abundance – colors are used to emphasize tutorial messages, while bold text is used for messages such as “Think fast!” during timed responses where the player is forced to make a decision in ten seconds.

Figure 28. A screenshot from *Choices*. Retrieved on April 19, 2019.

Figure 29. A screenshot from *Episode*. Retrieved on April 21, 2019.

5. Game interaction

Since interaction makes up such a great part of interactive story games' allure, in this section of my paper, I am going to analyze the most common game elements that add to the whole experience. Interaction in interactive story games does not consist of only a handful of choices as it might seem at first glance, regardless of whether the story authors chose to follow a mostly linear structure, or a hierarchical, or a parallel one. In fact, interaction is also provided by giving players an option to collect achievements or stickers, to design their character, collect points, play mini-games, review stories, and even to buy premium content. All the interactive elements in games are here to achieve one purpose: make the player feel like part of the story, and as if their choices have made all the difference.

5.1. Designing the character

How does designing the character actually enhance the interactivity? I would go as far to call it an unavoidable element for players of interactive story games in case the game designers are looking to achieve complete story immersion. Garrand shares similar thoughts:

> Making the player an active part of the characterization process allows for character development, while maintaining the interactivity of the narrative. Why couldn't a player/protagonist define him- or herself at the beginning of a movie by inputting certain data? Would slipping into the role of the protagonist be more comfortable if the other characters addressed the player by name and knew his or her taste in clothes and food? (Garrand, 1997, p.71)

In every story, players get to input their own name and design their character sprite; in some games, it is even possible to choose your love interest out of several ready-made characters[11]. Players often want to make the protagonist resemble their own looks, or at least the way they wish they looked. That is hard to achieve when players are offered only three to five different faces to choose from, and a few hairstyles out of which some usually have to be paid. But even having only a small number of faces and hairstyles offered creates numerous possibilities for your character's looks while getting a locked default look would only offer one. Unfortunately for players, if they do not wish to pay for in-game content, they might be forced into choosing a haircut or an outfit they might not like. In fact, some stories offer only one or two free options and several premium ones. And even if the free haircut or outfit might be exactly what the player wanted, the game forces them to rethink their decision. This can be achieved by labelling certain styles with "premium" and "basic" descriptions, or by making the premium options shine or glitter.

[11] Such is the case in *The Royal Romance*, where the players get to choose how their Prince Charming is going to look before they even talk to him.

Figures 30 and 31. Consecutive screenshots from *My Story*. Retrieved April 30, 2019.

Although players often complain about not being able to wear what they want, clothes are just one of the three ways (along with premium choices and ads) how game apps like this earn money and stay viable. If the players are not spending enough, the games can sometimes take interesting measures. For instance, *Dear Mona* has an infamous chapter where the player character goes to her prom, and the only free outfit players can choose is a pink tracksuit. Naturally, since most players would not want to go to their prom in sweatpants, they either opt to buy one of the beautiful premium gowns or – quit the game completely. For game producers, it can be tricky to decide whether it is more profitable to "force" players to pay at a few points during the game, or keep them happy all the time in order not to lose them forever.

5.2. Points, achievements, rewards

Point systems are usually a welcome feature in games, and interactive story games are not an exception. For games which focus mostly on the narrative, it can seem tricky to implement a feature like this. But point systems can be used everywhere - inside the stories or

in the main menu, as “redeemable points in a video game, or [as] bonus points awarded to players for successfully completing special tasks within a game” (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011, p.36). In fact, Zichermann and Cunningham call point systems “an absolute requirement for all gamified systems” (2011, p.36). They can be “overt, direct, and highly motivational” (Zichermann, Cunningham, 2011, p.38) or they can be a hidden feature that is not available to players. Points can be collected for rewards (fulfilling the “Read a total of 4 chapters today – easy, right?” task in *My Story* would get you an extra ticket which can then be used to read one extra chapter) or to unlock achievements (such as reading one story from the drama shelf, which is once again rewarded, but this time with another in-game currency, diamonds). They can also be used inside stories as game points. The most common type of game points is relationship points. For example, in *Mortal Frenemy* in *My Story*, where the player character is the main suspect for murdering her classmate, players have to make friends with at least one other character in order not to be betrayed and thrown in prison as a scapegoat. But since most players are frustrated by getting a bad ending, these relationship points can be used for giving them some extra content as a reward for playing the game the way the writer(s) wanted it. In *Episode’*s *The K*ss List*, the player character collects Worshippers (loyal minions) by earning admiration, igniting desire or instilling fear in them.

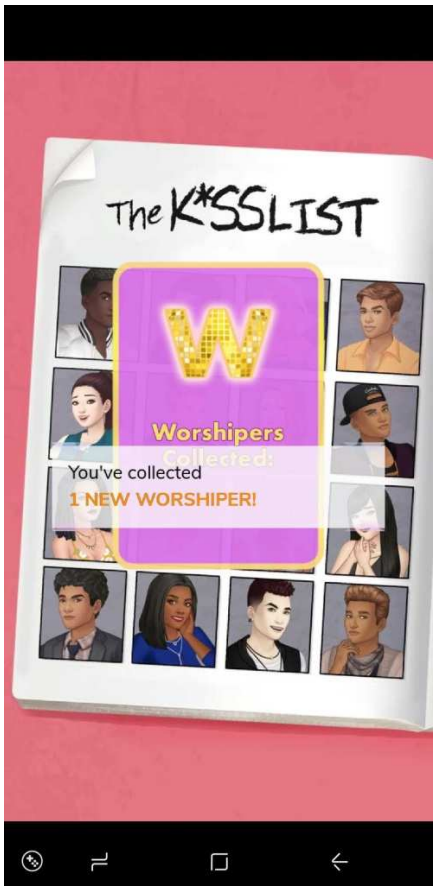


Figure 32. A screenshot from *Episode*. Retrieved April 22, 2019.

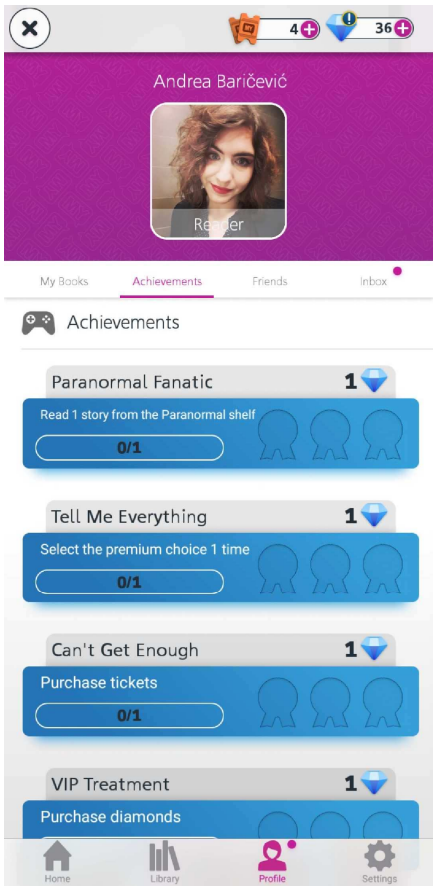


Figure 33. A screenshot from *My Story*. Retrieved April 30, 2019.

Another feature that *My Story* has is Stickers. Stickers can be unlocked while reading chapters, and are usually earned after completing mini-games, such as finding an object which is hidden on the background (a diary in a messy room) or choosing the right object out of the three available (for instance, choosing an alcohol-free cocktail next to a beer keg and a wine glass). Stickers like this are a great encouragement for people when playing games – not only do they get a reward which their character can then use interact with in the story after collecting them (such as opening the diary which they just found), but there is also a sense of achievement in case they find all collectible items. Zichermann and Cunningham have a simple explanation for this. "For many people, collecting is a powerful drive. Other players enjoy the sudden rush of surprise or pleasure when an unexpected badge shows up in a gamified system. A well-designed, visually valuable badge can also be compelling for purely aesthetic reasons. (…) Badges also mark the completion of goals and the steady progress of play within the system" (2011, p.55). Not only are the completed albums of badges (or Stickers) a reward on their own, players also get other valuable in-game prize after

completing them – usually a small amount of the game's virtual currency. This also encourages players to stay in the game longer in order to spend their received prize.

5.3. Player types

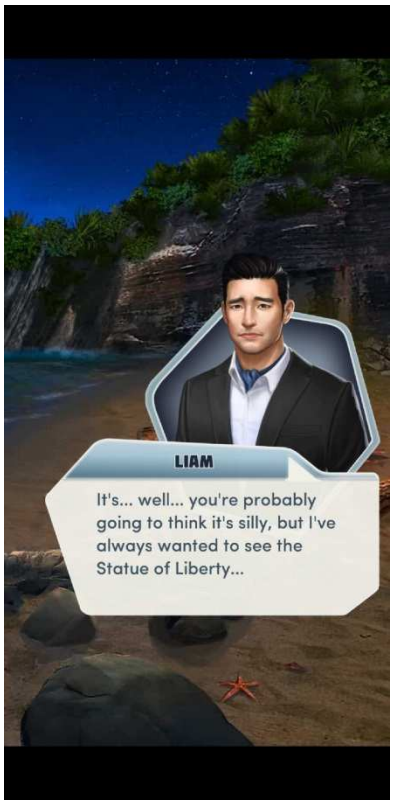
When designing a game, it is important to know who the intended consumers are. Different players have different goals - people play for mastery, to have fun, to destress and to socialize (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011, p.20). "The more you know about who is playing your game—both current and prospective players — the easier it is to design an experience that will drive their behavior in the desired way" (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011, p.21). The most common types of players that Zichermann and Cunningham list are explorers, achievers, socializers, and killers. For explorers, the experience on its own is the main objective of playing a game (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011, p.22). Interactive story players who faithfully open the app at least once a week purely because they like to read and try out different choices are explorers. A part of the community also belongs to the achievers type – but they are often trickier to satisfy. "People who like to achieve are an integral part of any competitive game. They drive a great deal of projects, services, and brands. The problem with designing exclusively for this player type is that it is difficult to develop a system where everyone can win and achieve. And for achievers, losing at the game will likely cause them to lose interest in playing it" (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011, p.22). This is why most mini-games in the interactive story game model are so easy to win.

Players also expect other types of reward when actively participating in a story, especially when they are driven by intrinsic motivation. Narrative pleasure and immersion in a fictional world (Ryan, 2009, p.53) is often the biggest incentive. In her article, Ryan describes four different "kinds of narrative immersion that relate to different facets of the storyworld": spatial, temporal, emotional, and epistemic (2009, p.54). For players of mobile interactive story games, the most important one is the emotional immersion. This is the type of immersion where players feel an emotional connection to the characters on the screen.

> The emotions we experience while playing games – excitement, triumph, dejection, relief, frustration, relaxation, curiosity, and amusement – are overwhelmingly self-directed ones, because they reflect our success and interest in playing the game. But their range is much smaller than the self-centered emotions of life: computer game players may fight to

> rescue a princess, and they may receive her hand in reward, but unlike the heroes of love stories, they are not motivated to act by romantic feelings. Whereas narrative interest regards characters as persons, ludic interest regards them as means to an end. (Ryan, 2009, p.56)

Playing the story and trying to fulfill their character's wishes makes the players feel a sense of accomplishment. A satisfying case of emotional immersion can also be achieved by avoiding all situations where players might end up feeling guilty. Unfortunately for them, it is a popular trope in video games to make the player character choose between two friends where the one that is left ends up dying immediately – such is the case in *Walking Dead*, a popular Telltale's game. Players can get emotionally attached to characters and being pressured into making choices that they do not want to make can leave them feeling annoyed or even mad. The same situation might happen in mobile interactive story games; in fact, some premium choices or outfits are encouraged to be bought so that players would avoid feeling any discomfort. Guilt is a powerful motivator; in *Choices*, the prince character that the protagonist is interested in has a sad monologue about how he really wanted to visit the Statue of Liberty in her city, but did not have any time. A short while after, the player is faced with a premium choice. The paid option is to take him to the famous monument on a boat tour (and call in a favor since it is really late), and the free option is to tell him you two should call it a night. But even if players choose the free option, most games soften the blow; in *Episode*, whenever the player chooses not to buy premium clothes despite trying them on and having all the supporting characters gasping and awing at their beauty, the main character simply comments that she has always liked a challenge and winks at the screen.



Figures 34 and 35. Two related screenshots from *Choices*. Retrieved April 19, 2019.

Figure 36. A screenshot from *Episode*. Retrieved April 21, 2019.

Nevertheless, it is almost impossible to keep a player satisfied all the time. Although all players want to read stories and have fun, some of them get easily disheartened when they realize they cannot choose the option they wanted simply because they would have to pay for it. Occasionally, some players also get frustrated because of the game's publishing schedule. The players expect new story chapters to arrive at fixed intervals, usually multiple times per week, but that is not always possible. Additionally, a large number believe that mobile games should be completely free, and that sporadically watched advertisements should bring in enough money for the app. Since that is far from the truth, producers are forced to use virtual currencies in order for the project to be profitable.

5.4. Virtual economy

In this section, I am going to explain the virtual economy in mobile interactive story games and finally explain the freemium model which they are based on. Interestingly, virtual

economies have completely changed the mobile gaming system, and it has become the primary way of earning money for all kinds of mobile games and applications. Zichermann and Cunningham explain that the power of a virtual economy lies in the fact "that it allows a designer to bring in a lot of money and control how it goes out." (2011, p.42) The most popular models of the virtual economy are freemium models, which are "business models that allow [companies] to offer free services to the consumer while gaining revenue through indirect methods" (Crappell & Morin, 2014, p.12). In freemiums, the core product is given away for free to a large group of users while premium content is sold to a smaller fraction of the same user base (Crappell & Morin, 2014, p.12). This can also mean objects which are used inside the game and which are otherwise very rare and hard to find, such as in *Pokemon Go*, the currently most profitable freemium mobile game on the market. The trick is that these kinds of models usually offer a completely one-way exchange system. "A player can only put money in, and since there are no real-world rewards to redeem for, it all stays in the game." (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011, p.42) To optimize the marketing and encourage players to exchange a real-world currency for a virtual one, game producers offer promotions, ratings, and likes on social media in exchange for virtual currency points. Some games also use the dual economy system, which has two in-game currencies, and "each is used for different kinds of items within the game" (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011, p.43). The interactive story games I am analyzing function by the same principle. For example, *My Story* offers tickets and gems. Tickets are a currency which is "refilled" every hour and which can be exchanged for reading chapters; one ticket equals one chapter. In *Chapters*, they are also called tickets, while in *Episode* they are called passes; both names invoke an image of story chapters as mini-movies that you must have a ticket for in order to watch. In *Choices*, the same type of currency is called keys, and you use them to "unlock" chapters. These examples make it easy to notice that the use of virtual currency is also gamified, and that paying adds an extra interactive element.

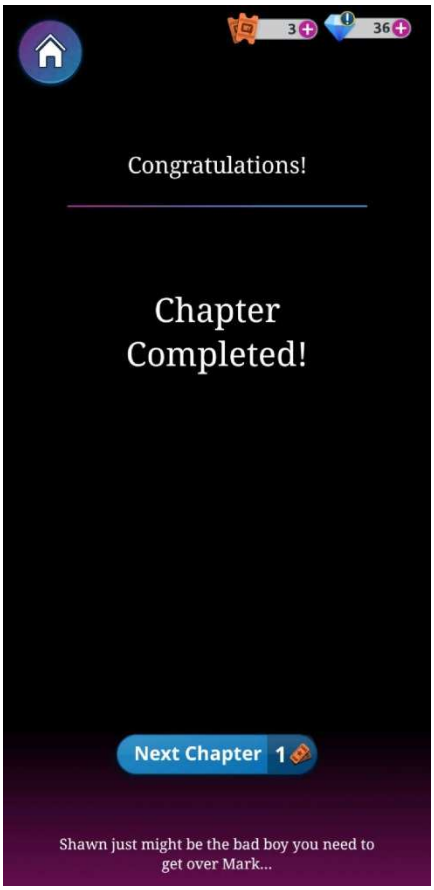


Figure 37. A screenshot from *My Story*. Retrieved April 30, 2019.

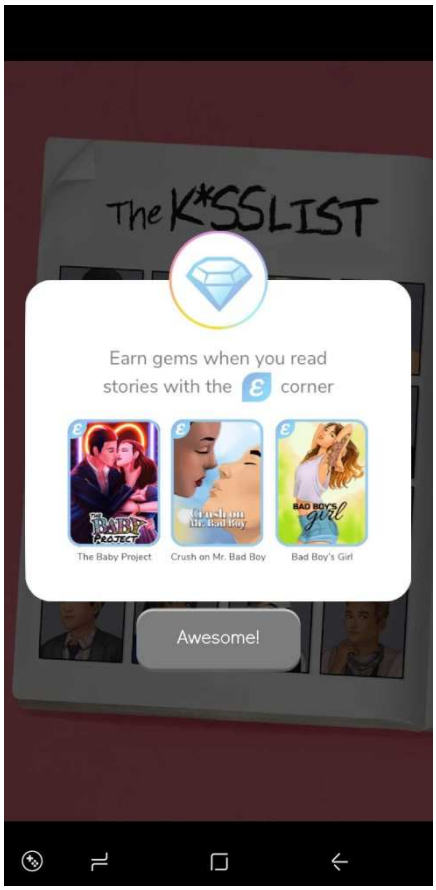


Figure 38. A screenshot from *Episode*. Retrieved April 21, 2019.

There is another, rarer currency available in games, and it is called gems (*Episode*) or diamonds (*My Story*, *Chapters*, and *Choices*). Gems or diamonds can be bought with real money, but they can also be earned by watching ads, reading chapters or fulfilling some game requirements – for example, they can be given to players as a reward for reading a paranormal story or liking the official Facebook page. Gems and diamonds need to be earned since they are not automatically given every hour as the other type of currency. They are also the biggest source of income for game companies since they unlock access to usually attractive premium content. In mobile interactive story games with a focus on the romance genre, this usually includes buying nice clothes for your character sprite or exclusive content such as dinner with a love interest in a high-class restaurant. As I already mentioned, in *The Royal Romance* this means taking the prince to the place he really wanted to visit, and in *Truth or Dare* buying the premium option means being nice to your neighbor who is a potential love interest; in *Dear Mona*, the premium is to find out gossip about Shawn, a love interest and a potential future father of your daughter; and in *The K*ss List*, the premium is to wear a beautiful dress on your

own party in order to get some attention as a new girl in school. Thanks to these examples, it can be concluded that, even though freemium models are advertised as games for everyone, the best content is always reserved for the paying players – and people who do not want to pay are never going to get the same interactive experience.

6. Conclusion

My main goal in this paper was to explore the elements of interactive narrative present in mobile interactive games and focus only on the first chapters of representative games, but in certain paragraphs (such as 4.2. Branching) I also covered some material which was not necessarily a part of the samples. The reason for this is simple – in order to properly explore all three structures of branching, It was impossible to limit myself to only the first chapter, as I believed it would not present an accurate image of the games' interactive narrative. Furthermore, I dedicated a section to the effect of globalization on these particular games since this plays an important role in how they should be perceived.

Although mobile interactive games try to appeal to primarily the American audience and then everyone else, and although the stories are situated on the territory of the United States and star American protagonists, they are not a true representation of the culture. They are embedded in fantasy of one idea of America – an idea of what everyone else (and perhaps even some Americans) believe the country should look like. The linguistic samples I collected show that, despite the possibility to choose the character's looks or a love interest of the opposite sex, the text always remains the same, and the character design is purely aesthetical. The cultural references are minimal in order to minimize this problem and to achieve a higher level of immersion, but it is impossible to fully eliminate it. The players cannot choose their characters' backgrounds, and there are always certain elements of the story which cannot be affected by their decisions, such as the protagonist's speech idiosyncrasies.

Based on this conclusion, an important question stems: is this language assimilation a positive or a negative phenomenon? Unfortunately, a straightforward answer cannot be offered. One point for the positive side would be that the games do not differentiate between ethnicities and, at some level at least, try to provide as much diversity as they deem possible. From what I have gathered up to this point, there is no difference between characters' speech based on their ethnicity, and most or even all the differences stem from characters'

personalities. But the negative side of this practice is erasure. The default is often (at least from my personal experience) a white, middle-class female, even if the character can take the appearance of a different race, or even if the protagonist follows the "from rags to riches" trope. This notion is dangerous precisely because it is a fantasy game: if players are never put in the shoes of a minority or an oppressed group, and if the same type of character is always shown as the norm, the games are once again stressing the amount of inequality in the real world.

Nevertheless, mobile interactive story games have other qualities as well. However cliché this might sound, they are changing the game industry. Their availability, their simplicity, and their format make an attractive choice when people have only ten or fifteen minutes to spare, and their drama-filled content and a constant flow of new stories makes them continually come back for more. Despite the fact that some content has to be paid, the free storyline is still enticing enough to offer fun even to the most dissatisfied players. And fun is what these games actually promise to offer, so I would like to believe that they might become more diverse in the future.

Realistically, mobile interactive story games could easily become extinct in a couple of years, just like the media that it was shaped after. The popularity of *Bandersnatch*[12], an interactive movie which works on the same principle but with real-life graphics, is great proof that this is the kind of content which sells. My prediction is that most future media are going to be interactive; and since people have liked stories since the beginning of humanity, we can be certain that interactive story games are, even if they end up changing their format and the medium, still going to persist for a while.

[12] *Bandersnatch* is an interactive movie and a standalone episode in Netflix's popular science fiction series *Black Mirror.* Its main difference from the series' usual content is the presence of branching and multiple endings which viewers could get depending on the decisions they made during the movie.

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