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► To cite this version:

Hélène Sellier. Encouraging Self-expression and Debate in RecovR: A Research-Creation Project to Build a Ludo-Narrative Model for a Sustainable Impact on Cultural Diversity and Inclusivity. Alex Mitchell; Mirjam Vosmeer. Interactive Storytelling. 14th International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling, ICIDS 2021, Tallinn, Estonia, December 7–10, 2021, Proceedings, 13138, Springer, pp.410-415, 2021, Lecture Notes in Computer Science, 10.1007/978-3-030-92300-6_40. halshs-04613806

HAL Id: halshs-04613806

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04613806>

Submitted on 17 Jun 2024

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Encouraging self-expression and debate in *RecovR*: a research-creation project to build a ludo-narrative model for a sustainable impact on cultural diversity and inclusivity

Hélène Sellier

The Seed Crew

Abstract. The paper introduces *RecovR*, a research-creation project whose aim is to develop a ludonarrative model that would enable to have a sustainable impact on cultural diversity and inclusivity. The preliminary conclusions concerning the necessity of creating a space for debate and the poetics of chaos that could make it possible are discussed.

Keywords: Narrative Design, Research-Creation, Games for Change, Expressive Game.

1 Cultural and scientific context of research

Dating back from the 2000's Art Game trend (Sharp, 2015) and amplified with the expansion of the Indie Games at the end of the decade (Keogh, 2015; Sharp, 2016) as well as the rise of accessible authoring tools such as Unity (Nicoll & Keogh) and Twine (Anthropy, 2012) which gave birth to different artistic endeavours such as Serious Games (Alvarez, 2012), Games for Change or Queer Games (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017), there is a growing wave of games that tackle social issues concerning cultural diversity and the inclusion of varied identities by delivering a message or painting a personal experience. Thanks to their ludonarrative structure, they aim to change society by raising awareness about existing problems, questioning social norms or empowering marginalized individuals. The idea of a discourse embedded in the game was famously theorized by Ian Bogost in his book *Persuasive Games* (2007) and his conclusion infiltrated the industry, leading to debates such as the ludo-narrative dissonance debate (Seraphine, 2016).

The video games which emerged from this background often give a specific opinion or share a particular perspective on the social issues they discuss. However, the socio-cultural fabric is made of a variety of points of view and a multiplicity of ways to deal with them (stereotypes as a cognitive model, internalized self-prejudices, cognitive dissonance, etc). For example, even within groups of people invested in the same issue (such as gender equality or disability), there are several conflicting views (Freedman, 2003; Goodley, 2011).

To depict issues regarding cultural diversity, inclusiveness of different identities and social diversity, it seems adequate to find a way to allow “a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices” (Bakhtine, 1984: 6) rather than adopting a single teaching stance, a moralizing discourse, or a dominating perspective. This essay presents a research project, undertaken by the team of the indie game studio The Seed Crew, which aims to conceptualize and build a ludonarrative model that enables the expression of different feelings and thoughts on multifactorial and sensitive issues. Based on the idea that a consensus can emerge from the dissensus (Heraclite, 1998: 10), it intends to bring people together and to foster social interconnectedness.

Following the recent developments of Game Studies as well as the evolution of the concerns in the professional world, a solution might be found with the approaches that emphasize the role of the player in the construction of the game’s meaning. The project is thus grounded in several frameworks: firstly, Post-classical Narratology theories that focus on the reader’s interpretation (Eco, 1979; Baroni, 2007); secondly, Play Studies that posit the importance of the player’s experience (Sicart, 2011) and their applications, such as Expressive Games (Genvo, 2012); lastly, Narrative Design since this creative discipline focuses on the user’s involvement (Posey, 2008).

In this essay, I will begin by describing the methodology of the project, then I will explain its current state and conclude by establishing the plan for further research.

2 Research-creation as a methodology

To obtain a ludonarrative model which is both conceptually interesting and pragmatically viable, methods from the field of research-creation (Gosselin, 2006; Paquin & Noury, 2018) are used. The project links theory, which is actualized in scientific publications (i.e Sellier, 2020) and communications (i.e Sellier, 2021), and practice, which leads to the development of *RecovR*. This video game, intended to be a tool for professional training, is divided into several modules, each related to a social issue (sexism, ableism...) and made up of several episodes. According to Chapman and Sawchuck’s categorization (2012), the whole project falls mainly under the practices of “research-for-creation” and “research-from-creation”.

On one hand, reading and interpreting scientific literature on media culture, game studies, social psychology, sociology, and cultural studies allows us to conceptualize a part of the game. Since most of the fictional situations in the game are based on facts taken from research papers, it could be said that the project also falls under the category that Chapman and Sawchuck call “creative presentation of research”. However, individually, each topic is not our area of scientific expertise, so we don’t define this feature as fundamentally part of our work.

On the other hand, the game is created in order to generate data that can be analyzed. Indeed, we designed the game to test several hypotheses regarding the narrativity and the expressive potential of video games, such as the power of seriality to encourage dialogue between the players. When finished, at least partially, the production can thus be analyzed in different ways (formal analysis, user experience...) to establish tentative

results. Indeed, our work is an iterative process in which a phase of scientific discovery leads to a time of creation which, in return, introduces a stage of theorization.

3 Reflexive gaze and formal analysis

As of June 2021, the first module of the game, focusing on sexism in the business world, was developed in a bit more than a year and is published. It was designed to enable the player's expression of themselves in several ways. In the following paragraphs, I will focus on the main features: each episode basically consists of four parts.

Playing Charlie, a young woman recently hired, the user is first invited to explore a 3D environment depicting an open office space. They can choose to listen to rumors which are spread all around. Some "barks" (Beaulieu, 2020) are sexist comments which pollute the shared space; others are only quick pictures of everyday life. Similar to a kind of wandering (Flawinne, 2007), this type of play is completely optional and embraces the necessary random aspect of learning (Lavigne, 2020). The player can choose how many complex and potentially disturbing situations they want to face.



Fig. 1. The Seed Crew – *RecovR* – Module 1: Sexism – exploration

Each exploration phase is followed by a phase of mandatory dialogue depicted in 2D in which the player can learn about the life of Charlie's colleagues, the challenges she faces, and the adversity of corporate life. Using curiosity, surprise, and suspense effects (Baroni, 2007), as well as techniques particular to branching narratives (such as narrative puzzles or hidden paths), those moments aim to immerse the player in the fictional world by creating a narrative tension. If the user doesn't have the choice to endure the situation (be it a neutral, mundane, comment or a sexist microaggression), they can decide how they handle their response. Based on the two main behaviours identified by the research in psychology about sexism (Melotte, 2017) and inspired by the Jakobson's functions of language (1963), the dialogue options allow the player to either confront the NPC (passionately or rationally) or dodge their observation (being vague or using humor). Since there is no right or wrong way to answer, but only different consequences that depend on the interlocutor's personality and occupation,

this feature allows the player to freely express themselves and to experiment their opinions.



Fig. 2. A The Seed Crew – *RecovR* – Module 1: Sexism – dialogue choices

If the narrative structure makes room for the player's voice, their avatar also has her own views. The text of every interface is diegetic: for example, the beginning and the ending menu are written like a personal journal in which Charlie sums up what happened to her but also expresses her feelings toward her colleagues' sexist comments. These moments invite the player to discover another interior life and assume that empathy can lead to a growing awareness of someone else's problems (Zanna, 2015; Immordino-Yang, 2016). Since the player-character is not only an interface allowing fictional immersion, but also a tool encouraging a reflexive attitude (Barnabé & Delbouille, 2018), we decided to harness the potential of this ambivalence to design moments of conflicting point of views. In the exploration or the dialogue phases, the player can push a red button each time they think the character's comment is sexist. The player is thus invited to adopt an analytical thinking. If their reasoning matches with Charlie's, her interpretation of the situation is unlocked in the ending screen. The player is encouraged to express their opinion, but they also face another consideration of the interpersonal situation.

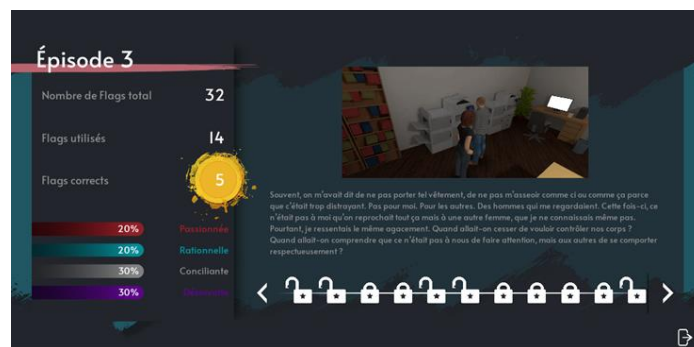


Fig. 3. The Seed Crew – *RecovR* – Module 1: Sexism – end menu.

The game expects the player to be alternatively immersed in the story and critical of its implications, but it also provides an emotional outlet. In each episode, there is a turn-based combat phase in which the player has to perform different QTEs, such as pushing frantically and repeatedly on one button or, on the contrary, aim at the right time in the right place. On one hand, this feature corresponds to the fundamental autotelic and non-productive characteristics of games since it doesn't help learning about sexism (Huizinga, 1951) and reconnects with the idea of play as fun. However, if the player wants to invest themselves in an interpretation, this part of the game is also meaningful on several levels. Symbolically, the combat phase corresponds to the psychological fight Charlie endures when she can't take it anymore and thus is very different aesthetically. The combat stances coincide with the dialogue options, and there are correspondences between the player's movement and the meaning of the chosen attitude. For example, the passionate and confronting answer is linked with the successive hits. This feature encourages the player to verbally express their feelings, be it as a mumble for themselves or an exclamation of triumph, when playing in a group.



Fig. 4. The Seed Crew – *RecovR* – Module 1 : Sexism – QTE

The game was created to be played in two main contexts: either alone as a self-examination experience or with other people as a shared experience. However, in each case, the episodic format tends to stimulate the dialogue after the moments of play, since the users ponder upon the past fictional events and imagine what will happen next (Goudmand, 2018). The seriality of the project thus aims to create an environment for the players to collectively talk about sexism and to give them the opportunity to gather around this social issue to find suitable and sustainable solutions in their particular interpersonal context.

4 Current hypothesis and future of the project

RecovR confronts the player to various beliefs and behaviors, the NPCs prejudices, their avatar's views, and their own judgment. The game also urges the player to alternate between several opposite attitudes: immersion and reflexivity, empathy and self-expression, cathartic fun and analytical gaze... The ideal experience unsettles the player, who is constantly invited to interpret the game, to give their own perception and understanding of the fictional events.

Our current hypothesis is the following: To create a deep and sustainable impact on social issues such as sexism and ableism, games need to be catalysts for human relations, they need to let the players express their own feelings and thoughts on multifactorial and sensitive issues. For a game to foster exchange between diverse points of view, a solution seems to be to not try to impose a unique scope, but rather to create an experience based on tensions between diametrically opposed poles. Rather than focusing on designing harmony and consensus, we may seek to draft a chaotic structure and trust the player to take into their own hands the process to make sense of it.

This line of thought is close to the vibrant field of contemporary research on narrative structures which leave interpretative room for the players. More particularly, it is inspired by Rémi Cayatte's work (2019) in which, focusing on procedural narratives, he argues that the expressive power of video games resides precisely in the moments when the player takes in charge the operating of the content of the game to inject meaning in the gaps in the ludonarrative structure.

The preliminary conclusions obtained thanks to the conception of the first module of *RecovR* and the subsequent formal analysis of the created object form a knowledge which we need to question and build upon. Firstly, the complementary ideas of a balanced experience between converse elements and a breeding ground for debate will be tested in another module: the second part of *RecovR* will tackle the discriminations linked with the experience of disability and focus the discussion on the issue of ableism. Secondly, we have set up a series of user tests, in which a close observation of play will be followed by semi-directive interviews in order to determine if the theoretical hypotheses are verified in concrete uses. Thirdly, by communicating provisional results (Bouchardon, 2012), we hope to enrich our understanding of the link between interpersonal communication and sustainable social impact through video gaming practices thanks to the feedback of the scientific and professional communities.

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