

yours truly. self narrative and narrative designs of a self.

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Introduction

In this paper, I aim to look at how personal game design can contribute to constructions of the self. I hope to show how making game narratives can in turn help shape a personal narrative. This shall be done by looking at a selection of games, in order to argue in which ways this personal narrative could be developed. This should not only help continue discussions presented on hermeneutics of the self presented in previous conference proceedings (such as Pedercini, 2015), but also contribute to games and self as a whole.

Ricoeur and Narrative Identity

The topic of self narrative design will be approached by looking at Paul Ricoeur (1988)'s theory of narrative identity. Ricoeur argues that “life itself is a cloth woven of stories told”; the perception of our self is dictated through the narratives that we build around ourselves. As Dan Zahavi (2007) explains, this puts Ricoeur in contrast to other concepts of self as it helps us consider how identity can change - not only is it not located objectively, but it is also opening itself to constantly changing subjective readings, that we ourselves have to recite.

Ricoeur creates this distinction through *Idem* and *Iipse*. *Idem* is the identity which remains as a constant, despite the mutability of everything else around it – it is what keeps Theseus' ship as his when the stern is changed. It is how, externally we can note our identity as our own, as opposed to someone else's. Meanwhile *Iipse* is closer to the concept of selfhood, that which we cannot often express but we realise as perennially, not only ours, but as us. We can locate the concept of *Iipse* and ipseity in phenomenological work, such as Sartre or Merleau-Ponty, precisely because it is subject to our personal phenomenological experiences – it is in flux with our being.

When discussing identity, Ricoeur argues that both are necessary and a part of how identity has been constructed through the ages. We cannot discuss *Iipse* alone, mostly because

cementing the self in writing, or filming, or in this paper's case game making, requires a cementing of our identity's whatness, at least so that we can discuss it. However, we also cannot discuss *Idem* alone, because that would be ignoring our own positionality within our identity. This is what we are leading to when we speak of a narrative identity. Identity is formed through this interplay between the *Idem* and *Iipse*, between the objective identity that remains, and the stories of the self that we (and others) tell about it.

Within games, these narratives can be constructed through game play – the negotiation of our place within games can be a construction of one of the many linens within our life's cloth, especially if there is a self ascribed designation of identity (such as character creation). However, while it is acknowledged that there is still much to be gained by looking at narratives of self through the remediation of play, in this paper, I hope to look specifically at the potential self construction within the process of making games. I aim to do this by mostly actively looking at intentional makings of self, such as through autobiographical games. However, I will also show how non-autobiographical self narratives can still be relevant to look at in terms of Ricoeurian identity philosophy, as they establish an identity through an othering process, which others can share and appropriate.

Autobiographical Design within Game Studies

I would argue that making an identity within a pre-made digital game (such as character creation in *Skyrim*) as opposed to designing a self within a personal autobiographical work is different in at least one very important way. In the first example, the renegotiation of the *Iipse* remains very individual, yet separate – for example, last time I played *Skyrim*, I made a female Dunmer with a bald head and a scar across her face. The story I told of myself, using this avatar, served as a method to extend my selfhood into something that it is not, in order to help me better understand what my identity is. Some of it is clear, defining myself as a female served as a way of negotiating my maleness (through othering). By playing something I am not, I can construct a narrative identity that helps me discuss what I believe I am – a male. It is individual, as any form of extension of selfhood within *Skyrim*, is based solely on my play. However, it is separate, as the limits of these extensions, are not defined by me. For example, querying my gender beyond the normative two would not be possible.

On the other hand, in autobiographical game design and subsequent interaction, the renegotiation of the *Iipse* becomes communal, and yet personal. Let us for example, consider *Cibele* by Nina Freeman. In this game, players get to relive Freeman's relationship, which she formed with another individual through an MMORPG. Freeman herself, through both the design and gameplay, gets to play (and play with) something that is both herself, as it is her personal story, but also separate from herself, as it is now made ontic within the game's code. Freeman can both play herself, retelling her story and solidifying her personal narrative identity, but also play what she was, developing her non-game located *Iipse*. Additionally, other people also get to play the past-Freeman, sharing and developing further her story, not through renegotiating what the narrative is, but rather through further illustrating what the narrative is not, a relationship that Freeman can share with her players. For Freeman, it is both communal and personal as while *Cibele's* narrative is delineated by what Freeman wants it to be, this delineation is highlighted and shared by everyone who partakes in her individual journey.

Previous work about autobiography within digital games has touched on some of the points we just listed. For example, Gualeni (2014) discusses something similar in terms of Foucaultian “freedom”. He argues that freedom, within Foucault's work, can be conceived not only as an act of rebellion against oppression, but also as a way of projecting a moral self in relation to structures of power around us. Foucault draws examples from Ancient Greece's practice of ethics which he argued was not based on how one can act as a moral subject, but rather based on how one can be the subject they wish. Ethical living was performed in relation to what they wanted to be, rather than what they ought to be – they self designed themselves to shape society around them.

In a similar way, he argues that methods and practices of self design could be looked at in terms of Foucault's technologies of the self, which Foucault defines as techniques which

“permit individuals to effect [alone or with the help of others] [...] a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves [...]” (Foucault, 1988, 18)

Gualeni, through Foucault, argues that an awareness of the institutions of “power” around us allows us to free ourselves with exercises of self design, whether this means designing the self or designing for our selves. He links this thought to earlier point in the same paper, where

he discusses game design as a transformative practice, which as the name implies is the idea that game design can help transform people in different ways.

Power and Self

There is a clear difference in focus between Foucault and Ricoeur; while Foucault works more often with a larger picture, in terms of where we fit within the Structure, Ricoeur is more deeply vested within the personal, and how we shape an identity in relation to the other. However, looking back to our work, there is still some similarity between narrative identity in the autobiographical and the concept of freedom from “power” through technologies of the self. For example, In *Cibele*, we can make the argument that Nina Freeman is projecting a moral self that is not as deeply bound by sexual norms instituted by “power”. By fashioning a self that acknowledges these “power” boundaries, she frees herself from them. Within what we have earlier discussed, we could similarly state that the personal narrative is bound in a way that allowed for renegotiation of not only Freeman's sexual norms, but society's at large.

However, I would differ from Gualeni, and perhaps Foucault, in terms of the necessity of acknowledgement. Gualeni stated that “for the practice to be liberatory, one must first recognise the constraints imposed by power,” which I find myself disagreeing with. This might have been the case for previous technologies of the self, but I would argue that autobiographical game design is different from non interactive media, due to the communal aspect of narrative identity. When explicitly designing a self, there is already the limitation set by your *Iipse*, what you perceive yourself to be. Anything that you do not consider to be you will not be designed as you. The design of the self explicates where you belong within the structures of power. Hoping to make the last part a bit clearer, it is hard to set yourself free from the “power” institution of sexual norms if you find yourself ascribing fully to every sexual norm. Realising your position is not only potentially harder, since you might have defaulted within the norms, over chosen to be there, but also not deeply relevant, since pushing towards freedom from “power” when you are part of the “power” is perhaps slightly paradoxical.

Since you do not choose your positionality within the “power” structures, you do not necessarily need to consider what “power” institutions you are setting yourself free from. Realising how you can be free will make redefining your narrative identity easier. However, the practice of self design as a transformative practice can still be liberatory through how

others interact with it, through the communal formation of a narrative identity. Even if you do not realise the edges to liberation that you have set, players can realise these for you.

I would even go further and argue that even if you realise in which way you are renegotiating power structures, there is still something to be gained from the communal renegotiation. Foucault hints at this necessity, as we can see in the earlier quote, where he states “[alone or with the help of others]”, so perhaps this is a point of re-entry. Communal renegotiating of an *Iipse* can help legitimise a particular change in a person's narrative identity through a confirmation of result. Additionally, the deeply personalised boundaries laid forth within an autobiographical game can help others struggling with their own narrative identity to further understand their own *Iipse* through this shared experience.

For example, let's consider Anna Anthropy's personal journey of her transsexual transition in *Dys4ia* (2012). On one hand, there is the clash between a pre-ordained self and an emergent self, as Anthropy deals with her male to female transition. She is playing with her *Iipse* by detailing a time when her *Iipse* was in major flux. However, through her personal narrative being reified, Anthropy also allows for a social legitimisation of her personal narrative, which might in turn help further affirm her identity.

As her identity is socially contested, placing her in a position of otherness, the existence of a narrative that affirms her identity might help take her out of her positionality as other. The existence of a thing that outlined Anthropy's phenomenological hermeneutic process allows others to know that they can construct a self narrative that they might not have perceived as possible or otherwise legitimate. While Anthropy acknowledged the power institution that she was setting herself free from, that of gender normativity, the sharing of this story and further experience, helps normalise this outside-of-power structure, legitimising the narrative identity that she is trying to set for herself, as well as the narrative identity that others have been struggling to create.

This allows for an application of Ricoeur to one final narrative design which will lead to this paper's final question. Sam Barlow's *Her Story* (2015) is not an autobiographical story. However, it does deal with the very personable protagonist Hannah Smith, a woman who is being investigated in relation to a crime, who has traits of identity that are often othered such as mental health.

Through Anthropy's *Dys4ia*, this paper has shown how the reification of a personal narrative might be beneficial beyond Anthropy's self and into other selves that might have needed a thing to kickstart a personal hermeneutic process. The final question posed by this paper becomes where does *Her Story* place itself within Ricoeurian narrative identity. Despite not being explicitly acknowledgeable as a self narrative in the same vein as autobiographical games, is it possible to state that Barlow's work still belies a positionality, and in turn, at least a fragment of narrative identity? Additionally, if it does, is this identity ingrained within a self enough to be shared and appropriated by othered selves (such as through mental health) that are looking for a reification of an identity they cannot fully perceive?

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