

RPG (ROLE PLAYING GAME) VIDEO GAMES AND LONELINESS: AN ANALYSIS OF *FINDING PARADISE* NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

The research argued that 'Finding Paradise', the third installment of adventure RPG video games developed and published by Freebird Games, embodied excellent storytelling techniques for illustrating loneliness and those who experienced it in society. The 'Finding Paradise' narrative used immersive technology to let players experience the subject at hand with their own senses. Video game design aimed for relevancy to contemporary society's realities as well as compelling storytelling. Close reading was used to break down 'Finding Paradise' narratives into smaller aspects to strengthen and articulate a more connected relationship with the text; as a result, the researchers could draw interpretations within the text. By incorporating Herman's fundamental narrative components into the 'Finding Paradise' narrative and examining how stories and narratives can be used as a teaching tool using the reader-response approach, it can be concluded that the subcomponents of the game's narrative, specifically the representation of situatedness, event sequencing, worldmaking, and reality representation, provide a good example of developing a well-crafted and non-judgmental representation of loneliness as a mental illness and individuals who suffer from it that can also be used in EFL/ESL classroom.

Keywords: video games, loneliness, narrative, EFL/ESL

INTRODUCTION

In today's artificially intelligent world, loneliness is a growing issue that is frequently stigmatized, minimized, or ignored. Loneliness and social isolation are global public health concerns that impact people of all ages, from children to the elderly (Fakoya, McCorry, & Donnelly, 2020). According to Perlman and Peplau (as cited by Sundqvist & Hemberg, 2021), loneliness is defined as an uncomfortable feeling that happens when people suffer a quantitative or qualitative deficit in their social relationships. Despite the fact that older adults have been related to loneliness in the past, new studies have indicated that children and adolescents experience loneliness more frequently and with greater intensity (Danneel et al., 2018; Kowal et al., 2021; Lyyra, Välimaa, & Tynjälä, 2018; Sundqvist & Hemberg, 2021; van Roekel et al., 2018).

By fostering good attitudes regarding loneliness,

those close to the lonely person can assist and help them. A better understanding of loneliness as a form of mental illness can encourage a more optimistic outlook on addressing the issue and supporting those who endure it (von Soest, Luhmann, & Gerstorf, 2020). To date, however, there have not been many studies on how to encourage positive attitudes toward loneliness among people to raise awareness.

One strategy to investigate the issue of loneliness is to immerse it in storytelling and representation. Despite its rarity, loneliness has been adequately represented in a variety of popular culture, from movies like the box office *Joker* in 2019 to novels like the acclaimed *Journal of a Solitude* by May Sarton in 1973 to video games. Among many others, *Finding Paradise*, an adventure RPG (role-playing) video game written and made by Canadian independent game designer Kan Gao, published for PC by Freebird Games, and released to the public on

December 14th, 2017, fits into the category of a well-crafted representation of loneliness in the modern media. The video game was re-released amid the COVID-19 pandemic quarantine in June 2021 for Nintendo Switch. It is the third installment of the series of games made by the same game development company as the first and second installments, *To the Moon* and *A Bird Story*.

Finding Paradise is more of a narrative or story-driven game; most of the gameplay relies on finding the main character Colin Reed's memories through puzzle solving. The player can learn the truth of his wish by analyzing information, experiencing his feelings, and discovering ways to go deeper into his memory.

Aside from being more participatory than books or movies, video games are one of the best ways to portray a given condition or illness through the perspective of those who are affected by it. Furthermore, research conducted in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic has discovered that commercial video games, under professional supervision, could be effective and stigma-free resources for the mitigation of mental health issues when traditional therapeutic treatments are unavailable (Kowal et al., 2021).

The *Finding Paradise* narrative can be used in ESL (English as a Second Language/EFL (English as a Foreign Language) lessons to encourage students to produce discourse about mental health awareness in the target language by incorporating a reader-response approach. The *Finding Paradise* engaging and imaginative narrative allows learners to divert their attention from the more mechanical aspects of learning English (Davis, 1992). Learners' imaginative engagement could then be used to design instructional activities that require them to produce a discourse that involves the expression of learners' responses to the texts or narratives as they describe their imaginative engagement (Hirvela, 1996).

Considering the significance of loneliness representation in popular culture to raise awareness, this research would like to argue that *Finding Paradise* is a fit to explore loneliness better than any other media; hence, it later may raise awareness of this mental illness. Therefore, the researchers include close reading to examine the narrative of *Finding Paradise* RPG (Role Playing Game) video games in portraying loneliness and representing those who suffer from it. The secondary goal is to question the prevalent idea of gaming as merely enjoyable in order to raise awareness of the mental illness.

METHODS

Various media, such as literary fiction, comic books, movies, television shows, or even video games, use narrative and storytelling techniques to deliver messages to their audiences. According to Herman (2009), the narrative is (1) a form of representation of situatedness or a certain discourse environment for telling about some experience (situatedness); (2)

the narrative and its representation should focus on a structured time course of particularized events (events sequencing); (3) and the narrative should also be introduced into a story world, with specific settings, characters, plot, and conflicts (world-making/world disruption); and lastly (4) the narrative should convey what it is like to live through the story world-in-flux and at the end highlight the pressure of events onto real-life consciousness and emotions (what it is like). In this analysis, the researchers utilize Herman's four basic narrative structures.

Close reading is used to break down *Finding Paradise* narratives into smaller aspects in order to strengthen and articulate a more connected relationship with the text (Cobley & Siebers, 2021). Close reading allows the researchers to add more nuance to the text or more analytic rigor in reading it. As a result, the researchers would be able to draw interpretations within the text.

To incorporate the close reading approach into the analysis, the researchers do the following: (1) Going through the *Finding Paradise* game's narrative from beginning to end, including every option available to the player (play by choice mode); (2) Going through and identifying textual and semiotic clues in the elements of narrative (plot, characters, setting, theme, point of view, style, and conflict) that convey the emotions and reality of loneliness; (3) Analyzing those clues of the elements and dividing them into Herman's four main narrative structures (representation of situatedness, event sequencing, world-making, and reality representation), those parts are later subdivided into smaller subcomponents; (4) Analyzing the subcomponents of the narrative and how the subcomponents of the narrative represent loneliness; and finally (5) Concluding the narratives of *Finding Paradise* that have every subcomponent that positively and perfectly represents loneliness, symptoms of loneliness, and people who suffer from loneliness, and that they could be used as learning material to raise awareness of the mental illness.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Video games, perfecting multimodality with a high level of immersion and agency, are more appealing media (Kowal et al., 2021; Michailidis, Balaguer-Ballester, & He, 2018). During immersion, one's consciousness is temporarily expanded into parts of the unconscious, similar to hypnosis, but with the ability to remain conscious, as in lucid dreaming states. Game immersion is highly personal, but there are some indicators from the game itself that might help make the game experience more immersive. The game flow, realistic graphics, and story or narrative are some of the most important indications (Writz, 2021).

Video game immersion enables the modification of the sensory, cognitive, and emotional products of an immersive gaming experience (Michailidis, Balaguer-Ballester, & He, 2018). Thus, experiencing video

games is more than just enjoying the flow of the game, such as task attention, goal achievement, and reward; it is also a psychological experience. Figure 1 shows the *Finding Paradise* graphics.



Figure 1 Finding Paradise Graphics
(Source: Gao, 2017)

RPG video games *Finding Paradise* features the same two main protagonists as its two predecessors, Dr. Neil Watts and Dr. Eva Rosalene from Sigmund Corp. However, the storyline and narrative are different, including their patient on his deathbed, Colin Reed. The story revolves around Colin exploring his memories to identify significant objects and collect energy from them in order to strengthen the memory and connect to a more distant one from his childhood to the present day (Valentine, 2017). During the thrilling scientific exploration, Eva and Neil discover that Colin, despite having a relatively happy and fulfilling adult life with his wife and a son, has suffered from loneliness during his childhood as a result of abandonment and peer rejection which later he invents comfort in the shape of an imaginary companion named Faye. On his deathbed, the distant memory of Faye and his childhood causes him remorse and depression. His wish to reunite with Faye helps him deal with loneliness and discontent.

Finding Paradise, despite being constructed with 16-bit Japanese-style graphics that feel rather old-fashioned in comparison to other high-definition graphics adventure games, creates an immersive gaming experience with choose-your-own-adventure narratives and point-and-click game mechanics in every plot point of the story that allows the player to choose and explore steps for Neil and Eva into Colin's deepest and most hidden memory. Furthermore, some other essential components of the game, namely the written or spoken narration, dialogues between characters that are occasionally enigmatic, well-crafted 2D graphics and coloring, and melancholic background music, contribute to the immersion experience and convey the message of the game about loneliness and living with loneliness.

The researchers use Herman's (2009) basic narrative elements to discuss the subcomponents in *Finding Paradise* narratives. Each subcomponent of the narrative is treated under a separate category. The first subcomponent is the representation of situatedness.

Stories are the outcome of complicated transactions between the creators of the texts, discourses, or other semiotic artifacts, the texts themselves, and the consumers and interpreters of the stories. All of whom are influenced by their own cultural, institutional, genre, and text-specific protocols (Herman, 2009). Thus, stories are a narrative representation that includes (a) the textual or semiotic cues used in the medium and (b) the characters, settings, and plots of the story world that those cues represent. On the other hand, stories are also communicatively situated representations for the consumers and interpreters who interpret such cues to attend to certain communicative contexts and aims.

Finding Paradise sets its narrative around the main characters: a mysterious and sad character, Colin, and two cheerful and dynamic doctors, Eva and Neil, and other supporting characters. The way *Finding Paradise* contrasts Colin, Eva, and Neil's characterizations provides hints for how the graphic's colors and background music alter between the characters. The game maker employs gloomy, frigid, and isolated graphic coloring in the early plot points when the bedridden Colin invites and wishes the two doctors from Sigmund Corp to alter his life memories to become happier ones. Many interactions occur during this early part of the game between the doctors and Colin's family, who refuse Colin's wishes to the doctors to fabricate memories with his family, which are eventually discovered to be pleasant ones. Through these representation cues, the players are invited to grasp the issue and, sadly, the reality of loneliness and isolation from the perspectives of others, often close family or peers although whose intentions are well, to take agency in explaining the feeling of loneliness, resulting in a more isolated situation for the sufferers (Sundqvist & Hemberg, 2021).

The second subcomponent in the analysis is event sequencing. Whereas the focus on specific situations and events is the characteristic of narrative representations, the nature of how the world is going is also a concern in crafting the narrative. Furthermore, as particularity distinguishes a story from generic explanations, a narrative's temporal profile distinguishes stories from many examples of description (Herman, 2009).

The plot of *Finding Paradise* shifts back and forth between Colin's childhood and adolescence and his present. Although the player can easily identify the issues of temporality and particularity of events in the past and present using representation cues such as lighter and warmer color grading for the past and more frigid for the present, the back-and-forth event sequencing reminds about how loneliness, particularly loneliness experienced as a child, has no temporal consequences (Danneel et al., 2018). Loneliness can be restored in one's older years. Figure 2 shows Colin's childhood memory.

Next, it examines the worldmaking or world disruption subcomponent of *Finding Paradise*. Regardless of whether the representation cues and temporal sequences develop within a more or less fully

story world, stories in a game require disruptive events or conflicts to build tensions and produce an immersion experience of the subject (Herman, 2009). Disruptive events as the narrative's driving force define a new criterion for determining when an event sequence qualifies as a story. Making sense of how narratives reflect disruption in story worlds requires making assumptions about the kinds of agency characters have in those worlds, as role-bearing or position-occupying individuals who occasionally act at odds with their own or other such individuals' interests and ambitions (Herman, 2009).



Figure 2 Colin's Childhood Memory
(Source: Gao, 2017)

Conflicts in *Finding Paradise* occur when Neil and Eva learn the truth about Colin's past and Faye, his imaginary companion. Faye appears in Colin's memories and frequently plays the role of Colin's opposing intellect, telling him to do what he is frightened to do. Faye is a portrayal of a happy young Colin. When they last met, Colin was going to register as a pilot, and Faye made a promise to meet with him in his later years, which, if fulfilled, signifies Colin has led a happy life. When Colin becomes ill and bedridden, he is terrified by Faye's promise and begins to believe that he will never live a happy life. As a result, he requests that Sigmund Corp alter his memories, which are entirely false. Colin does have a good family life with his wife and son. Later, it is learned that Colin's melancholy and loneliness cause him to be deluded, longing for his time with Faye to return.

With the help of Neil and Eva, Faye is reintroduced into Colin's memories, which brings an end to the conflict. Colin's memory of Sigmund Corp is erased by Faye after the physicians leave. By not asking for help from them, Colin's life will remain as it is, free of any bitterness. As a child, Colin used to gaze across the balcony and see Faye. She asks Colin whether he has any regrets, and Colin admits he is happy with what his family and life have given him. Faye, in the end, says goodbyes, and Colin thanks her for always being his friend. In reality, Colin gives his wife one last kiss before his last breath. After he dies, Sigmund Corp gives Colin's green book to his wife and reveals his writings to her.

The reality of loneliness is rather complex. The conflicts in *Finding Paradise* describe situations and occurrences that depart from the realities and complexities within the case of loneliness. More than that, the narrative is a cognitive and communicative strategy for negotiating the gap between what was expected and what actually occurs in everyday life (Herman, 2009). Non-sufferers and ordinary people understand how thinking in the reality of loneliness that agency is never substituted, and aids supplied to help the individual recover do not overrule them (Yanguas, Pinazo-Henandis, & Tarazona-Santabalbina, 2018). Conflicts in the narrative also assist the game player in attributing motives or aims to others, evaluating the foundations of their own behavior, and making predictions about future reactions to situations. In this context, the narrative provides a kind of discourse framework for developing reasons for why individuals do what they do or fail to do what they are expected to do.

The last subcomponent is 'what it is like' or how reality is represented in the narrative. The narrative is rooted in the lived, felt experience of human or human-like beings engaging with their surrounding environment on an ongoing basis (Herman, 2009). On the other hand, the less a text or conversation encodes the pressure of events on an experienced human consciousness, the less susceptible text or discourse is to narrative interpretation.

Many reviewers on fan sites praise *Finding Paradise* for exploring the themes of regrets, loneliness, and moving on, such as a review by Rebekah Valentine in 2017 on Fansided website, in which she fondly describes the characters as being 'beautifully flawed and believably human' (Valentine, 2017). Many other reviewers agree, as positive reviews flood Metacritic's page on the game.

Kan Gao's writing style has always been distinctive and unique, which is apparent in *Finding Paradise*. The distinctive writing is complemented by the game's unique visual cues and immersive approach. The writing of the *Finding Paradise* narrative is also acclaimed for depicting an authentic outcome from one of the syndromes of loneliness in childhood that occurs when a child experiences negative friendship, that is, the creation of an imagined friend (Schwartz-Mette, Shankman, & Dueweke, 2020).

In their design, video games have come to depend not only on graphical complexity but also on the elements of fiction. Nowadays, video games represent a relatively new territory in studying the nature and impact of narrative (Batchelor et al., 2021; Ostenson, 2013). Ostenson (2013) has suggested that video games have a place in the English classroom. He has argued that video games, especially adventure video games, can help students learn problem-solving skills and teach them about social issues through the game's narratives. As a medium of learning, video game narratives are participatory for understanding a specific subject or real-life problem from the first- or third-person point of view (Batchelor et al., 2021;

Ostenson, 2013). Students act as players, making decisions that drive the game's plot. They can reach a meaningful conclusion about the game and experience the story from different perspectives at the end of the game.

The researchers propose adapting the reader-response method to implement video game narratives as a medium of learning. Reader-response theory that emerges in the field of literary criticism challenges the supremacy of authorial intention in a text and assigns readers to text interpretation (Hirvela, 1996). Rosenblatt in Hirvela (1996) has concluded that as active participants, readers create meaning while reading a text, resulting in an approximately equivalent role for the reader and the text.

Reader-response theory, as an instructional tool, has had a significant impact on both the teaching of literature and the teaching of composition within the L1 (First Language) context (Hirvela, 1996). Louise Rosenblatt later has contributed to the transactional theory of literature, which states that the text itself, particularly the literary text, is incomplete and requires the reader's experience to be understood (Davis, 1992). Literature texts are an 'evoked work', meaning that they emerge from the reader's experience of the original text as well as the meaning embedded within the text (Hirvela, 1996).

With its emphasis on viewing a real-life story from narrative reading, the reader-response approach as an instructional tool is better equipped to build upon a mental health discourse and loneliness in ESL/EFL classes. Because this approach is concerned with the student's overall experience of the reader-text transaction, as in the *Finding Paradise* video game is the experience of understanding the narrative of loneliness and playing the immersive game, any discourse produced is viewed as a basis for achieving toward additional, connected discourse, in this case, mental health awareness. Discourse is thus produced and seen in the context of the full story of reading, and it serves as a starting point for further and related discourse production (Hirvela, 1996).

CONCLUSIONS

This research addresses the subject of loneliness and how little awareness there is in society. It aims to remedy the situation by employing the immersion experience from the RPG video game *Finding Paradise*. To summarize, *Finding Paradise* employs the basic elements of narrative to construct its gaming narrative around the theme of loneliness. In *Finding Paradise*, textual and semiotic cues, as well as characterization and settings, convey the emotions and reality of loneliness and represent those suffering from it. The back-and-forth flow of events between the past and present explains the realistic temporal narrative of loneliness, which is also supported by visual and semiotic cues. The worldmaking techniques also help the narrative to be credible and may assist the

game player in attributing motives or goals to others, analyzing the foundations of their own conduct, and making predictions about future reactions to loneliness situations. Finally, the game's human-like atmosphere, characters, and story encode the game as believable.

As a result, it is critical to initiate and continue the conversation of how new immersive media, such as video games, might depict and convey the human psyche in a more interesting way for people to absorb.

Due to the limited sample size employed and time allocated for this research, there may be discrepancies and/or differing viewpoints on the subject that are not accounted for. Future studies could look at the issue from a different angle, such as psychology, and with more data. Perhaps the perspectives used can provide a far larger perception of the media reviewed in the research and the subject matter under examination.

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