Ludonarrative coherence and ludomusical harmony: the case of *Night in the Woods*

Spójność ludonarracyjna i harmonia ludomuzyczna: przypadek „Night in the Woods"

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Abstract: The article presents two related concepts crucial for the discussion and design of narrative-driven video games, namely ludonarrative coherence and ludomusical harmony, as represented in *Night in the Woods* (Infinite Fall, 2017). Ludonarrative coherence encompasses the design choices that help to integrate the narrative with the gameplay, and ludomusical harmony represents this concept in relation to game music. In other words, in narrative-driven games the story told, the gameworld created, and the game mechanics afforded should enhance, rather than encumber, one another. *Night in the Woods* is a game that successfully maintains ludonarrative coherence and harmony, as we illustrate on selected examples of mechanics that imply limited agency, relatively low level of difficulty, or a sense of failure.

Keywords: ludonarrative coherence, ludonarrative harmony, ludonarrative dissonance, narrative-driven games, narration in games, gameplay, *Night in the Woods*

1. Introduction

The article discusses ludonarrative coherence and ludomusical harmony in the context of their specific execution in a narrative-driven video game, *Night in the Woods*. Our observations follow circa 26 hours of direct gameplay (individual and tandem-play on a Windows 10 PC with Xbox One controller) supported by occasional use of other gameplay-related materials such as assorted YouTube walkthrough videos. As a part of our text is devoted to the analysis of music in the game, the assumption here is that the (hearing) player is listening – as we did – to the music during play, rather than, for example, switching the sound off, an entirely possible option in its own right.

2. Disclaimer

Published in 2017 by the Infinite Fall studio, *Night in the Woods* (NITW) has garnered significant attention even before it was put on the market. A Kickstarter project as it was, NITW was able to collect four times as much money as required, which clearly indicated the interest that the indie games scene invested in its development (Trattner, 2017, p. 131). Initially, it got positive reception, both from the critics and the players, not an easy feat for a game that deals with matters such as, among the others, mental health issues (Phelps, Wagner, Moger, 2020, p. 115).

This acclaim changed when it transpired that one of the people engaged in the project, Alec Holowka, was responsible for acts of sexual violence. From an indie games success story, NITW has turned into a highly controversial topic to discuss. Disclaimers pertaining to the situation can be found, for example, in Fiorilli (2019) or Consalvo and Phelps (2020). Characteristically, Fiorilli says that "the primary interests of the analyses herein are the writing and themes portrayed in the game, rather than the gameplay programming and soundtrack for which the individual in question has been credited" (2019, p. iv). Consalvo and Phelps explain their position in a similar vein:

> We do not want to celebrate the work of anyone who has hurt and abused others, but we also realize the game itself was created by a collective, including individuals

themselves harmed by Holowka. We concluded that it was necessary to acknowledge the harm one of the game's developers had inflicted on several people but also to acknowledge the value that the game and the messages it is trying to convey still holds (2020, pp. 339–340).

In the light of the above mentioned controversy, it is highly difficult not to relate to the specific (and detrimental) paratextual impact Holowka's actions had on NITW. However, as Consalvo and Phelps underline, "Holowka often served as the team's public face [...]. Yet Holowka's history was not the only inspiration for the game; other developers used their own backgrounds as reference" (ibid., p. 339). We decide to approach the game not as a work of a single auteur, but as the outcome of the team work, a system in which each of the constitutive elements, including the music score, co-depends on other elements to create a unified artistic vision that still deserves academic insight.

3. Where, when, and how of Night in the Woods

The gameworld of NITW consists of Possum Springs, "a fictional, destitute Pennsylvania mining town" (Keever, 2019, p. 1), and the surrounding forests; the time frame is some vaguely defined "contemporary America". Veale makes a point that the game "never attempts to tell a universal story: it tells a very specifically American one as approachably as possible" (2021, p. 7).

NITW combines a selection of literary and cinematic tropes, e.g. the conventional depiction of the "small-town Americana" spooky town established by Twin Peaks (Fiorilli, 2019, p. 21), with various modes of play, and represents the Rust Belt aesthetics (Palmer, 2014), or to be more specific – the Rust Belt Gothic[1]. The player controls the anthropomorphic, cat-like Mae Borowski, "a rare character within popular culture and particularly within video games, in that she is a young woman who is allowed to be a human disaster (Flores, 2019; Pane, 2017)" (Veale, 2022, p. 6). Veale says that though "she is a sympathetic character", the player

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[1] As it is a broad and complex issue, we cover NITW as a Rust Belt Gothic/American Gothic text in another (upcoming) text.

may realise that she is also far from being perfect (2022, p. 6). The game is "narrative-driven" (Keever, 2019, p. 2), "2D side-scrolling game [and] at times a platformer, at times a dialogue-heavy adventure/exploration game. Furthermore, it includes several mini-games with varying mechanics" (Trattner, 2017, p. 131), some related to music. Yet apart from the platformer-type and musical mechanics, the NITW game is rich in other, narrative devices. For example, the roguelike video game on the main character's laptop, *Demontower*, oscillates between embedded – and metanarrative, as it is a game within a game. Other devices which may be considered as embedded narratives are a play performed during the Harfest and the contents of Mae's journal.

"The 'play' of *Night in the Woods* is primarily the free movement of walking, an act of transit made playful insofar as it avoids the imperatives of consumption and utility in her movements" (Keever, 2019, p. 2). As it is widely recognised, "most of the time the player has little agency over Mae aside from running through town" (Trattner, 2017, p. 131). This is an example of how NITW utilises game mechanics to spin its story and upkeep the ludonarrative coherence. In the following sections we are going to discuss selected instances of the ludonarrative coherence and ludomusical harmony in the game.

4. Jumping on electric lines in Possum Springs: ludonarrative coherence

NITW is relatively easy to play: "there is only one skill-based challenge that acts as a gatekeeper and that is right at the start" (Veale, 2021, p. 6). It eschews hard fun (Lazzaro, 2021) and as Veale has it:

> if you do badly, the game lets you proceed [...] At the same time as the game encourages progress, it makes avoiding the consequences of your decisions very difficult. There is only one save slot for the game, and it autosaves upon exiting. [...] As a result, it is very easy to make decisions and find yourself unable to take them back. [...] This is very appropriate for Mae's contextual position, both narratively and affectively (2021, p. 6).

The lack of control and the feeling of entrapment are at the core of NITW. The NITW player has very limited agency as, in fact, most choices

are affective rather than narrative, "written for the player to understand what's going on in Mae's head, in all its contradiction, and sometimes in direct contrast to what comes out of her mouth" (Fiorilli, 2019, p. 38). There are "moments of frustration" (Trettner, 2017, p. 135) and "dialogue options, both of which will evidently lead to social disaster" (ibid.)

As Phelps, Wagner, and Moger explain, "the game employs literal, but not necessarily explicitly stated, depictions of mental illness while also containing metaphors of mental illness through its environment and narrative" (2020, p. 127). Other themes to be found in the game are nostalgia, capitalism, friendship, and the quest for meaning, not to mention the mental health issues singled out above. All of them are represented by means of gameplay mechanics and rules, "the main vehicle for meaning in games" (Rusch, 2017, p. xxv), interplaying with visual and audio design, as well as dialogues and other verbal elements (eg. Mae's diary). This is "a combination of narrative and mechanics which influence players' affective commitment to a game" (Caravella, 2021), facilitating the emergence of the Arystotelian hexis to "practice morality in a virtual, fictional space" (ibid.). For example, as communicated via dialogue boxes, the player gets to know that the characters cannot leave Possum Springs because of the lack of resources/ the emotional obligations they have (Keever, 2019, p. 1). Other than that, Mae and her friends, as the playable avatar and the game engine operated NPCs, are literally trapped in a "very constrained context" (Veale, 2021, p. 2) of the limited and controlled game space:

> [comprised of about eight major screens of exterior townscape. Among them: the commercial town center, the former underground trolley station, the parking lot behind the old supermarket. [...] a handful of buildings, like the church and the workplaces of Mae's friends. [...] the player nearly always starts the day in Mae's bedroom. From there, Mae can walk out of her third-floor room, down the stairs, out of her parents' house, and down the street either to the left or to the right. The Borowski household is located on a residential street near the rightmost boundary of the game's map. Moving to the right, the player finds some woods, a bridge, and the sign marking the city limits of Possum Springs. Attempting to continue rightward, the player provokes Mae to quip that she's not about to walk all the way to the next town over (Fiorilli, 2019, p. 33).

Mae is able to walk only around the spaces that have been programmed to be accessible and interactive, and these, as it has been said, are as limited as the choice of actions that Mae may undertake. Thus, "the player is guided spatially through the town" (Consalvo, Phelps, 2020, p. 346)

and made to engage in "repetitive acts in game play [that] can function procedurally as metaphors themselves" (ibid.). "There is little room for interaction with the virtual space or even the people in it. Every day starts the same way [...]" (Trattner, 2017, p. 132).

The player may utilise the principle of charity and explain this inability to escape in terms of a pseudo-fictional event (Hogenbirk, van de Hoef, Meyer, 2018, p. 10). Since NITW is a video game, it is only logical that the gamespace it offers is limited and the player's actions are always controlled to the significant extent by the game system; the fact that Mae cannot leave Possum Springs can be attributed to the video games' medium specificity. On the other hand, incorporated into the narrative as they are, the above-mentioned restrictions of the player's agency seem to be plausible enough not to be considered to be pseudo-fictional – they are smoothly incorporated into the narrative.

Mae comes back to town in "a kind of nostalgic tourism", stays at her parents' place and refuses to find a job (Keever, 2019, p. 1). She spends her days hanging around the town, walking up and down the streets (and electric lines) which "evolves into a repetitive routine" (Harkin, 2020, p. 118), and as Harkin (2020) has it, "this format offers players an insight into the collective melancholy of the town's struggling residents" (ibid.), used as "as invaluable ludic representations of Mae and Bea's differences as the player's actions are simultaneously representative of Mae's illusory freedom and uncertain future and Bea's mundane routine and sense of entrapment" (ibid.). In other words, the game makes the players perform specific, repetitive actions in exchange for little or no agency. This way, NITW can be analysed in the framework of Bogost's procedural rhetoric (Consalvo, Phelps, 2020, p. 346; Harkin, 2020, p. 118), which complements the above mentioned Caravella's (2021) claims about the use of hexis in the game.

5. Die Anywhere Else: ludomusical harmony in NITW

A game can be categorised as musical on the merit of numerous criteria, from "formal elements, such as theme, mechanics or objectives, centre on music, musicians, music making or another music related activity"

(Austin, 2021, p. 140), to a less defined characteristics, such as "a particular genre of music in its soundtrack" (ibid.). NITW seems not to be labelled as a musical game despite the presence of musical mechanics and the general importance of music as its theme and a significantly deep integration of music and narrative. This section is going to focus on NITW musical minigames in the framework of ludomusical harmony.

"A synergy between the game design and its music" (Westberg, 2022, p. 2) could be approached as ludonarrative harmony (ibid.). However, to highlight its specificity and differentiate it from the ludonarrative harmony discussed in the previous section, we suggest to use the term ludomusical harmony here. Thus, ludomusical harmony would denote the opposite of ludomusical dissonance which is, in turn, a possible incongruence that "occupies a space where the three elements of gameplay, narrative, and music overlap" (Huerter, 2019, p. 24). Taken from Michiel Kamp's discussion of *Diablo III*, the idea of ludomusical dissonance consists in a contextual (aka related to the player's interpretive baggage and horizon of expectations) "interaction between the music of a game and that game's narrative and gameplay elements that causes disruption and works against the intended goal of immersion in storied play" (Huerter, 2019, p. 26).

Stevens, Reybould, McDermott suggest another term, namely "the ludo-narrative conflict in music" (2015, p. 7). The conflict arises when the game needs to communicate and facilitate specific emotions and should provide time-based musical structures that are impossible to implement because of interactivity and player's agency (Stevens, Reybould, McDermott, 2015, p. 7). In other words, "many of the strong emotions evoked by music are associated with the creation of, and confirmation and violation of, expectancy, and a sense of closure" (Stevens, Reybould, McDermott, 2015, p. 7) and closure is impossible if the player is allowed to navigate the gamespace and make decisions freely. These challenges require specific design strategies. As Huerter puts it:

> music in video games is intended to facilitate flow and immersion, as well as emotional involvement. [...] the goal is to create an overall experience that is integrated and compelling, and to allow deep involvement in a narrative (2019, p. 24).

An example of the game that achieves this goal provided by Westberg is *Untitled Goose Game* (House House, 2019) which "has been designed

to sound like there is a jazz pianist improvising musical phrases over the mischievous acts of the player" (Westberg, 2022, p. 2).

Generally speaking, music is an important trigger of immersion in NITW. For example, a guitar player can be heard and seen during the party in the woods. Not only the melody played but also the sounds and visuals of tuning the instrument can be heard and seen. However, the music is muted during Mae's speech, probably to emphasise an important moment and to centre the main character. Obviously the soundtrack varies, from ominous (for example, heard during breaking through the construction site) to sentimental (during Mae's conversations with mum). In this text, however, to discuss the ludonarrative harmony that contributes to the symbolic reading of NITW we are going to focus on the selected musical minigames.

The recurring dreams featuring the four musicians are the most complex of the musical minigames and one we thoroughly discuss in an upcoming publication. In her dreams, Mae starts exploring areas where she discovers one-by-one the ghosts of four musicians: accordionist, saxophonist, tubist, and violinist. After each revelation, a particular musician starts to play their part on the instrument and, one by one, all musicians join the jam session, so finally the player can hear the complete piece performed by the quartet. This seems to give the player the perfect balance between interactivity and the expectancy and closure possible in the time-based musical structures which, as the abovementioned Stevens, Reybould, McDermott observe, can generate strong emotions (2015, p. 7). Diametrically different when it comes to the emotional atmosphere, the up-the-stairs game consists in carrying a heavy object up a flight of stairs (and trying not to tumble down). In contrast to the guitar/band practice where the mechanic is built on the rhythm, the pitch of the sound is an important indicator here. Indeed, there are twelve steps of the stairs resembling the twelve steps of the chromatic scale with semitones. Played on a piano, each step on the stairs is followed by the sound with a tremolo effect obtained due to playing each note in octaves, with additional sounds from the bass register audible during moments of waiting. It is not only going up and down the stairs, but also up and down the chromatic scale, starting and ending at the note C. This mechanic is musically accurate also because a player goes back to a previous lower note when a game orders to take a step down.

The musical minigame that we would like to discuss in more detail is the bass guitar practice. Each time Mae plays a bass guitar, in her room or with the band, the player experiences a minigame similar to the well known *Guitar Hero*. The player's task is to click on a particular button shown on the screen in the form of a bead dropping on one of the strings. However, NITW resembles *Guitar Hero* only in the general concept, as the player controls only the right hand of a bass guitar. Indeed, anyone who has ever played a guitar or any similar plucked string instrument (or even any bowed instrument) will come to the conclusion that only one hand is simulated in the gameplay. As a result, the mechanic here is based on the sense of rhythm rather than the melody and it seems to be a rhythm game (Austin, 2021, p. 140).

Lyrically, the songs represent themes typical for such genres as post punk and new wave, oscillating around the painful feeling of alienation and detachment from the world. The vocals are not performed either during own practice nor band rehearsal, the reason seems to be the concept of not including any verbal audio in the whole game (all the dialogues are in the graphic form) as well as helping the player to focus on the instrumental music. However, the game has such an impact on popular culture that many covers of the songs from NITW have been recorded and uploaded on such platforms as YouTube and SoundCloud.

Another issue with the guitar practice minigame, and a narrative one no less, is a choice of the instrument played by Mae. A bass guitar seems to be suitable not only for the game mechanic, as it has only four strings which are easily adaptive to the four buttons of a controller and the low frequencies are audible yet pleasant for a player, but also for the main character's personality. Attributing the bass may be accidental, however, it seems to be conscious, as it is usually the lowest sounding instrument in bands and it rather not stands out, which seem to be applicable to the protagonist.

Although playing the guitar is more complex and requires two hands, in the minigame the pitch of the sound seems to be more or less accurate to the string it is played on and suggests the range of a particular one, linking the beat with the melody. Also, the rhythm mechanic seems to be approachable for a wider group of recipients as it does not require other musical skills. So, seemingly, the minigame is both simple and challenging

enough to be enjoyed by the players, even though NITW is not advertised as an overtly music game and mastering guitar skills may not be the reason for playing the title. However, if – regardless of the repeated practice – mistakes are still being made, Mae is either bitterly dissatisfied with herself or criticised and scolded by her friends. Thus, symbolically, playing the bass guitar may be read as another failure: Mae tries to be a part of the band, which would require harmonious performance which she is not able to deliver. The group of friends try to get in tune, literally. They try to cultivate their hobby and do anything but the boring everyday chores. It is just a pastime, but even so should be treated seriously – good performance requires practice. Mae's performance seems to disappoint both her and her friends, even though the player may try to improve their skills and play the virtual guitar better each time. In the gameplay we have experienced, the feedback for the guitar practice was invariantly negative, no matter how hard we tried – there was definitely no reward for trying. This resembled another situation from NITW, namely the sequence that covered grocery shopping for a dinner at Bea's place and cooking the meal: although the selection of foodstuff items seemed to be perfectly sensible (taking into account the cultural context presented in the game), the dinner was always a disaster. Thus, for the player who fails to play the guitar perfectly, the minigame utilises ludomusical harmony showing how Mae cannot value herself and find her self-esteem, and how other people react to her failures[2].

6. Conclusion

In the article we have addressed the issues of ludonarrative harmony and its musical equivalent, ludomusical harmony. The game in question is narrative-driven and this aspect has been already profoundly discussed. NITW, a narrative-driven game as it is, entwines narrativity into the gameplay mechanics. The selected examples we have recalled show how

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[2] If Mae plays the songs perfectly, she is apprised by her friends and responds, "All in a day's work" (Night in the Woods Wiki, n.d.), which could be suggestive of diminishing her own value just as well.

specific game mechanics support and enhance the narrative weaved with the help of verbal and visual texts. Whereas the limited player's agency, limited gamespace, or simplified guitar play mechanics may be understood in terms of the medium specific pseudo-fictionality, their incorporation into the narrative gameworld is so effective that they retain their narrative and worldbuilding impact. Then again, we decided to approach NITW as a highly coherent project that combines ludonarrative coherence with its musical equivalent, that is ludomusical harmony, paying special attention to the game's music. It has been interesting to observe how the game that strives to deal with non-trival issues such as mental health crisis utilises music to achieve its goals.

The playable protagonist of the game is a character that constantly fails and has little control over her life. This is reflected in the gameplay that does not allow the players to be successful at numerous tasks, forces them to choose options that would end in the situation being highly uncomfortable for Mae, and limits their movements, making them stay inside the perimeter of what is a simulation of a small Rust Belt town in the times of economic and social collapse. However, it is worth noticing that the choices in NITW concern affect and emotions and although we can rightfully talk about ludonarrative coherence in the game, NITW gravitates toward affective impact, facilitating emotional immersion into the storyworld in tune with its main theme – mental illness,.

In NITW the "illusory freedom" observed by Harkin (2020) and a "constrained context" (Veale, 2021) recalled in section four of our text is rendered not only by means of visuals and movement and the related gameplay, but in a significant part through the game's music. In NITW music is an immersion trigger that stays in synergy between what can be heard and what can be seen or inferred from the storyworld. The ludomusical harmony is up-kept throughout the game, to be noticed in the musical minigames, examples of which we have discussed, as well as in the dream sequences that constitute time-based musical structures allowing for a specific expression of emotions. Mae's characterisation, too, depends upon intra – and extradiegetic music. Music is here a part of the storyworld (as, for example, in the sequences that show an acoustic guitar player in the woods) as well as an irreplaceable tool that helps to render character's emotional responses and, last but not least, helps the player

to get in tune with the emotions that the story and the world that it takes place in evoke. This strategy, as we have discussed, requires a series of tactical adjustments, so the use of music in the game changes from sequence to sequence appropriately. All in all, the ludomusical harmony remains.

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Spójność ludonarracyjna i harmonia ludomuzyczna: przypadek *Night in the Woods*

Abstrakt: Artykuł prezentuje dwa powiązane ze sobą pojęcia spójności ludonarracyjnej i harmonii ludomuzycznej, ważne z punktu widzenia badania i tworzenia narracyjnych gier wideo, na przykładzie *Night in the Woods* (Infinite Fall 2017). Spójność ludonarracyjna dotyczy tych wyborów projektowych, które pozwalają zintegrować narrację z rozgrywką, natomiast harmonia ludomuzyczna odnosi to pojęcie do muzyki w grze. Innymi słowy, w grach ukierunkowanych na snucie historii opowieść oraz świat gry powinny współgrać i uzupełniać zastosowane mechaniki, i vice versa. *Night in the Woods* jest grą, która z powodzeniem podtrzymuje obie spójności, jak wykazujemy na wybranych przykładach mechanik, które regulują ograniczoną sprawczość gracza, względnie niski poziom trudności gry czy też poczucie porażki.

Słowa kluczowe: spójność ludonarracyjna, harmonia ludomuzyczna, dysonans ludonarracyjny, gry narracyjne, narracja w grach, rozgrywka, *Night in the Woods*

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