Optional Narratives and Supplemental Storytelling
in Behaviour Interactive's *Dead By Daylight*

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*The following text accompanies the videographic essay of the same title in this issue, viewable **here**.

Abstract

This written analysis and the videographic essay it accompanies explore the relationship between narrative and gameplay in *Dead by Daylight* (*DBD*). The term "ludonarrative dissonance" has become very popular in video game discourse, referring to situations where the gameplay and narrative of a game seem to be at odds: the story tells you one thing, while the actual gameplay mechanics ask you to do something that doesn't logically fit with that story. I want to explore how *Dead by Daylight* creates the opposite phenomenon of ludonarrative harmony, where every gameplay input or choice not only fits within the narrative but actually serves a crucial role in telling it.

Match-based, short-form games like *DBD* often struggle with ludonarrative dissonance. It's really hard to tell a cohesive, consistent story in a game with short, standalone, multiplayer matches where each match begins and ends in the same place. *DBD* is a compelling example of a game that manages to find a strong narrative function for its cyclical matchmaking structure. The last section of this analysis makes a case for why this phenomenon is particularly relevant to the horror genre. *DBD* takes a style of game where narrative is often seen as secondary or optional to the main experience of gameplay and makes a case for the centrality of narrative to the game. I tie this into a similar discussion of horror, exploring how people often see the plots of horror movies as thin excuses for the "real" entertainment, and how these assumptions miss out on the importance of narrative to even horror films whose narrative seems supplementary.

Introduction

Behaviour Interactive's *Dead By Daylight* is a relatively straightforward, match-based game. Each match consists of five players: four people play as survivors and one plays as the killer. The killer's goal is to kill all four survivors before any of them can escape. The survivors' goal is to escape before they are sacrificed. While there are additional mechanics to keep gameplay fresh and interesting, the core gameplay loop is the same. Matches typically last for less

than 20 minutes, and this match-based cycle makes up the entirety of the game. There is no single-player mode to progress through, and nothing like a continuous campaign or story mode. The game is cyclical: each match starts exactly the same way, and ends in one of exactly the same three ways:

> 1) The survivors escape.
> 2) The survivors die.
> 3) Some survivors escape while others die.
> Rinse and repeat.

This essay is a discussion of narrative in *Dead By Daylight*. This seems like a strange approach: how can I talk about narrative in a game that doesn't involve playing through a story? As I have mentioned, there is no progression component, and nothing the player does results in a clear story; gameplay consists of cyclical, repeated matches that always start and end in the same way. You spawn in a randomly-chosen level. You are either the killer or a survivor, and then you either kill, fail to kill, survive, or die. And yet, many fans of *Dead by Daylight*—including me—are deeply invested in the story and lore of the game.

Narrative in Dead by Daylight?

Despite *Dead By Daylight*'s cyclical structure, its producer Behaviour Interactive actually does produce a vast amount of lore and backstory behind the game. However, the only way to learn more about this story is to actually stop playing. The explicitly narrative content is contained in an area called The Archives, which is entirely separate from the main game and accessed through a series of menus where you can read short stories and listen to audio recordings that flesh out the characters and universe of the game. The Archives have a vast amount of narrative content, but they are completely distinct from the game itself; there is no need to engage with The Archives to play the game fully, and the only way to listen to the stories in The Archives is outside the realm of gameplay proper. It is therefore hard to see these archives as an active part of the game, but more as a supplemental, optional feature.

This raises the question of why The Archives are even there in the first place. Why bother writing pages and pages of expansive lore for a game that could entirely function without this lore? Why write all of these stories for when the likelihood is that the majority of players will never read or listen to them?

This is a recurring issue that happens in matchmaking games like *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009) or *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment / Iron Galaxy 2016, 2022); there is an expansive lore, but all of it is contained in peripheral or supplementary materials that never overlap with the main game. As with *DBD*, none of it is essential to playing the game itself, and players actually have to stop playing the game in order to access it. Yet it still continues to exist; many fans, including myself, also love this lore, and for many of us the games would be much less fulfilling without it.

  This essay explores storytelling in *Dead by Daylight* (*DBD*). I argue that, even if players never read anything in The Archives and never actively seek out the game's backstory, said story nevertheless manages to become a core part of their gaming experience. The video accompanying this written analysis explores how narrative is intertwined with gameplay, even for players who never intend on engaging with *DBD's* more obviously narrative components.

  The primary way that *Dead by Daylight* does this is by constantly incorporating the narrative into the gameplay mechanics; that is, almost every element of *DBD*'s gameplay is interwoven with its narrative structure in a way that makes the two impossible to understand separately. The closer you look at character playstyles and gameplay mechanics, the more it becomes clear that they are inextricable from the story; you are embodying the narrative and story simply by playing the game. This harmony of gameplay and narrative is a core part of how *Dead by Daylight* tells its story through the gameplay, and it makes up the bulk of my video essay. I also briefly explore the concept of embedded narratives, examining how small narrative clues or "breadcrumbs" keep jumping out at players during the game, teasing them with the possibility of a greater narrative context behind the matches in which they are engaging, keeping the narrative relevant even to the most narratively-disinterested of gamers.

Ludonarrative Harmony

  One of the most popular terms in video game discourse is ludonarrative dissonance. This term refers to what happens when the gameplay of a game doesn't match up with its narrative. Classic examples include stopping to play a bunch of minigames while a giant meteor that you need to stop is slowly hurdling towards the planet—or being set on fire, stabbed, and shot repeatedly in a gameplay battle, only to die from a single stab wound in a cutscene. As Lauryn Ash describes: "for me, just the other day playing *Divinity Original Sin 2* [2017], my immersion was broken: as the main story says you must escape, but

my friends/myself were spending all our time sneaking and looting around a giant castle. If you really wanted to escape a place so badly, would you in real life really snoop around every corner and risk getting and killed? No. You would high tail it out of there as fast as possible. That's ludonarrative dissonance" (2020, n.p.).

This issue happens very often in matchmaking games: in the plot of Overwatch, for example, Pharah is friends with Cassidy and Mercy. Despite a tense relationship with her mother Ana, the two are also ultimately fighting on the same side. However, this doesn't stop her from firing a literal rocket barrage in these characters' faces and blowing them up if they end up on opposite player teams in the game. Match-based games require a lot of suspension of disbelief because the gameplay itself often doesn't really fit with the larger narrative, and the two exist on separate plains. While Morgana and Kayle in *League of Legends* hate each other, they can still fight on the same team in a match because it would be too restrictive to prevent players from choosing certain team compositions due to narrative restrictions. The narrative in matchmaking games may be vast and interesting, but it often gets in the way of gameplay, so the two simply occupy different spheres, and thus ludonarrative dissonance is introduced.

As the popularity of the term implies, it is very common for game designers to create situations where players are engaging in a gameplay mechanic that is at odds with the story that they're playing through. However, there has also been a lot of work towards developing games that express the related concept of ludonarrative harmony, where gameplay and narrative reinforce each other. Ash explains ludonarrative harmony as "a synchronization between mechanics and narrative that create a consistent and realized experience or story" (2016, 1). The video explores ways that *Dead By Daylight* creates ludonarrative harmony, using its cyclical matchmaking structure as a narrative strength rather than a limitation.

The Entity

The underlying narrative behind *Dead by Daylight* is that an evil creature known as The Entity abducts people and traps them in its realm. It then puts them through endless trials where killers and survivors have to play out the matches that the players of *Dead by Daylight* undergo. The killers are as much prisoners as the survivors, and many of them do not consent to their participation but do so out of fear of reprimand. The Entity feeds on extreme emotion; however, it isn't content with only one extreme emotion, but requires

an oscillation between different extremes in order to fuel its energy. Thus, it provides as many opportunities for hope and escape as it does for fear and defeat—this fluctuation is key to how it feeds off of energy. As the video demonstrates, these narrative features of The Entity always inform the gameplay structure, leading to there being pretty much no element of gameplay input or interaction that is at odds with the narrative; by playing out the game, you're playing out the narrative. By playing *Dead by Daylight,* you are feeding The Entity.

For killers, the game also creates moments of narrative engagement through gameplay mechanics. The *obsession system*, for example, means that killers don't just mindlessly hunt down survivors the same way every time. Every trial, a random survivor is marked as the killer's obsession. Depending on the killer's perks, different trials require the obsession to be handled differently: some require you to save the obsession for last or taunt them, while others give you the power to hunt down the obsession quickly and kill them more easily than the others. One ability has your obsession change every time someone injures you, turning the game into a story of vengeance where you hunt down specific survivors for retribution. The obsession mechanic bakes narrative into the gameplay experience of killers; you don't simply hunt down survivors mindlessly, or approach every trial the same way. Depending on your obsession and corresponding perks, you play out a story in the trial related to how the killer is feeling about specific survivors that time around; rather than executing the exact same gameplay loop every time, the gameplay mechanics are the catalyst for a type of thinking that is filtered through storytelling. If Jake hits you with a pallet during the game and you have equipped the ability Nemesis, Jake is now your obsession; you're encouraged by the game to act out a revenge plot inspired by the action he took in the game.

Narrative Fragmentation

While the bulk of the video essay accompanying this analysis is interested in exploring ludonarrative harmony in *Dead by Daylight,* I also briefly examine the game's use of narrative fragmentation. While narrative fragmentation in gaming was around long before the release of FromSoftware's *Dark Souls* (2011), the game (and the *Souls* series of which it is a part) is often gestured to as a strong example of the technique. The story of *Dark Souls* is fragmented and embedded in subtle parts of level design, item descriptions, gameplay mechanics, and level art. Every interaction with the gameplay in *Dark Souls* reveals a little bit more about the context behind its narrative, and the

combination of narrative design with gameplay leads to moments where the player is tantalized with the promise of secrets and information about both gameplay and story. As Daniel Vella argues:

> Another mode of ambiguity that *Dark Souls* employs can be identified in its tendency to present the player with entities whose function within the game system is never explained or hinted at. One of the starting 'gifts' the player can choose when creating a new character, for instance, is the Pendant [...], which is only described, in its inventory entry, as an "old-looking item with no obvious value". Of course, what such a description tantalizingly suggests is that the pendant might have some value which is not obvious and which it is up to the player to discover. It is likely, then, that the player might decide that there is a good chance the Pendant might actually offer more valuable rewards than any of the straightforward bonuses provided by the other starting gifts. (2015, n.p.)

In this case, the pendant taunts the player with two simultaneous suggestions; it might have a gameplay use that isn't obvious at first sight, and it might end up having narrative significance that isn't obvious at first sight. In both cases, a mystery is hinted at in something seemingly mundane like an item description, and players—whether they're focusing on gameplay, narrative, or both—are pushed to string these various hints together to piece together an understanding of what's going on in the world of the game.

Dead by Daylight is full of these moments. The video component of this essay explores a few of them, where idiosyncrasies are impossible to ignore in the game, but don't fully make sense unless you're able to piece them together with narrative components to better understand the bigger picture. The narrative itself is also never available in one clear or coherent space; The Archives consist of a variety of different notes, short stories, and similar fragments, and each fragment has to be unlocked separately by completing gameplay challenges. The result is that, much like in a *Souls* game, playing the game constantly throws narrative breadcrumbs at the player that become increasingly hard to ignore, and players find themselves piecing together these breadcrumbs to figure out the truth. As with the rest of the game, this is done with a sense of ludonarrative harmony; the players have to piece together the lore out of fragments and hints because this is also exactly what the characters have to do. It is established that characters in The Entity's realm have a hard time holding on to memories, which get lost in a substance called The Fog; piecing together memories—in both gameplay and narrative—is a process of

reaching into this fog to try and pull out the lost memories and put them back together. Narrative fragmentation is justified through ludonarrative harmony, rather than simply being present as an arbitrary feature to imitate the popularity of something like *Dark Souls*.

Why *Monstrum*?

A lot of this essay has been looking at *Dead by Daylight's* relationship to video game discourse more generally; however, the video was made for *Monstrum*, raising the question of how all of this relates to horror? I do find it interesting that, out of all of the matchmaking-based games that I regularly play, it is the horror one, *Dead by Daylight,* that seems to have particularly mastered ludonarrative harmony. One of the most common experiences that I have as both a gamer and a fan of horror is that people are often surprised to learn how much I care about the plots of things that I like. When I tell people I love the *Saw* movies, for example, they often assume that it's because of the intense, graphic violence that characterizes what has since become known as the "torture porn" genre, or cycle. They tend to assume I'll love extreme movies like *The Human Centipede* (2009) or *Hostel* (2005) because they have a similar spectacle-horror aesthetic, but I have much less interest in those movies: the reason that I love *Saw* (2004) is because of the narrative. This is something that people still find strange because a lot of people have trouble conceptualizing horror as a narrative medium; the narrative is often seen as being something secondary or supplementary, or just an excuse to justify the desire to watch scenes of violence.

Video games and horror both suffer from the same stereotyping when it comes to narrative: while the stories are there, people see them as just an excuse to justify engaging in the medium when, secretly, the "true" desire is simply for something more carnal, usually violence. I want to show how narrative is important to these mediums—not simply because the narratives themselves are good, but because even the components seemingly divorced from storytelling such as gameplay are actually intricately bound with the narrative itself. I enjoy the violence in *Saw* because it's part of the point that the film's narrative is trying to make about human nature, games, and the will to survive; the two features are inextricable from each other. Because *Dead by Daylight* (like *Saw*, arguably) sits at the intersection of video games and slasher movies—two things very frequently accused of using narrative as an "excuse" to frame the parts that fans actually care about—it is particularly useful to see how all of its gameplay and

horror elements are deeply intertwined with its narrative. The narrative isn't just a secondary feature "tacked on" to the gameplay and horror; it's a core feature without which these elements would be significantly less meaningful.

The short-form focus of this issue is important to my argument. People are warming up more to the narrative potential of obviously story-based video games like *Mass Effect* (2007) or other RPGs (role-playing games). Similarly, horror films like *The Babadook* (2014) or *Midsommar* (2019) are being embraced more as meaningful narrative cinema. However, these examples are often put in a more distinctive or "elevated" category and contrasted to the seemingly less sophisticated manifestations of horror like slasher flicks or first-person shooters. By looking at how even the most seemingly non-narrative form of gaming—match-based games like esports games and party games—still have a substantial narrative function, I hope to complicate our understanding of what narrative looks like, when narrative matters, and what genres or media are narratively significant.

Countering the idea that a film or video game might only have a narrative as an "excuse" for someone to engage in more carnal pleasures, I want to show how narrative has a significant, embedded place throughout the entire experience. Even if you just watch *Saw* to see people's heads get ripped off, you inevitably end up engaging to some extent in a narrative structure that informs how and why those heads are getting ripped off, and even if you just play *Dead By Daylight* to get stabbed by Michael Meyers, you're engaging in a form of narrative storytelling in a more complex way than you may realize.

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