(The following essay is an overview of the convention panel 'How Free-2-Play Games are Changing Video Game Narratives')

I'm not exactly unbiased when it comes to free-2-play video games. Having been genuinely addicted to two games in as many years, I am acutely aware of their allure (or what seems like allure; it's actually exploitation, but that's a discussion for another time). Free-2-play games are becoming increasingly controversial because of their explosive success as they take over the gaming industry. At the same time, they're challenging our notion of what is and is not a video game. Gameplay mechanics and fun vs psychological addiction have been discussed elsewhere, so I wanted to discuss how free-2-play games are changing the stories in the games themselves. I want to focus less on the logistical differences between formats and gaming styles and instead focus on the artistic side of how free-2-play games are upending the medium.

What are Free-2-Play Games

First, let's make sure we're clear on our terminology. A free-2-play video game is an entertainment computer game that is available to be downloaded for free (usually through the iTunes App store or Google Play) on any compatible system, usually a smart phone or a tablet computer. The game itself can be downloaded onto the device without cost or any significant system requirements, though many require an internet connection to play. A key component is that most of these games are (theoretically) wholly available to play and 'beat'. What that means is that it is possible to complete all the available content in the game without any monetary investment at all.

Let's not spend too much time on the mechanics, but it's important to understand the games themselves. While there is some variance from one game to the next, most free-2-play games are open-ended (there is no definitive final boss fight, no conclusion to the story), they involve regularly-scheduled events (usually weekly), they often offer daily bonuses for logging in, and they have bonuses that can be purchased (special items, refills of energy or health, etc).

This last element is especially distinct from previous types of video games (computer games and console games) in that the purchase was self-contained (you spent a fixed dollar amount and received the entire content that was likewise a fixed amount – ie $50 for a game that offers approximately 20 hours of gameplay, not including side quests and level-

grinding). This began to change with the advent of downloadable content (DLC), which has become a staple of the modern console and computer gaming industry. While some games offer DLC for free, most charge anywhere from a few dollars to upwards of the entire cost of a new game for DLC.

Free-2-play games arrived on the scene in the late 1990s but really took off in the mid-to-late 2000s. The style of gameplay originated with children's games and casual games that were available through a given company's website or, increasingly, on the blossoming social media platforms. Connected to the gameplay was some feature that could be advanced with an in-game purchase. These types of games began to do tremendous business, with gaming tie-ins for popular toys like Neopets becoming more profitable than the toys themselves.

Free-2-play games would become very popular in some countries like South Korea and Russia where they would essentially dominate the entire market. Free-2-play games grew in popularity world-wide, with many players citing their casual gameplay and the ease of use (not requiring special, bulky hardware like a dedicated console or a gaming computer). Today, free-2-play games make up a large portion of the gaming market (with some speculations placing it as the single largest segment of modern gaming). While numbers vary radically depending on the study, there is no doubt that free-2-play games are becoming a dominant and influential force in modern gaming.

How do they differ from traditional games

We could go into greater detail on the differences between free-2-play games and traditional games, but we're focusing specifically on the story and the narrative. The key difference between free-2-play games and traditional games all boils down to this: free-2-play games lack characterization, interaction, and progression. Sometimes, they even lack definitive characters.

At first glance, one might argue that early games were no different. Were it not for the box art or the instruction manual that came with the game, most gamers might not even know the main character in the Legend of Zelda is named Link, or that their character in Castlevania is a knight named Simon Belmont. **START HERE**

Going back to the earliest modern generation of video games – primarily the 8-bit legends, the Nintendo Entertainment System and the Sega Master System – video game characters were very rudimentary. Mario has no personality identified in Super Mario Brothers, nor do the Forsaken in

Altered Beasts, nor Simon Belmont in Castlevania, etc. The characters in the original Final Fantasy, a gaming franchise lauded for its stories and characters, had no lines or personalities whatsoever. What little information there is about the character in most games of this generation is offered in ancillary material like the instructional booklet or the box art.

However, the game focused on these individual characters by making them the player's avatar within the game itself. The player controlling the game controlled this singular figure and no other aspect of the game. It was the single manner in which the character interacted with the game. As gaming would develop, more than one character would become available, but in the earliest modern generation, the focus of the game was on the gameplay mechanics of this singular character. As a result, the character's very existence and function became their characterization.

With the rise of 2nd generation consoles (the Sega Genesis and the Super Nintendo being chief among them), characters grew in complexity. Gamers were presented with dialogue, character sprites (sometimes that even contained changing expressions), and other hallmarks of character development.

One of the best examples of this might be the Nintendo game series The Legend of Zelda. In the first game, released in 1986, offered no dialogue (with the exception of a handful of shopkeepers hidden throughout the game) and little indication as to personality and even identity of the character the player controlled. Everything players understood about the character (even his name, Link) was taken from the accompanying manual.

In the second game in the series, Legend of Zelda II: the Adventure of Link, released in 1987, the game took a considerable step forward. Players encountered a multitude of people in various towns across the video game world. Most townsfolk had an entire window of dialogue that helped to build the rich world and give us some insight into the story. Their reaction to the single character helped to further inform the player as to who they were controlling.

Four years later, in 1991, the series had its third installment with Legend of Zelda III: Link to the Past. Available on the Super Nintendo, the game enjoyed many upgraded features, most notably a backstory to Link (that he lives apart from the rest of society, with his uncle). We see his uncle's death and see Link interact with numerous people, similar to Adventure of Link, but now with dialogue that changes depending on when the player interacts with the in-game characters.

Future games in the franchise would further evolve the story, the world, and the character of Link with increasing dialogue and interactions. This trend is important to note, that every generation of gaming (from the

first generation of modern games in the 8-bit era to the current generation colloquially known as the streaming era) has further and further developed the characters and the world through player interaction with the game.

Free-2-play games have bucked this trend. Free-2-play games, often to streamline gameplay, have removed much of the interaction. The Square-Enix entrant into the free-2-play gaming scene, Final Fantasy Record Keeper, is completely devoid of dialogue except in the opening sequence and occasionally at updates. There are two named characters in the game, Tyro and Doctor Mog, who largely only interact as a tutorial to explain gameplay features. No information is given on these two except that they are an apprentice and master librarian, respectively. There's no indication as to what world they inhabit, what life beyond the library is like, nothing to give us insight into the world.

Gameplay narrative in free-2-play games is often told through narration and directed at the player, rather than with the player. Iconic figures speak to the player but there is no exchange. Likewise, characteristics of the player rarely manifest in the dialogue. In games with multiple character choices, the selection seems to have little bearing on the dialogue presented.

What this means is that free-2-play games differ from traditional games by eschewing active storytelling, (where the player is the primary performer) in favor of a more passive story, where events transpire that are then conveyed to the player. In short, traditional games are experienced first-hand whereas free-2-play games narrate and share passively.

Emphasis on collection

There is a bigger change to gaming than the lack of dialogue and character interaction. Many free-2-play games are built on a collection model. This means that players gather resources that are refined into gameplay elements (armor, weapons, machines, crops, etc). Sometimes these gameplay elements are simply items, but more games are embracing a leveling system for items. It's no longer enough to gather the materials to make a really advanced tank for the battle simulator; players have to further power up the tank to high levels. Some games even have item collection to facilitate gameplay, with collecting certain gems or towns or whatnot increasing one's reservoir of stamina (or whatever metric) that allows the player to perform more actions before having to set aside the game (or pay a small amount to keep playing).

Many games have a collection component. Throughout the game, you must gather superior weapons and armor, spells and items. This is not

unique to Free-2-play games, but these games have embraced it to such an extent as to bypass emphasizing it as a gameplay component and turned it into a revenue stream by charging for these gameplay elements. Free-2-play games emphasize collection in one form or another (depending on the game and game mechanic) to the point that the primary function of gameplay is acquisition and collection.

Emphasis away from a central character and more about the group gathered together

What the lack of dialogue & interaction and the emphasis on collection means for gameplay is that the hero is de-emphasized, if not phased out entirely. Without interaction, there is no characterization. There is no figurehead to focus your narrative and gameplay upon. The game ceases to be a story about a specific protagonist and becomes instead a story about a collection of characters, many of whom are often interchangeable. Some games will have a focal character to narrate events, but this character is just that: a narrator with no involvable story arc or development. Additionally, with the emphasis on collecting, the characters also become less important than the gear/spells/equipment that they command. It's the powers that matter, not the people. Characters become simply one more resource to manage.

Both of these elements - lack of principle characters and emphasis on collection – serve to shift the emphasis of the story away from the character(s) and to the environment itself. The story becomes about the city that is being defended, or the environment where the daily dungeon is being fought (thus defining the powers necessary). The game isn't a story about a hero but about a place. The heroism of the one is supplanted by the nationalism of the group.

What are the implications of emphasizing the place over the person? What does it matter that the story is more about the setting than the personality of the player's avatar within the game?

The short answer is…we don't know. Narratives like this haven't really been done before in fiction. The closest parallels we have are multi-character epics like the Lord of the Rings, where the story of the War of Middle Earth is told through more than just one character. In television, you've had series that were more about groups (Star Trek and Bananza immediately come to mind). There are even stories of groups with rotating, evolving casts (Transformers and ER are just two examples).

Yet in all of those instances, the story was told through the eyes and actions of individuals. The single person's deeds shaped events that would

unfold. While the narrative may have jumped from one focal point to the next, the new or current focal point was still followed as the central character. Free-2-play games are moving away from that sort of depiction and instead turning any character presented into narrators of a sort, while the gameplay focuses on the actions of groups defined by attributes and not personality. As stated before, they aren't individuals but another resource to manage.

Regular Events Have Little Meaning

Most free-2-play games have special events (scheduled daily, weekly, or monthly) that lack any sort of logical progression. Last week, the blue nation was attacking. This week, the red nation is attacking. These events occur without any precursor or foreknowledge and end summarily with little explanation (as the event simply ends with the conclusion of its limited availability for access). Gameplay wise, this keeps things fresh by offering new challenges. Narratively, this is frustrating because it means that a storytelling component is never solved.

If a nation invades and the heroes must repel the invasion, a resolution must be reached in order for the story to climax to satisfaction. Goblins invade, the hero fights them off, and then…what? Does the city build a giant wall against future invasion? Does the city send emissaries to negotiate peace, or at least a non-aggression pact? Are the goblins wiped out, or at least removed from future assaults? Within the confines of free-2-play games, none of these things happen. The attack ends within the selected timeframe and a new event occurs. The lack of narrative movement results in the game being 'frozen in time'. Events transpire but don't move the story towards any sort of conclusion. This reduces the events to isolated and often non-sequitous matters, nothing that contributes to a larger story. In other words, they're random events that carry no significance.

Conclusion

All of this adds up to free-2-play games fundamentally lack a story. They are devoid of central characters, and instead have narrators. They are devoid of consequences of actions and progressions of events, and instead of have random occurrences without context. They emphasize collection and resource management over progression of story or evolution of character.

In and of itself, this is not a big deal. Plenty of video games lack a story, sports games and simulators chief among them. Heck, Street Fighter II (one of the most famous and successful video games of all time) really

has no story at all within the game. A narrative is not a fundamental component to a video game.

What makes this a big deal is that free-2-play games are taking over. Free-2-play games are the fastest growing style of games and the mainstream gaming community is taking notice. Microtransactions, a mainstay in modern gaming, is a direct response to the success of the free-2-play model. Some gaming analysts even speculate that the free-2-play model may become the standard for the industry in the next decade.

That as well, in and of itself, is not a big deal. Gaming is technology-driven and needs to adapt. Yet when you combine these two elements - free-2-play games may become the go-to model for the industry, and free-2-play games overwhelming lack of story - the result is that a lack of story may become the go-to model for the industry.

Much of the video game medium may lose their storytelling features and instead turn into simulators and resource-managers with narrators. This renders them less a game and more a job with a cult-of-personality attached.

The future of games and their stories may be that Hyrule is more important than Link or Zelda, that Castlevania is more important than the Belmonts or Dracula, that the individual matters less than the group.

Before this is dismissed as apocalyptic rambling, consider the rise, dominance, and staying power of reality television. When shows like COPS and then Survivor first appeared, most critics and even general audiences dismissed them as voyeuristic fascination and a passing fad. Today, whole networks like History, Animal Planet, and E!, devote the majority of their broadcast hours to nothing but reality TV. While it is an extreme possibility, it is none the less a possibility that narrative-absent games (or at least narrative-light) may become the mainstay due to the overwhelming success of the free-2-play model.

The implications of this for the industry are, potentially, quite far-reaching.