

# GAMEPLAY-AS-NARRATION: A narratological account of video games by way of *Tokimeki* *Memorial 2*.

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# 1 Introduction

In the field of Game Studies there is a well-known and famous debate between the “narratologists” and “ludologists”. However as Espen Aarseth wisely notes, “narratology” for scholars of Game Studies does not mean “narratology” in the traditional sense as applied to literature and literary media: “Tragically, in the field of game studies the term ‘narratology’ has changed meaning and does not refer to the academic discipline of narrative theory, but to a more or less mythical position taken by an imagined group of people who are seen to believe that games are stories.”.<sup>1</sup> What I am interested in this paper is not the question of whether “games are stories” but rather to explore if the tools of “narratology” in the traditional sense are expressive enough as they have been formulated in the context of non-interactive media to characterize and analyze interactive media—video games—as is.

This is perhaps a controversial position to take. In writing that “[t]he inability of literary narratology to account for the experience of games does not mean that we should throw away the concept of narrative in ludology”,<sup>2</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan presupposes that the tools of literary narratology are not expressive enough to give a proper account of narrative in games. I aim to show in this paper a rejection of that premise, and aim to show that one can indeed apply the tools of literary narratology without needing to ‘bend the rules’ all that much, let alone the need to postulate new theory. While there have been previous attempts to analyze video games through a narratological lens, all that I have encountered fall into the trap of treating games as unique objects against other media. For example, Aarseth (2012) provides an analysis rooted in narratological theory, but still tries to integrate ‘ludology’ as a separate axiom,<sup>3</sup> creating yet another new games-specific 4-dimensional framework that is not reflexive against non-interactive media.

To explore the feasibility of such analysis, I will attempt to apply these narratological tools to *Tokimeki Memorial 2*, a Japanese DATING SIMULATOR. In doing so I hope to show that by simply using existing frameworks of narrative and literature, one can still arrive at meaningful analyses of interactive media just as one can with non-interactive media. Broadly speaking, I wish to demonstrate the idea that *games are not special*: under existing

1. Espen Aarseth, “A Narrative Theory of Games,” in *Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*, FDG ’12 (Raleigh, North Carolina: Association for Computing Machinery, 2012), 1, ISBN: 9781450313339, doi:10.1145/2282338.2282365, <https://doi.org/10.1145/2282338.2282365>.

2. Marie-Laure Ryan, “Beyond Myth and Metaphor,” *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (July 2001), <http://gamestudies.org/0101/ryan/>.

3. Aarseth, “A Narrative Theory of Games,” 132.

narratological frameworks, even ‘static’ texts have some notion of ‘interactivity’ built in to the process of meaning-making being the interaction between the reader and text. However, by no means is this essay a broad, generalizing overview, and is merely *one step* in the overarching conversation. Rather than “narratology” as taken in game studies, I mean here the theoretical frameworks of structural narratology as formulated by scholars the likes of, but not limited to Seymour Chatman, Gerard Genette, Wolfgang Iser, and Roland Barthes, which I will assume some familiarity of; to aid the reader I will refer to Gerald Prince’s *Dictionary of Narratology* when introducing jargon. As well I will take a look at applications of narrative theory to video games by other authors such as Gerald Farca and apply such analyses to *Tokimeki Memorial 2*.

This paper will focus mainly on GAMES-WITH-PLOT; or rather GAMES-WITH-SJUŽET (in the Juulian sense, a ‘progressive’ game<sup>4</sup>). However this is not because of a lack of utility but rather a lack of academic interest on my part. While I am of the position that games like *Pong* or *Tetris* are always mediated by a NARRATOR<sup>5</sup> that narrates some narrative (for example, in *Pong* this is a narrative of tennis), without tangible SJUŽET<sup>6</sup> it is difficult to talk of issues of CHRONOTOPE,<sup>7</sup> IMPLIED READER<sup>8</sup> (player), and narrative frames. To be clear here, I argue (but will not elaborate in this essay) that these functional roles are *always present*, but they are present in the same manner as they would be present in a formal proof or quantitative study: without much plot to discuss it is difficult to derive interesting observations on plot and its role in meaning-making. While I will show how the tools of literary narratology are applicable to GAMES-WITHOUT-SJUŽET at a surface level, I will mainly put aside the question of “are all games narrative” for now and begin with an analysis on a game that is uncontroversially narratively driven: *Tokimeki Memorial 2*.

## 2 Welcome to Hibiki High—What is *Tokimeki Memorial 2*?

*Tokimeki Memorial 2* is the second title in a series of relatively unknown and mostly untranslated dating simulators released exclusively in Japan. For this reason, I feel it necessary to give both a brief overview of the game, as well as my reasons for choosing *Tokimeki Memorial 2* (and indeed the focus on dating simulators in general), as the object of study in

4. Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (MIT Press, 2005), 12.

5. Gerald Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology* (1987; University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 67.

6. *Ibid.*, 89.

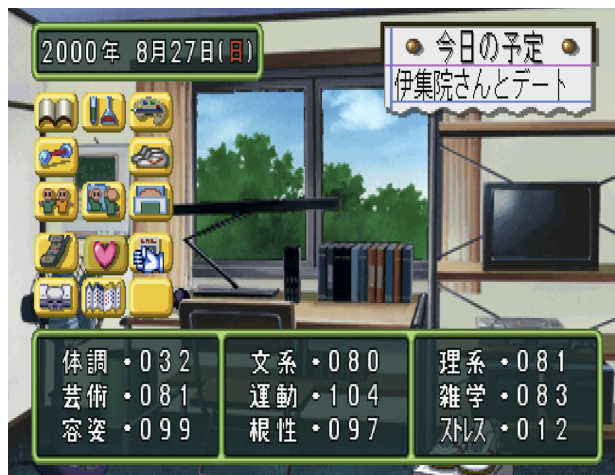
7. *Ibid.*, 13.

8. *Ibid.*, 43.

this essay.

*Tokimeki Memorial 2*<sup>9</sup> (abbreviated *Tokimemo 2*), was published by Konami for the PlayStation in 1999 as the sequel to the original *Tokimeki Memorial*.<sup>10</sup> While highly popular in Japan,<sup>11</sup> the *Tokimeki Memorial* series was never brought over to the North American audience and to date remains relatively unknown in the Western market save for a small but dedicated internet following. While not the very first dating simulator, the original *Tokimeki Memorial* is widely considered to be the game that popularized the genre in Japan<sup>12</sup>—leading eventually to the popularity of dating simulators like *Doki-doki Literature Club*, and more widely seen, the popularity of dating simulation game mechanics seen in games like *Persona 5*, *Fire Emblem: Awakening*, and *Dragon Age*.

In terms of story, setting, and gameplay, *Tokimeki Memorial 2* plays out mostly like its predecessor.



The protagonist is a male, presumably Japanese highschool student that, over the course of three years in highschool, aims to build relationships with the girls he goes to school with, in hopes of being confessed to at the end of the three year period by one of the girls. The game plays out on a weekly schedule, where the player can decide on one of 8 possible daily activities that can raise or decrease certain stats per day<sup>13</sup> (WEEKLY-DECISION). The activity the player chooses will be done on a daily basis

for the entire week. On weekends, the player may opt to call one of the girls they have met before, or go on a DATE previously arranged with a girl via phone-call. On dates and occasional weekly and special events, the player is sometimes offered a choice to pick between one of two or three possible dialogue options when conversing with another character (DIALOGUE-SELECTION-EVENT). The choice of dialogue option affects the addressee's

9. Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo, *Tokimeki Memorial 2* (Konami, 1999).

10. *Tokimeki Memorial 2* (The Visual Novel Database), <https://vndb.org/v5390>.

11. Tim Rogers, *ACTION BUTTON REVIEWS Tokimeki Memorial* (Action Button, 2021), "Introduction", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xb-DtICmPTY>.

12. Ibid., "'The First Dating Simulator?' (No, actually)".

13. In row-first order, left-to-right, top-to-bottom on the figure beside: Health, Humanities, Sciences, Arts, Athletics, General Knowledge, Appearance, Willpower, Stress.

opinion of the protagonist in either a positive or negative way; the rest of the dialogue is otherwise outside of the player's influence, including the protagonist's. By raising (or failing to raise) a character's opinion of the protagonist via these two gameplay actions, the character may confess to the protagonist at the end of the game's 156 week runtime. Complex interpersonal relationships between characters are also simulated and have an effect on the relationships between the protagonist and other characters: for example if a character's opinion of the protagonist falls too low, that character's best friend will also have a low opinion of the protagonist. If it falls extremely low, rumours will begin to spread and affect the opinions of *all characters* that the player has met. In essence, *Tokimeki Memorial 2* is a game about *discourse*: the narrative told here is that of the protagonist and his three years in highschool.

### 3 GAMEPLAY-AS-NARRATION in *Tokimeki Memorial 2*.

In the structuralist account of narrative, Gerald Prince defines the NARRATOR as "the one who narrates, as inscribed in the text. There is at least one narrator per narrative, located at the same DIEGETIC LEVEL as the NARRATEE he or she is addressing"; crucially for our analysis, "in a given narrative, they may of course, be several different narrators, each addressing in turn a different narratee of the same one".<sup>14</sup> Therefore, to begin our analysis of *Tokimeki Memorial 2*, we must tease apart the separate narrative layers present throughout the game, and attempt to locate the narrator(s) and narratee(s) inscribed within.

#### 3.1 Internal monologue as narration in *Tokimeki Memorial 2*.

Let us first examine the dialogue sections of gameplay. At the lowest diegetic level, much of the in *Tokimeki Memorial* is delivered as INTERIOR MONOLOGUE.<sup>15</sup> One such example is the protagonist's self-reflection after a DIALOGUE-SELECTION-EVENT, where he will give his thoughts on how good of an impression the selected dialogue line delivered on the addressee (usually a girl during a DATE), after the addressee responds to the player's choice of line. The protagonist's self-reflections range from "Perfect! I made a great impression!" to "I think I made a bad impression",<sup>16</sup> depending on how appropriate the line was for the

14. Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology*, 66.

15. Ibid., 45.

16. Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo, *Tokimeki Memorial 2*.

situation at hand<sup>17</sup>. If at any point there is more than one DATE scheduled, the protagonist will sometimes forget where to meet with the girl scheduled for that time, and prompt the player to remind them—diegetically this is framed as the protagonist digging through his own memory as to where they had planned the date. Given this internal monologue, there is clear evidence for at least one narrative level with an instance of an I-NARRATOR<sup>18</sup>—“I” being the protagonist (not the player).

This self-reflective AUTODIEGETIC NARRATION<sup>19</sup> seems to imply that the narrative in *Tokimeki Memorial 2* is HOMODIEGETIC<sup>20</sup>—that the narrator being the protagonist exists within the story. It is easy to characterize *Tokimeki Memorial 2* as a diary-type story where all addressee address the protagonist who immediately narrates the events to himself as narrator, experiencer, and narratee, in this internal monologue. Crucially, such narration is necessarily SIMULTANEOUS,<sup>21</sup> a consequence that will become more apparent in its importance throughout this essay. For now, I wish to discuss the major complication in this analysis: that of the structural position of the PLAYER-NARRATEE.

### 3.2 The PLAYER-NARRATEE.

While it is true that the protagonist-narrator never addresses the player directly, we must confront the fact that *the player is indeed addressed by some narrator*. This instance of narration occurs during a dialogue-selection-event. While such dialogue choices are framed diegetically as the choice of the protagonist-narrator (and thus, the protagonist-narrator believes that it is *indeed his choice*; furthermore the protagonist is *never aware of the player throughout the game*), there is indeed a choice to be made, presented to the player by the game, and the player must choose it to progress with the narrative. Given that we have here a choice presented to the player by the game, I propose here the formalism of the PLAYER-NARRATEE being the addressee of the GAME<sup>22</sup>. Here, by GAME, I mean the totality of all on-screen ludic elements including user interface elements, the gameplay loop, game

17. All translations mine unless noted otherwise.

18. “‘I’ as protagonist”, Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology*, 41.

19. Ibid., 9.

20. Ibid., 40.

21. Ibid., 89.

22. By proposing this formalism, my intention is not to fall into the trap of creating game-specific theory. I stress that the player-narratee has no special properties exclusive to video games. In literature, the function of the player (reader)-narratee can be subsumed under the function of the narratee in the outermost narrative level; a more general term could be PARTICIPANT-NARRATEE. In the remainder of this section, I justify the existence of this structure and attempt to formulate it with regards to choice in video games, without assuming gameplay (ludus) as a structural axiom.

mechanics, etc. Consequently, this implies that the game is simply an instance of a narrator, which I will henceforth call GAME-NARRATOR. Thus the NARRATING INSTANCE<sup>23</sup> on which the player-narratee and the game-narrator interact forms GAMEPLAY-AS-NARRATION.

Before we explore the consequences of gameplay-as-narration, I wish to clarify the some of the consequences of 'interactivity' under my model, which we will explore in more detail in section 4. Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) provides two dichotomies of interactivity, the INTERNAL-EXTERNAL axis, and the EXPLORATORY-ONTOLOGICAL axis.<sup>24</sup> Under Ryan's dichotomies, the internal player is situated within the diegesis of the game narrative, and the external player is situated outside; similarly the exploratory player can have no consequence on the plot, whereas the ontological player has "the demiurgic power to co-create the virtual world".<sup>25</sup> Under gameplay-as-narration, there is *always* a separation between the player-narratee and the diegetic protagonist; furthermore, with the exception of fourth-wall breaking scenarios, the diegetic protagonist is *never aware* of the player-narratee, just as in non-interactive media. Thus, unlike Ryan's model, no matter how much they insist on self-insertion, there is never a situation where the player is themselves within the virtual world of the game, since all ludic aspects are mediated through the game-narrator<sup>26</sup>. By utilising existing theory it is simple to characterize these effects: in the case of *Tokimeki Memorial 2*, the narrative of the protagonist's internal monologue (between protagonist-narrator and protagonist-narratee) is an EMBEDDED NARRATIVE<sup>27</sup> within the FRAME NARRATIVE<sup>28</sup> on which the player-narratee and game-narrator interact.

Returning to *Tokimeki Memorial 2*, under gameplay-as-narrative, it is important to make the distinction that during dialogue sections such as DATES, it is the game-narrator that narrates the events of the date to the player-narratee; likewise it is the game-narrator that asks the player-narratee 'What dialogue choice should the protagonist make?' In terms of speech-act theory, the LOCUTIONARY ACT<sup>29</sup> of presenting dialogue choices has the intent of

23. Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology*, 57.

24. Ryan, "Beyond Myth and Metaphor."

25. Ibid.

26. Perhaps controversially, this also implies that the notion of a 'player-protagonist' or 'player-character' is nonsense in most games, as there is no way for the player to exist in the embedded plot. The sole exception to this is a fourth-wall break wherein the narrator of the embedded narrative (not necessarily a protagonist-narratee, see *The Stanley Parable*) directly addresses the player as they exist outside of diegesis, thus *bringing the player inside the inner diegesis as a character*. Such instances are, while not unheard of, very rare in videogames as such an narrative act would ironically break any sense of immersion the player may have.

27. Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology*, 25.

28. Ibid., 33.

29. Ibid., 49.

the ILLOCUTIONARY ACT<sup>30</sup> of asking the player-narratee ‘What dialogue choice should the protagonist make?’, which realizes the PERLOCUTIONARY ACT<sup>31</sup> of having the protagonist *decide* on that choice. Hence the protagonist-narrator does not directly narrate to the player-narratee, but rather the game-narrator serves as an interface between the frame narrative of gameplay, and the embedded narrative of the diegetic virtual world (where the protagonist, his classmates, Hibiki High School, etc. resides within). Put differently, the game-narrator is OMNISCIENT<sup>32</sup> with respect to the embedded narrative—he knows all about the protagonist-narratee while not directly existing within the diegesis of the embedded narrative; indeed the fact that the game-narrator is extradiegetic is an important consequence of framing the narrative of the protagonist as embedded within the frame of the game. This is how the player-narratee can be narrated to about the events of the game world. To be clear here, it is not that the game-narrator knows everything about the (character-) protagonist, but that the game-narrator knows everything that the protagonist-narrator tells the protagonist-narratee; it is *not necessary* for the protagonist-narrator to narrate the entirety of the diegetic game world. In such cases, the game-narrator *can not* re-narrate what is not narrated to the protagonist-narratee.

### 3.3 Simultaneous plot progression and hidden narration.

We have so far discussed the implications of gameplay<sup>33</sup> in the dialogic sections of the game, but we have yet to examine the three other types of gameplay in *Tokimeki Memorial 2*. In addition to dialogic sections, there is the main gameplay of deciding the protagonist’s actions that week, occasional JRPG parody sections that occur during dates, and the childhood system. While we will not examine the childhood system in much detail, let us first take a look at the main gameplay loop of *Tokimeki Memorial 2*.

The main other half of gameplay in *Tokimeki Memorial 2* is to choose the stat-boosting activity that the player will do for the week (alternatively the player may choose to phone someone in their phone book, triggering dialogue, which we have discussed previously in the prior section)—the ACTIVITY-SELECTION-EVENT. Upon doing so, a short little animation will play showing the progress of the protagonist in doing that action. In the

30. Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology*, 41.

31. *Ibid.*, 71.

32. *Ibid.*, 69.

33. Remember that we have redefined ‘gameplay’ as ‘gameplay-as-narration’, and henceforth I mean ‘gameplay-as-narration’ when I say ‘gameplay’. In a later section I discuss how ludus (interactivity) fits within this theoretic structure.



figure to the right, the protagonist is exercising, potentially boosting his 'Athleticism' stat. Occasionally, a girl who has a high opinion of the protagonist may appear in these segments. Let us break down the layers of narrative in such a gameplay segment under gameplay-as-narration.

There are at least two levels of narration occurring simultaneously in such a segment on both the 'protagonist level' (the embedded narrative) and the 'player level' (the frame narrative of gameplay). First, let us reiterate the notion of 'choice' discussed earlier. The menu user interface (as can be seen in section 2.1) performs a similar speech act on the narrative level of gameplay—in this case, the locutionary act are the actions available in the user interface, the illocutionary act is to ask the player narratee 'What action should the protagonist do for the week', and the perlocutionary act realized is the decision of the protagonist (in his own diegesis) to do such an action<sup>34</sup>



At the embedded level, the narration simply involves how the protagonist is improving at the chosen skill (in this case, athletics). However this narration is unlike that of the dialogic segments, 'less explicit' in that the player is not privy to the protagonist's thoughts and experiences directly. Rather, it is mediated by the user interface—the game—which forms narration at the frame level that *is* accessible to the player-narratee (and thus eventually the real player). However, the athletic (or other skills) improvement of the protagonist indeed has effects on the embedded plot; for example, certain girls require that athleticism be raised sufficiently to meet, or that the protagonist must be sufficiently well groomed (sufficiently high appearance stat) in order to attend the end of year Christmas party, which is improved by having the protagonist groom themselves for the week.

This realizes the effect of plot-progression in the embedded level with hidden narration. To clarify, the narration on the embedded level during these segments are not available to player (and indeed is *never available, even during the dialogic section*), because the embedded narrative is *always retold by the game-narrator*. The game-narrator of this narrating instance

34. While the user interface in *Tokimeki Memorial 2* is overt, this need not be the case. Indeed every input loop can be characterized as a speech act by the game-narrator; for example in *Super Mario Bros.*, the locutionary act of polling for input performs the illocutionary act of asking 'Where should Mario go?', which realizes the perlocutionary act of Mario's movement when answered.

decides indeed to *not* simply reiterate events as given, but rather to SUMMARIZE<sup>35</sup> the story to the player-narratee through this animation.

At the same time as the protagonist improves diegetically, plot occurs simulatenously on the frame level through the stat numbers being visibly going up on the user-interface. That is to say, all games have at least one narrative frame between player-narratee and game-narrator, including GAMES-WITHOUT-SJUŽET. In games-with-sjužet, the plot (what players colloquially call 'storyline') is an effect of the embedded narrative, and in games without, such as *Pong*, there exists only the frame narrative under gameplay-as-narration. In other words, gameplay, i.e. the 'formal rules' as Jesper Juul<sup>36</sup> takes to be the game itself, can not be taken in isolation; the frame narrative of games *necessarily includes its visual representation*. Furthermore, perhaps radically, *plot can occur on the level of gameplay*, by the reconfiguration of gameplay elements, even in games-without-sjužet. To take one example, in the 2018 game *Tetris Effect*,<sup>37</sup> the stage will change apperance in accordance with the number of lines cleared—this reconfiguration of appearance *is plot*, narrated by the game-narrator, and likewise is the score number on the side increasing as the player clears more lines. In *Tokimeki Memorial 2*, this PLOT-IN-GAMEPLAY occurs in the form the protagonist's stats increasing as he trains, which is *an extradiegetic representation of a diegesis*—the stat numbers exist only within the framing of gameplay, and *not within* the diegesis of the protagonist himself.

### 3.4 The unreliability of the game-narrator.

It is also important to note that the game-narrator can be UNRELIABLE.<sup>38</sup> In *Tokimeki Memorial 2*, this can be seen in the JRPG parody sequences that occasionally occur during a date sequence (RPG-BATTLE-EVENT). *Tokimeki Memorial 2* is rooted in a realistic diegesis, and the diegetic virtual world in which the player resides in is not a world of myth and magic; nor is the protagonist a trained martial artist. Under gameplay-as-narration, how can we reconcile this gameplay segment with the overall diegesis?

There are two possible formulations that can be argued for here: either the protagonist-narrator is being unreliable, or the game-narrator is being unreliable. In the latter case, one would argue that the protagonist-narrator is unreliable and thus narrates a recollection of his encounter with the local hooligans as being an epic battle akin to the role-

35. Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology*, 95.

36. Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, 13.

37. Resonair, *Tetris Effect*, dir. Tetsuya Mizuguchi (Enhance / Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2016).

38. Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology*, 103.

playing games he so enjoys playing—there is evidence for this in the PlayStation that can be seen in his room during ACTIVITY-SELECTION-EVENTS. However this interpretation would be inconsistent with the idea that the protagonist-narrator is unaware of the game-narrator and thus narrates to himself. Thus, such an interpretation would require that the protagonist is lying to himself—put simply this implies that the protagonist is clinically insane and *truly sees himself in the position of a character in a role-playing game*<sup>39</sup>.

The latter analysis is much more easier to explain given our current framework. Crucially, this *Final Fantasy VII*-like battle is a construction of the game-narrator reinterpreting the protagonist-narration in a way that is entertaining for the player-narratee. While diegetically the protagonist was indeed involved in some altercation, the player is not able to access that level of narration (i.e. what actually happened),



but instead is only able to view it in terms of how the events are portrayed by the game-narrator. In other words, the game-narrator embellishes for the purposes of entertainment, similar to how the game-narrator summarizes during ACTIVITY-SELECTION-EVENTS.

This formulation of RPG-BATTLE-EVENTS as occurring purely on the frame (gameplay) level is consistent with the diegetic plot. There is no diegetic consequence for HP or MP points, nor are there ever any representations of magic or martial arts skills in the diegetic story: they are simply never mentioned during the dialogic segments, which is the player's only (mostly) transparent view into the diegesis of the embedded narrative. After the player defeats the hooligans, messages show indicating earned EXP and items, but such items or EXP are *purely gameplay elements*, and are never mentioned nor are they relevant to the plot. Indeed, the protagonist is simply unaware of any earned EXP or item drops in the same way they are unaware of his stat numbers owing to the separation of narrative levels.

39. Note that this is not necessarily the case for a game that does involve myth and magic in its diegesis—the battles in *Final Fantasy VII* do indeed occur diegetically, and thus a similar battle segment could easily be argued to occur within the embedded level as formulated here.

### 3.5 Gameplay segments as narrating instances.

We have seen now three different 'types' or segments of gameplay; while not all games segment their gameplay in this way, it is a rather common occurrence, albeit not often to the same level as *Tokimeki Memorial 2* in its radical genre shifts. For example, the separation of the 'overworld' from individual cities is one such segmentation, as are quick time events or cutscenes.

Among scholars of Game studies, there have been various attempts at characterizing this segmentation of gameplay types. Aarseth writes that "games" are an inherently multimediac and disjoint form:

As pointed out above, it must be noted that "games" are not simply games, but complex software programs that can emulate any medium, including film, text/novel, graphic novel, and, for that matter, simulate board games and sports. We often commit the mistake of using the metonymic term "games" for software that in reality are integrated crossmedia packages, such as *Max Payne* (2001) which contains graphic novel pages and movie-like cutscenes (short animated movie clips that interrupt the gameplay), as well as ludic components. Is *Max Payne* a story or a game? Is it a hybrid? An amalgam? Whatever the answer, it seems clear that it is not purely a game, but a piece of software that does contain, among other things, a game.<sup>40</sup>

Gerald Farca proposes a fourfold account of *plot elements*, *cutscenes*, *quick-time events*, and *static images* as elements of discourse in games within a serial account of plot.<sup>41</sup> While such accounts indeed have value in Game studies, they presuppose the requirement for a narrative medium to be 'flat' with respect to its plot, for lack of another word. Indeed Aarseth spends the rest of his article building up a model that axiomizes gamic interactivity in his 'ludic pole', vis-à-vis the 'narrative pole'.<sup>42</sup>

With gameplay-as-narration, a clear account of the varying gameplay segments arises in the form of positing different NARRATING INSTANCES<sup>43</sup> for each segment of gameplay on the level of the gamic frame narrative. Each set of mechanical shifts indicates a shift in the narrating style on the frame level, thus demonstrating a new narrating instance—in literary analogy, consider a passage where writing style, or even language, shifts multiple times

40. Aarseth, "A Narrative Theory of Games," 130.

41. Gerald Farca, "Towards the Implied Player" (October 2020), 237, ISBN: ISBN 978-3-8376-4597-2.

42. Aarseth, "A Narrative Theory of Games," 131.

43. Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology*, 57.

within while narrating the same events. Just as natural language is one vehicle of discourse, so too are gameplay mechanics and user interfaces, and can be treated as such. Thus in *Tokimeki Memorial 2*, there are at minimum 4 different narrating instances (ACTIVITY-SELECTION, dialogic sections, RPG-BATTLE, and a yet to be examined 'childhood system') at the frame narrative level of (extra-) diegesis, which are moved between disjointly during a playthrough. Importantly, I have said nothing about the interior structure of the embedded narrative; this allows us to detach shifts in gameplay from shifts in *sjuzet*<sup>44</sup>. In the case of *Tokimeki Memorial 2*, I am of the opinion that the embedded narrative is one continuous narrating instance between protagonist-narrator and protagonist-narratee, but this is not necessarily the case—in a game such as *The Last of Us: Part II*, the switch in protagonist between Ellie and Abby<sup>45</sup> constitutes a change in embedded instance whereas the frame instance remains the same as the gameplay itself has not changed. Crucially it is also important to distinguish between plot-in-gameplay and a shift in narrating instance of the frame narrative: plot-in-gameplay is continuous whereas an instance shift is a discontinuous shift in a set of mechanics. For example, unlocking new abilities that enable new game mechanics is plot-in-gameplay, whereas minigames are often a shift in narrating instance.

## 4 Interactivity and gameplay-as-narration.

In the previous section we formulated a notion of games as narrative by postulating that the gameplay itself is a form of narration and it is the game that does the narration as an instance of the game-narrator. Importantly, this account does not postulate new theory that presupposes games as different vis-à-vis non-interactive media but rather uses existing literary narratology in an attempt to show that, indeed, existing tools are expressive enough to account for games as a medium.

The elephant in the room is of course, the notion of *interactivity*. We have addressed the text-to-reader relationship as present in literature as it is in games by postulating the notion of a game-narrator and that gameplay mechanics are speech acts that realize perlocutionary effects within the embedded narrative. Here, it is the nature of such perlocutionary effects that I endeavour to give an account for with non-novel theory—put frankly, *how does, and*

44. To clarify, while *sjuzet* can also refer to plot-in-gameplay, I use it exclusively in this paper to refer to plot in the embedded narrative of games-with-*sjuzet*.

45. Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us Part II*, dir. Neil Druckmann, Anthony Newman, and Kurt Margenau (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2020).

*what happens when the player is able to affect sjužet?*

## 4.1 The Reification of Virtual Plot.

To begin answering the question, I extend on Gerald Farca's approach of an IMPLIED PLAYER<sup>46</sup> and Bakhsheshi and Ghahreman's application of Iserian reader-response theory and Barthesian theories of readerly/writerly text to video games.<sup>47</sup> Quoting Iser, Farca writes:

"As readers, we exercise a power over narrative texts that is arguably as great as their power over us. After all, without our willing collaboration, the narrative does not come to life."

[...]

The phenomenology of reading is based on the reader's interaction with the text, yet for this process to occur, the literary work itself cannot be a closed and finished object. Instead, the solution Iser proposes is to situate the literary work in between the opposites of author and reader and to view it as basically "virtual [in the sense of indeterminate] in character, as it cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or the subjectivity of the reader, and it is from this virtuality that it derives its dynamism." Now, if the text's work world remains dynamically incomplete awaiting the reader to fill in its particulars, it follows that the literary text may only come alive through the process of actualisation and the interaction between reader and text.<sup>48</sup>

To put this in the context of video games, Bakhsheshi and Ghahreman succinctly note that

Iser in his theory of reception stated that any literary text (a game narration is a literary text narrated through a new media rather than print) is a product of the writer's intentional acts, and it partly controls the reader's response, however, it includes a great deal of gaps, blanks or indeterminate elements. In order to understand the story, the reader must take an active participation, and try to fill in those gaps.<sup>49</sup>

46. Farca, "Towards the Implied Player."

47. Farkhondeh Fazel Bakhsheshi and Omid Ghahreman, "The Importance of Form in Game Narration," in *2018 2nd National and 1st International Digital Games Research Conference: Trends, Technologies, and Applications (DGRC)* (IEEE, 2018), 149–155.

48. Farca, "Towards the Implied Player," 201.

49. Bakhsheshi and Ghahreman, "The Importance of Form in Game Narration," 150-151.

In other words, the act of meaning-making in *any text* is done through the interaction between the text and the reader. All texts include indeterminate elements which become 'filled in' as they are read by the reader—the 'filling in' of which is an instance of *active* participation. In games, the presence of the game-narrator allows the author (developers) of the text to not only *prompt* such participation, but also to *reify* the 'filled-in' gaps in terms of sjužet-affective perlocutionary effects. In other words, the virtualities of plot are reified into the text itself when it comes to games. Importantly, while such reification occurs on the level of embedded sjužet, it simultaneous occurs within the mind of the biological player as well in the same sense in which occurs when reading traditional literature. The ability of the game-narrator to realize such perlocutionary effects are the only medium-specific stipulation that is required under this framework. In non-interactive media the narrator can address the narratee but can not respond; in games, the only difference is that the game-narrator can respond to the responses given by the reader (player).

The idea of a narrator responding to the narratee is not without precedence. One can for example posit a magic talking book that changes its story depending on how a character reacts: this would be a responsive narrator albeit within diegesis. Arguably, choose-your-own-adventure books can also be accounted for by a responsive narrator. The stipulative argument here is that the game-narrator is able to respond to the biological player, through the player-narratee: what was previously a one-way form of communication now becomes a two-way form; but such effects can also be found in forms of media such as drama, oral storytelling, etc., where the (literal) narrator changes the story in response to audience behaviour. Regardless of the controversiality of this approach, such an assumption is a much smaller one to make than entire game-specific frameworks such as the ones presented by Aarseth (2012)<sup>50</sup> or Ryan (2001).<sup>51</sup>

Let us reexamine the effects of a DIALOGUE-SELECTION-EVENT as first explored in (3.2). Farca writes that "reading is a selective process in which the reader has to make decisions as to which possibilities are to be imaginatively actualised [...] In video games, the selective process is extended to the player's ergodic involvement in the game";<sup>52</sup> we have thus previously established that the player's ergodic involvement is prompted by the speech-acts of the game-narrator. Indeed, a game that takes no input is hardly a game at all; much like how a deafblind storyteller in a remote village would be unable to tell if the story he orates should be embellished a bit more to hold the attention of the audience.

50. Aarseth, "A Narrative Theory of Games."

51. Ryan, "Beyond Myth and Metaphor."

52. Farca, "Towards the Implied Player," 207.

During a DIALOGUE-SELECTION-EVENT, the implied player would have in mind the girl they wish to receive a confession from at the end of the game, and thus will choose the dialogue choice presented to them in accordance with that goal in mind. For such a player, the meaning-making process involves attachment with at least one of the thirteen girls available in the game to date, and is reified by the decision to select one dialogue choice over the other. Likewise in a ACTIVITY-SELECTION-EVENT, the player would decide to train a skill in accordance with those same goals; goals that could change throughout a single playthrough. Of course, the preference for one girl over another is a result of the real-world experiences of the biological player as they learn more about the characters in the game. This is what Farca calls a “constant renegotiation of meaning, incorporating newly found perspectives (and those she has helped create) into the horizon of past ones and aligning this experience with her real world knowledge”.<sup>53</sup> In essence, mind of the player is reified into the text through this interaction with the game-narrator.

Of course, the biological player is not able to do whatever they want within the game; a deep hatred of a girl would not permit the player to decide for the protagonist to commit murder or (less violently) move out of town. This reiterates the notion that text provides structure for interpretation—the “blanks” or “gaps” in Farca’s Iserian analysis.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Farca writes that “the implied reader or player, therefore, is by no means to be confounded with any empirical being but rather resembles a structure that outlines the player’s participation in a work world”<sup>55</sup>—just as the interpretation of a literary text is constrained by the text itself, so too is the interpretation of a game text. Furthermore, the *reified reflections of such interpretations* is too limited: the biological<sup>56</sup> player is limited their decisions by the specific illocutionary acts of the game-narrator; the expected responses of which *imply* the role of an implied player in the structure of the game text. With regards to *Tokimeki Memorial 2*, while the biological player is free in their sentience, the implied player is limited to the verbs of the game (pick a skill to train, choose an dialogue option, ask a girl out on a date, etc.).

## 4.2 Game-narrator as EMBEDDED IMPLIED-READER.

We have so far avoided the actual machinery of how the embedded narrative is formed under gameplay-as-narration and simply assumed its existence. While the existence of

53. Farca, “Towards the Implied Player,” 203.

54. Ibid., 164.

55. Ibid., 205.

56. Farca uses ‘empirical’ to address the same concept.



narrative frames is often axiomatically assumed in many analyses of literature, it would bring into perspective how exactly the machinery behind the reification of meaning-making occurs as it relates to *sjuzet* in games (i.e. plot within the embedded narrative, for games-with-*sjuzet*).

Earlier in section 3.2, I proposed that the game-narrator is omniscient with respect to the embedded narrative. The reason for this assertion is to explain how the game-narrator is able to re-narrate to the player-narratee the events experienced by the protagonist, while not being the direct narratee of the protagonist-narrator. The focalization of the embedded narrative thus results in narrative focalization when mediated and re-narrated on the level of frame narrative. However it is not as if the game-narrator is able to know everything about the events that will occur in a particular playthrough; as the embedded narrative is narrated simultaneously, it is not as if the plot is being recounted—indeed as discussed in the earlier section, plot is being *created* through interaction between the player-narratee and game-narrator.

One way to formulate this creation of narrative is to situate the game-narrator as IMPLIED READER<sup>57</sup> of the embedded narrative. In other words, it is the game-narrator interprets the embedded narrative for the purpose of re-narration with the player-narratee. Bakhsheshi utilises the Barthesian concept of readerly/writerly texts:

[The gamer] is involved in the story making in the level of details, this blank helps the reader to feel more connected to the game and uses his standard in creating the story. Each of these blank details as Jenkins believes allows the audience to do more than simply observe; instead, they must involve themselves in the construction of the narrative. Although the outcomes are foreseeable, the variation offered to the audiences, is what makes these texts active. In Barthes words, this activity is what makes the reader a creator at the same time. The narrative written on this premise that can be categorized as writerly.<sup>58</sup>

What I propose here is not so much that the gamer is 'directly' involved in the story as Bakhsheshi argues, but rather that it is the game-narrator that interprets the embedded narrative with *influence* from the interaction between player-narratee and game-narrator to form observable *sjuzet* in games-with-*sjuzet*. The game-narrator is always in a position of retelling, but also continuously asks the player "how should I retell?". Necessarily, the

57. Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology*, 43.

58. Bakhsheshi and Ghahreman, "The Importance of Form in Game Narration," 154.

interpretation of the game-narrator may not necessarily correlate with the desires of the player-narratee.



Consider once again an instance of a DIALOGUE-SELECTION-EVENT. In the figure to the left, the player is given the choice of the Ferris Wheel, a Drop Tower, and a Hazard Simulation ride for the protagonist to ride with Hikari, the girl he is on a date with. The 'best' choice depends on the goals of the player; for example if the player aims to have an ending where the protagonist is confessed to by Hikari, they would choose an option that (in their con-

ception of Hikari's character) Hikari would like. If instead they aim to end up with a *different* girl, it may be prudent to choose a middling or even an option that Hikari would presumably dislike. However, the player is not explicitly given the information needed to make this choice.

Throughout the game, it is up to the player to conceptualize Hikari's personality (i.e. meaning-make) and use that conception to predict which choice would lead to their desired result. The game-narrator however, is unaware of the player's conceptualization of Hikari's personality. Indeed at times, none of the choices the game-narrator presents are desirable for the intent of the player. As the player is limited by the text of the frame narrative, so too is the game-narrator limited by the (hidden) text of the embedded narrative—the game-narrator can only present the choices allowed for by the text<sup>59</sup>. Likewise, as the game-narrator is constantly in a position of retelling, it must also be in a position of interpretation. Revisiting the earlier example of an RPG-BATTLE-EVENT, the unreliability of the game-narrator could also be motivated by the game-narrator interpreting the embedded plot in that way. Regardless, because the observable gameric *sjuzet* is always mediated by the game-narrator, it is not so much that the player creates new plot when making a choice, but that the player influences the game-narrator's interpretation (and retelling) of some embedded plot inscribed within a hidden text. In other words, variation in a playthrough is not so much a plot difference, but rather a difference in the retelling (narration) of gameric *sjuzet* at the frame level between game-narrator and player-narratee.

59. The exact nature of this hidden text is not important, but one could argue that it is the scripts and functions that provide the available choices.

### 4.3 Conceptualizing time within *Tokimeki Memorial 2*.



We have so far established a paradigm of parallel narration at the frame and embedded levels to structure our analysis. To complete our analysis, let us look at notions of time within the dual notions of plot-in-gameplay, and plot in the embedded narrative. I deal here not with any gameric formulations of time such as Zagal and Mateas' fourfold framework<sup>60</sup> or Juul's sevenfold framework<sup>61</sup> but rather with the traditional narrative TEMPI:<sup>62</sup> ELLIPSIS,<sup>63</sup> SUMMARY,<sup>64</sup>

SCENE,<sup>65</sup> STRETCH,<sup>66</sup> and PAUSE,<sup>67</sup> against the distinctions of DISCOURSE TIME<sup>68</sup> and STORY TIME.<sup>69</sup>

*Tokimeki Memorial 2* starts with the 'childhood system' which has markedly different gameplay from the rest of the game. Thus, story time in *Tokimeki Memorial 2*, at least with respect to the embedded narrative, is from the beginning of the childhood system, to the last day of highschool. In this childhood system, the player-protagonist<sup>70</sup> explores the town day by day with his childhood friends, talking to people, and interacting with the city until the protagonist eventually moves away and the game is flash-forwarded to the first day of highschool.

As story time is mostly fixed, what we are interested in are the dual notions of discourse time occurring during these segments. Each day is presented from sunrise to sunset, and

60. José P. Zagal and Michael Mateas, "Time in Video Games: A Survey and Analysis," *Simulation & Gaming* 41, no. 6 (2010): 844–868.

61. Jesper Juul, "Introduction to Game Time/Time to Play: An examination of game temporality," *First person: New media as story, performance and game*, 2004, 131–142.

62. Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology*, 98.

63. *Ibid.*, 25.

64. *Ibid.*, 95.

65. *Ibid.*, 85.

66. *Ibid.*, 94.

67. *Ibid.*, 71.

68. *Ibid.*, 21.

69. *Ibid.*, 94.

70. I use this terminology as shorthand, and not in any formal notion. I have previously argued that the notion of a 'player-protagonist' is indeed nonsense under my framework of gameplay-as-narration, but one disadvantage of a strict barrier between player and protagonist means that referring to both roles at once is a bit unwieldy.

events occur over a period of a few minutes per day; for the most part we can say that for a large portion of this segment, the game-narrator adopts a tempo of summary. Indeed, as *Tokimeki Memorial 2* compresses a week of childhood + 156 weeks of highschool into an approximately ten-hour experience, the overall tempo of the game is indeed summary as are most other narratives, interactive or otherwise.

There are indeed times where scene becomes the narrative tempo, particularly in dialogic sections; the protagonist talks and thinks at roughly the same time it takes for the action to have occurred in diegesis. The protagonist's actual school days are summarized through the skill training animations after an ACTIVITY-SELECTION-EVENT, and of course, the time between the end childhood system and the beginning of highschool constitute narrative elision.

However, the crucial difference between the childhood system and the rest of the game is that unless explicitly paused (i.e. with the SELECT button<sup>71</sup>), narration continues both on the frame and embedded levels: the day will end if the player simply stands there and does nothing. However, in other sections, Hansen's suggestion seems to ring true: 'In a video game, the player attains agency over that which cannot be controlled in the real world: time'.<sup>72</sup> To reconcile this discrepancy, must we resort to notions of 'engine time'<sup>73</sup> or Zagal and Mateas's temporal frames?<sup>74</sup>

My proposal is instead to split time across plot-in-gameplay and plot as it occurs within the gamic *sjuzet*. In the childhood segments, plot-in-gameplay progresses roughly at a speed correlated with plot in the embedded narrative: as plot progresses, gameplay mechanics eventually require the player to return (the protagonist) home and begin the next day—do nothing for long enough, and the high school section will eventually start.

The rate of this progression in plot-in-gameplay however, is tied to the rate of narration by the game-narration. During times where the player is allowed to 'do nothing', such as DIALOGUE-SELECTION-EVENTS or ACTIVITY-SELECTION-EVENTS, the player may of course, *do nothing* while keeping the game open. While gameplay-as-narration does continue in the form of background music, input polling, etc., neither plot-in-gameplay is progressed nor is plot in the embedded narrative. Crucially however, while gameplay-as-

71. I consider an explicit pause as such different from the notion of 'doing nothing'. In literary analysis, very few consider the time spent between reading sessions when the biological reader closes a book and goes for a walk; likewise we should not consider explicit pauses in considerations of time, as such events indicate an explicit biological pause outside of the text.

72. Christopher Hansen, *Game Time: Understanding Temporality in Video Games* (Indiana University Press, 2018), 2.

73. *Ibid.*, 4.

74. Zagal and Mateas, "Time in Video Games: A Survey and Analysis."

narration continues, narration of the embedded narrative *stops completely*. What I mean by this is not Pause, but that there simply is no reader to interact with embedded narration: the game-narrator being the implied reader of the embedded narrative is *unavailable to interpret* if the player chooses to do nothing but hang on the screen. Indeed the game-narrator is waiting for a reply from the player, and will do so indefinitely until the power to the console shuts down. That is to say that while discourse time in gameplay-as-narration continues indefinitely under a Pause *tempo*, discourse time in the embedded narrative simply ceases to exist, in the same way it does when a biological reader closes the book for a day, until the game-narrator once again becomes available. That is to say that every time a player choice is required, the narrative tempo of gamic *sjuzet* is always preserved regardless of how long a player takes to make that choice.

Examining the ACTIVITY-SELECTION-EVENTS, the player doing absolutely nothing does not mean that the protagonist spends the rest of his life in his room, nor does the player doing nothing in a DIALOGUE-SELECTION-EVENT mean that the protagonist and his date are trapped permanently in an amusement park. As well, there is no relation between the time the player takes to make a decision on the best reply to make—diegetically the protagonist would decide in a reasonable time, and as the rest of the narration seems to progress under a scenic tempo, there is reason to argue that the protagonist-narrator narrates through the DIALOGUE-SELECTION-EVENT under the same scenic tempo. Rather, time ceases to exist in the protagonist's diegesis, until the player-narratee indicates that choice to the game-narrator, who can only then continue with renarrating the embedded narrative. I must stress that this does not indicate that the game-narrator is not narrating: as long as the game loop continues, the user interface is responsive, and music is playing, there is gameplay, and gameplay is narration. Instead, the game-narrator has adopted a pausal tempo while waiting for a response from the player.

## 5 Conclusion

Current scholarship in Game Studies seem to axiomatically posit the uniqueness of the medium of video games. While there have been some attempts to apply theories of literary narratology to video games, most fail to do so without postulating new, game-specific theory. Using *Tokimeki Memorial 2* as a backdrop, I attempt to apply existing tools of literary narratology while postulating a minimal amount of novel theory; any novel terms used are framed as shorthand for explainable phenomenon in existing narratological frameworks.

To begin, we examined the narrative consequences of an I-narrator in dialogic game-play segments, and postulate the existence of a player-narratee by examining in detail DIALOGUE-SELECTION-EVENTS in *Tokimeki Memorial 2*. Furthermore, I argued that the protagonist-I-narrator by virtue of not addressing the player-narratee, is thus *not* the corresponding narrator to the player-narratee. Instead, the protagonist-narrator narrates to himself (protagonist-narratee), whereas the *game itself* (i.e. all ludic aspects of a video game) can be taken as an instance of a narrator: thus the game-narrator, and that game-play itself is narration (gameplay-as-narration). Moreover, it is through the speech-acts of the game-narrator that any plot variances occur within the game. To formalize the barrier between gameplay-as-narration and the game sjužet, I argue that games are inherently structured as a parallel narrative wherein the frame narrative constitutes the level of discourse under which gameplay-as-narration operates, which frames gamic sjužet as on the level of an embedded narrative that is directly inaccessible to the player and player-narratee.

To examine the feasibility of this argument, I examine two other gameplay segments in *Tokimeki Memorial 2* to ground my argument empirically. Through an examination of ACTIVITY-SELECTION-EVENTS, I attempt to detach gamic sjužet (plot as usually understood in games, as the 'narrative' component of games), with plot that occurs in the frame narrative (plot-in-gameplay), which is less well understood. Plot-in-gameplay occurs on the level of the frame narrative in games and thus involves the evolution of extradiegetic elements on screen; in *Tokimeki Memorial 2*, this occurs as the stats of the protagonist are raised through training. On the embedded level, there is the narrative of the protagonist doing the actual training in diegesis; while some of this plot is reiterated to the player by the animation in the middle, the game-narrator summarizes the events occurred in the embedded narrative and compresses a week of story time into a few seconds of discourse time. I also take a brief detour to examine the existence of the game-narrator in games-without-sjužet.

To explain RPG-BATTLE-EVENTS, I consider how the game-narrator can be unreliable. Two approaches are considered, and I come to the conclusion that the protagonist-narrator can not be held responsible for the narrative framing of the events occurred as a *Final Fantasy VII*-style role playing game; thus it must be the game-narrator that decides to embellish their retelling in such a way. In section (3.5), I also examine how different segments of gameplay involving markedly different game mechanics can be characterized as a shift in narrating instance in the frame level to explain the richness of games media within

existing theory. Thus, the frame narrative may be disjoint in its style, while still being in a re-narrating position of a continuous embedded narrative in the case of *Tokimeki Memorial 2*—this does not have to be the case for all games. It is also important to distinguish plot-in-gameplay, and a shift in narrating instance on the frame level: plot-in-gameplay is a continuous evolution of game mechanics, and not a sudden change in narrating style or voice (game mechanics) that would indicate a shift instead.

In the last section, we discuss the nature of how interactivity and player participation factors into our framework. With existing concepts of the virtualities of plot, I argue that changes in game *sjuzet* are simply a reification of meaning-making onto the text (or rather the re-telling of the text) itself. The mechanics of this reification is done by assuming the game-narrator is the implied reader of the embedded narrative, and that the discourse between game-narrator and player-narratee influences the interpretation of the game-narrator's reading of the inscribed, but hidden text; thus the player does not directly create the new text, but rather influences the retelling of the embedded text by the game-narrator. This also explains small variations in a playthrough that results in roughly the same plot points<sup>75</sup>. Finally, I attempt to create an account of narrative time under this framework, focusing on what happens when a player decides to 'do nothing'.

There is much more to say about using existing narratological tools to analyze games and gamic fiction. In particular, while *Tokimeki Memorial 2* allows very few tools for the player to manipulate time. As a result, I was not able to glean as many insights as I would liked in addressing the question of time in my framework. An exploration of open-world games would be much more interesting in answering questions of time, but being a game of discourse, *Tokimeki Memorial 2* provided a solid foundation on which to formulate my framework of gameplay-as-narration. While medium-specific analyses are always useful, a unified account of games among other traditional media shows both that existing tools of literary narratology can produce a feasible analysis of interactive media, that games are indeed narratives, but can be at the same time many other things as well.

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75. I use 'plot points' here in the common usage sense rather than any formal notion of the term.

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