Closed Game-like Arcs: Remediations of Play in the Late Age of Video

VERSION 4

Games wander, so do game studies, which may explain why my paper on an actual walking sim – *Beginner's Guide* – has wandered into a conference next week. This paper takes up Ellis Bartholomeus & Sybille Lammes interest in the action of inaction: from walking to watching.

We wander. Wittgenstein invoked games as a model for language, then found himself unable to say definitively what games are. "Here giving examples is not an indirect means of explaining," he wrote. "For any general definition can be misunderstood too. The point is that this is how we play the game. (I mean the language-game with the word 'game.')" (Wittgenstein 1958 sec. 61). When your definition of game is a way of playing with the word 'game,' you are unlikely to produce a straight story. But this paper is concerned with straight stories only as they are crossed by stories of another kind: contingent, uncanny, and queer. I will eventually

stroll by the subject of walking sims, but only after loitering in a very different street. Walking sims, Bonnie Ruberg observes, might just as easily be called "looking simulators" (Ruberg 2019, 201). I want to begin with a text that simulates not looking but *watching*.

>SLIDE 2: Russian Doll poster

I've been watching the miniseries *Russian Doll*, created by Natasha Lyonne, Amy Poehler, and Leslye Headland, which appeared on the Netflix streaming service in February 2019. Without too much inaccuracy you might think of the series as *Groundhog Day Goes to Brooklyn* or *Memento with Millennials.* The series follows Nadia Vulvokov, a gloriously foul-mouthed, epically dissolute software engineer, trapped in an event-loop in which she repeatedly dies and returns to the same moment, a party for her 36th birthday. It would be hard to imagine a more effective metaphor for arrested development (the condition, not the TV show), but as its title indicates, *Russian Doll* answers to a different metaphor: structures within structures, nesting, and enclosure.

For all its episodic chaos, *Russian Doll* has a clearly discernible story arc. [SPOILER WARNING!] Over its eight

episodes the basic premise develops significantly. Like Phil Connors in *Groundhog Day* and Leonard Shelby in *Memento*, Nadia analyzes, learns, and adapts. She tests and discards several explanations for her predicament – drug experience, curse, space-time fragmentation. Her loop intersects with another time-trapped character, expanding the problem space. Eventually Nadia grasps the terms of a moral catastrophe, then methodically rearranges her world to redress it. In the final scene she leads a collection of lost and broken souls in an exultant march. The moment feels like liberation or breakout, though it may as well be *danse macabre*.

Though *Russian Doll* deserves a much closer reading, I will concentrate here only on its main mechanic: Nadia keeps dying from a variety of causes, but each time finds herself standing before a mirror in her friend's bathroom, about to replay Level 36. The analogy to gameplay is obvious enough, and the fact that Nadia's job involves (glitchy) game coding makes the connection inescapable. Among other things, this is a TV show that engages certain formal properties of digital games. It can thus tell us about the relationship of video narrative and video game in the age of streaming platforms.

It is notable that *Russian Doll* premiered slightly more than a month after another momentous game/TV crossing, also from Netflix: the "Bandersnatch" episode of *Black Mirror* – also a story based on a game developer. I will have more to say about this conjunction, but let's return to the way *Russian Doll* uses the trope of player death. Ruberg has an important insight about the way this convention relates to "chrononormativity," the received construction of narrative time under patriarchy:

>SLIDE 3: Ruberg

> Dying and starting again is actually part of the narrative of normative game progress. As compared to the expectations of society at large, this represents a distinctly non-chrononormative vision of movement through time and space. Yet, within the dominant standards of video games, chrononormativity takes on different characteristics – suggesting that queer versus 'straight' relationships to temporality and spatiality can be multivalent, context-specific, and even contradictory. (Ruberg 2019, 206)

Ruberg is right about the inherent queerness of video games -- an insight I would extend to all forms of interactive or "ergodic" expression (this is probably controversial). These practices fundamentally challenge orthodoxies of progress, necessity, and absolute time. However, Ruberg rightly complicates the claim. The conceit of death-and-respawn queers conventional narrative, but that insurgency can be co-opted. Hegemonic culture may appropriate rather than suppress. It may assimilate discontinuity into a process that, as Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux argue, replaces radical play with ideologically de-natured "fun" (Boluk and Lemieux 2017, 8).

>SLIDE 4: Definition

Russian Doll makes fun with -- and of -- game culture through something I call a CLOSED GAME-LIKE ARC. This is a design pattern in non-interactive narrative that imitates the disjunctive, iterative play of adventure games, removing active choice and bracketing every iteration within a singular logic of resolution.

A certain kind of pre-millennial thinking would dismiss the closed game-like arc by invoking **narratological**

normativity: according to this view, storytelling is governed by the deep logic of language, which may be related to the anatomy of human brains. We are told that neither of these substrates has changed significantly over thousands of years. Narrative abhors innovation.

The strategy here is to fight recursion with recursion. We've been here before because we're never anywhere else. Looping is just a tool storytellers use, albeit rarely. Fictional people regularly awaken to the same nightmarish day: in "mind-game" films of the 1990s, the two mentioned earlier plus a host of others; in postmodernist fictions, from Borges' "Circular Ruins" to LeGuin's *Lathe of Heaven*; in existentialist mythologies like Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus* or Becket's *Godot*; all the way back to the ancient myths of repetition, Sisyphus, Prometheus, and all the dying gods.

I am neither a Millennial nor in any non-touristic way queer, but narratological normativity makes me want to spit. The developments at the end of the last century cannot be glossed over, even by theories less dependent on bad neuroscience. When Thomas Elsaesser coined the term "mind-game film" he referred to puzzles

generally, not computer games; yet arguably the cultural context of these films is deeply affected by the introduction of machines for simulation – no one ever offered Sisyphus those red and blue pills. Digital games are an artistic response to "algorithmic experience" (Burden and Gouglas 2013), the wholesale transformation of the personal and the social through systematic processing of information. The establishment of digital games as legitimate forms of culture – recognized as such by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2011 (cite) – significantly resets the stakes for narrative.

>SLIDE 5: Doggies

This might be the reason Netflix green-lighted the "Bandersnatch" episode of *Black Mirror*, introducing an innovative technology for choice-based storytelling. Much more could and should be said "Bandersnatch," but I have time only for a little whingeing. The story celebrates a cartoonish version of nerd-boy culture, seriously offends neuro-diverse people, and revives the worst kind of postmodern self-referentiality. The game engine, significantly named "Branch Manager" (as in a *bank*) manages to dole out only two links at a time, creating a labyrinth of possibilities that recalls less the

Garden of Forking Paths than your local mini-golf. Still, the show is important both in its overture to better things someday (not *Bear Grylls*) and its collocation with *Russian Doll*.

The successive release of these shows was probably emergent rather than intentional, but even so it demonstrates what Fredric Jameson called a "cultural logic," the response of a creative industry to changes in the means of production (Jameson 1990 pTk). To understand this logic, we need to tap an even earlier breakthrough, Claude Levi-Strauss' insights about game and ritual in *The Savage Mind* (1962):

>SLIDE 6: Levi-Strauss

> All games are defined by a set of rules which in practice allow the playing of any number of matches. Ritual, which is also 'played,' is, on the other hand, **like a favored instance of a game**, remembered from among the possible ones **because it is the only one that results in a particular type of equilibrium**. (Levi-Strauss 1962, p. 30; emphasis added)

Averse to normativities, I cannot invoke Levi-Strauss' concept of game and ritual as cultural law but will take it instead as analogy, a sweet move in a language game. I map Levi-Strauss' terms onto a different context: "game" for me means computer adventure game, and "ritual" is the closed game-like arc of cinema and TV. The point of the analogy lies with the third term, "equilibrium." According to Levi-Strauss, rituals sanctify the "favored instance of a game" in which crucial forces reach a balance. What balancing acts are at work in the Closed Game-like Arc?

On the economic side of this cultural logic, the neatly nested *Doll* strikes a compromise between games and television, two multi-billion-dollar industries circling one another in the long knife-fight of platform capitalism. For Netflix the closed game-like arc may well be a winning move, if it expands audiences at the margins, where all premiums lie in an age of monopsony. Yet like all rituals, this imitation-(of)-game is a contrived thing, an as-if. It is less solution than simulation. What does the closed game-like arc simulate? We could say it replicates what we used to call "watching television," a ritual of consumption originally punctuated by spot advertising

and regularly discontinuous schedules. Once we had appointments, now we binge. The management of discontinuity in *Russian Doll* might be symptomatic either of nostalgia -- Nadia's iterating life is a regularly scheduled program -- or of the new anxiety of persistence – how many episodic restarts can her viewers take? (Quite a few, given the very high Metacritic score for *Russian Doll*.)

From the perspective of 2019, *Russian Doll* more closely imitates another kind of digital experience: watching gameplay on a live-streaming service like Twitch.tv (see Taylor 2019). We could say the series simulates Twitch for people who don't like too many windows on their main screen. It is a representation of a representation of people playing with representations -- Matrix meets Matryushka.

We can trim some levels off this abysmal recursion by re-centering on the way closed game-like arcs simulate gameplay. Thinking back to Ruberg's remarks on the possibly "contradictory" relationship of iterative play and narrative hegemony, we might propose that *Russian Doll* equivocates between queer possibilities of discontinuous

storytelling and a normative demand for resolution. We get something like gameplay without all that simulated action, and minus any cognitive involvement beyond what Markku Eskelinen calls "the interpretative" (Eskelinen 2001). Nadia's life approximates a game. In the German sense of the word it is an *ersatz* game. Something has been replaced by a substitute. If we restrict our search to Neftlix – though that is by no means a necessary constraint -- we might take "Bandersnatch" as the displaced other.

>SLIDE 7: The Pitch

Consider this pitch: **Unhappy with the fussy, self-involved, deliberately frustrating gameplay in "Bandersnatch?" No need to leave the Netflix platform; just click over to *Russian Doll*, where you'll encounter a more interesting set of not entirely white and middle-class characters with way better dialogue. You'll have all the fun of leveling-up with none of the grind. Plus, you're guaranteed an outcome aesthetically consistent with the preceding four hours, not some absurd permutation banged on by desperate writers. We know you're time-curious, but what's so bad about chrononormativity?**

So goes the pitch -- we are not obliged to buy. Considered critically, the pairing of "Bandersnatch" and *Russian Doll* constructs a false dichotomy between traditional and non-traditional narratives, a constrained, toxic binary straight from the Branch Manager. What if we refuse those terms?

As this conference demonstrates, there is plentiful non-binary space in which to wander: classic walking sims like *Gone Home* and *Dear Esther*; Davey Wreden's deeply perverse ludonarratives-on-rails; just about anything by Emily Short or Porpentine Charity Heartscape, especially *Galatea* and *With Those We Love Alive*; David O'Reilly's marvelously oddball *Mountain*, the "art horror" at the end of the ludiverse. For the moment at least, the field seems wonderfully fecund.

>SLIDE 8: Queers in Love

Though time is short, I want to glance at one final example that seizes chrononormativity by its dilemmic horns: Anna Anthropy's *Queers in Love at the End of the World*. The game allots its player only ten seconds of life, and we would need to raise ten to a very large power to

explore its full meaning. I will note only that the game is the exact opposite of Levi-Straussian ritual – not a favored instance of play but a fiendishly unwinnable anti-game where we struggle to extend a series of hyperlinked passages, before "[e]verything is wiped away" in a little permadeath. The text we tantalizingly read is erotic, a doomed attempt at lovemaking, meaningfully marked as "queer."

Reading from the sad delusion of the chrononormative, we might say the game deconstructs player death, apocalypse, and the temporality of the phallus – *Done so soon? Well, it happens to everyone (in this game)*. It makes us achingly desire that excluded erotic middle, a time outside the algorithm, the relentlessly closing circle of the countdown timer.

>SLIDE 9: QiL address-bar exploit

Resistance is possible. *Queers in Love* is a Twine game, delivered via Web browser. A player can use the *back* function of the browser to perform something like record scratching: making the game's timer jump a groove, stacking up multiple countdowns, piling discontinuity on discontinuity. In an earlier version this "scratch" effect

added any passage visited to a composite URL displayed in the browser's address bar. By judiciously trimming this de facto game log, a resistant player could defy wiping-away and jump back to a lost moment.

But of course, this resistance was futile. The navigation-bar glitch was itself wiped away in a software update. The "scratching" exploit never steals enough time for a satisfyingly extended reading, and its stacked iterations close one by one, reasserting the game's primary curse. Yet this doomed outbreak shows how *Queers in Love* articulates to Wandering Games -- even though it is all about obstruction, not free play. It simulates not looking or watching but WANTING. The game makes us struggle for what we cannot have. It is (for me, so far) the definitive playful expression of vagrant and unruly impulse, the farthest point in possibility space from ritual equilibrium. It wanders right off the map.

Why go to such extremes? Remember bumper-sticker Tolkien: "not all those who wander are lost." On some maps, the edges represent liminal spaces or interzones, marshes or marches (wandering into the wrong part of Wales) where difficult and tentative encounters occur.

You can be held up at the frontier. (Apology here to Irene Fubara Manuel, whose border experiences differ markedly from my first-world problems.) On my way to a Canadian conference in 2015 I was refused entry by a border guard until I could explain why anyone would care about something called electronic literature. Arriving in Bangor this week I met a couple retired from the University who similarly questioned me about the value of Wandering Games (though they were far more solicitous of my comfort).

We ought to live for these moments. They define us by reminding that not all the world shares our peculiar desires. Negation is constitutive. As the game theorist scholar David Levy says, play expresses anti-ness: "games are not." If Levi-Strauss is right, there is no ritual (or cinema or television) without reference to the negative space of games. As the antithesis of ritual, satisfying that queer desire Anna Anthropy withholds, wandering games may represent the purest form of imagined play.

>SLIDE 10: Graffito