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Who Controls the Speech Bubbles?

Reflecting on Agency in Comic-Games

Digital games that strive to explicitly and deliberately evoke comics face one challenge right off the bat: movement. Since their beginnings, commercial digital games have been characterized by their use of moving images, usually displayed on a single screen, which connects them more to the tradition of animation than to that of comics. Hence, to be comic-specific in a formal-aesthetic sense – as opposed to the adaptation of the content of comics – digital games need to find ways to include some comics characteristics. Daniel Merlin Goodbrey's (2017) groundbreaking study of the intersection of comics and games lists seven such characteristics: space as time; simultaneous juxtaposition of images; closure between images; spatial networks; reader control of pacing; tablodic images; word and image blending (Goodbrey 2017, 44). An artifact that exhibits all of these characteristics would be a comic; to judge whether it would be a digital game as well, Goodbrey turns to Jesper Juul's (2005, 36) classic game model and its six characteristics of rules, quantifiable outcome, valorization of outcome, player effort, player attachment to outcome, and negotiable consequences. Both definitions include a number of complex categories that would need unpacking, but precisely this complexity as well as the sheer number of factors already illustrates the challenge: Few artifacts fully qualify as, in Goodbrey's term, *hybrid game comics.*

Despite my great appreciation of Goodbrey's work, I have recently taken objection to his strong reliance on the concept of hybridization (Backe 2020). To conclude that some games – i.e., those that exhibit a majority of the aforementioned traits – belong to a category of hybrid game comic is, at best, an intermediary step. As soon as such a category is established – in a process that is necessarily based on interpretation, taste, and some unarticulated heuristics – it provokes the question of how the examples within the category relate to each other, which runs the risk of exposing differences between cases which might ultimately call into question whether they were part of a unified phenomenon to begin with. Furthermore, examples that exerted great influence on later games without belonging into the category itself would run the risk of being excluded from analyses – such as Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead* (2012) or *The Wolf Among Us* (2013).

Still, it is irrefutable that a printed comic, an interactive comic, and a comic-based digital game are related without being the same phenomenon. So, how do

we discuss this relationship more precisely, without recourse to blanket categories like that of the "hybrid"?

In the following pages, I want to examine the usefulness of the game studies concept of *agency* in this context. A distinct theoretical concept in the study of games, related but not identical to agency in the more common sociological sense, it is used to characterize the particularity of actions players take, as opposed to real-life actions and low-level interactions. It is, therefore, one of the central criteria for the discussion of the "gameness" of digital games, and could be considered as a candidate for reducing the whole issue to just one dimension: the absence or presence of agency, absolute or gradual, as a measuring stick for the "gameness" of an example. In practice, though, agency manifests in countless different ways, suggesting that any such categorization of artifacts would not result in a linear spectrum-scale, but an at least two-dimensional (and potentially much more complex) continuum.

To illustrate these reflections, I will briefly introduce the concept of agency, formulate some explicit criteria for analysis, and apply them to a small corpus of recent examples that appear *prima facie* pertinent because of their recourse to aesthetic markers of comics: the print formats of strip or page, speech bubbles, thought balloons, sound-words and other emphasized typography, and maybe most importantly the panel and the gutter between panels. The goal of these analyses is to evaluate whether some aesthetic principles or forms of agency reoccur within the corpus, and whether we can hence consider these games as a somewhat coherent hybrid sub-genre or should rather see them as a diverse collection of different alternatives to the interactive comic format.

Agency in Digital Games

In *Hamlet on the Holodeck,* one of the foundational texts of game studies, Janet Murray (1997) defines game-specific agency as a particular kind of engagement, distinct from and more complex than interactivity, and as such as one of the central properties of digital games. To her, agency is "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (Murray 1997, 126), affording us "the thrill of exerting power over enticing and plastic materials" (Murray 1997, 153). This definition highlights what needs to be given for a game to provide agency: Players need to be able to act upon choices, choices need to appear meaningful, and the effects of actions need to be noticeable.

Murray distinguishes agency from participation and interaction. A participant in a process can be active, yet still be little more than a bystander in terms

of outcomes. If we are only acting when prompted, following instructions or a script to help produce outcomes that are predetermined and out of our hands, we do not have agency over what happens, or even over our actions. The term interaction neither has the same meaning. If I click a nicely animated button on a website, but nothing happens, I have been part of interactivity, yet without agency. Or to take a less extreme, but more pertinent example: Following a completely linear hypertext by clicking on the only offered hyperlink to traverse the text is interactivity – the whole of the text would not be visible to me without my interaction – but I would not have agency over the outcome.

This hypertextual perspective was theorized prominently by Espen Aarseth with his concept of the *ergodic*, "which implies a situation in which a chain of events (a path, a sequence of actions, etc.) has been produced by the nontrivial efforts of one or more individuals or mechanisms" (1997, 94). While Aarseth discusses several forms of "ergodicity," he stresses the universal significance of choices: "Each decision will make some parts of the text more, and others less, accessible, and you may never know the exact results of your choices; that is, exactly what you missed" (Aarseth 1997, 10). And just like Murray, he is skeptical towards the term "interactive," which to him "connotes various vague ideas of computer screens, user freedom, and personalized media, while denoting nothing" (Aarseth 1997, 55).

This resistance against the term "interactivity" is at least partially due to Brenda Laurel's use of it a few years prior to Murray and Aarseth. For Laurel, the subject of interaction is an "agent," understood as "one who initiates action" (1993, 4) – in other words, her understanding of interactivity is closely related to agency. Laurel's work is relevant insofar as she offers a typology of agency (by the name of interactivity), something later research has eschewed in favor of a recipe for "[d]esigning experiences toward the satisfactions of agency" (Wardrip-Fruin et al. 2009, 7). Laurel posits that "interactivity exists on a continuum that could be characterized by three variables: frequency (how often you could interact), range (how many choices were available), and significance (how much the choices really affected matters)" (1993, 20).

Laurel's distinction between variables of agency underlines that a quantitative approach to the phenomenon is fruitless. Game designer Paolo Pedercini puts it like this: "As long as the players feel in control of movements in space, even the most linear narrative and the most constrained level design will provide enough agency. In a way, that's what we've come to expect from mainstream games" (Pedercini, quoted in Sicart 2013, 104). While Pedercini's critique is directed at mainstream games where the countless moment-to-moment actions of blowing up things and shooting enemies never leave room for any meaningful changes to world or narrative that have not been pre-scripted by the designers,

the same is true for the recent narrative game genre of the walking simulator, where movement through an environment with little or no possibility to make meaningful changes is the whole game concept. Similarly problematic is the correlation that some theorists perceive between agency and both choices and the visible effect of actions. As Miguel Sicart (2013, 87) makes clear, there is an expectation of clarity of action possibilities and outcomes, but this can easily be overdone. When the long series of simulated social interaction and real-time achievement players attain throughout *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (2011) culminates in pressing one of four buttons with clearly spelled-out consequences, it is agency, yet only nominally so. This choice is palpably artificial compared to what has come before, and illustrates why some scholars categorically reject the term because all actions in narrative games are always somewhat predetermined (MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2007). Yet, despite its problems, agency is a powerful concept for analyzing the extent and the quality of activity players of digital games have. It has been applied to player modifications of games (Poremba 2003) and specified for particular types of games, e.g., narrative games (Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum 2010). Recently, C. Thi Nguyen (2020) has proposed agency as the central aesthetic property of digital games. He considers the agency of games as being layered on top of real-life agency, relating to and commenting on each other. Thus, while agency isn't something we encounter only in games, games are all about agency, and for an artifact to be considered a game, it needs to provide ludic agency.

Agency in Comic-Games

As I have previously argued, the analysis of the relationship between comics and digital games is a process that is challenged already at the simple nominal level (Backe 2020, 61). Speaking of "game comics," as Goodbrey does, implies that the phenomenon is, ultimately, rather a comic than a game; compounding both terms to, e.g., "gamecomic" would indicate a complete fusion of both forms, the hybrid Goodbrey expects them to form. In choosing the carefully hyphenated "comic-game," I want to stress that I study examples which *prima facie* appear as digital games and have a demonstrable relation to comics. Furthermore, I am interested more in the aesthetic dimension than the content-level; an argument for unique properties of comics adaptations compared to, e.g., adaptations of dramatic texts would require a different line of reasoning.

In the brevity of a chapter, it is obviously impossible to qualitatively analyze a broad, potentially representative sample. Instead, I have selected a small

corpus of examples based on some formal criteria. First, examples need to exhibit close adherence to the initially formulated comics characteristics, i.e., they need to include or allude to tablodic presentation (panel and gutter), speech bubbles, thought balloons, captions, or sound-words. Second, examples should come from different game genres to at least partially account for the diversity of games. Third, mostly for pragmatic reasons to further delimit the field, only recent (2017–2020), independently published games from small developers were considered. Even with these criteria in place, a number of examples could not be examined because of the limited space, including *Deep Sky Derelicts* (2017), *Lovecraft Quest – A Comix Game* (2018), and the "Barbara" episode of *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017). The four examples that I ultimately decided represented the breadth of the field best are the Polish side-scroller *Liberated* (2020), the Croatian point-and-click adventure *All You Can Eat* (2017), the Ukrainian visual novel and match-three game *Metropolis: Lux Obscura* (2017), and the Australian first-person shooter *Void Bastards* (2019).

Based on the brief overview of agency in the previous section, the core questions to ask about this dimension are: What do we have agency over? How, and how frequently, do we exert agency? And, as an additional dimension, is agency thematized in the narrative of the game? Additionally, the fashion in which comics are paid homage to or imitated need to be taken into account, which results in four heuristic questions I will submit all examples to:

1. What is the gameplay? What traditional game genre serves as a basis for the game, and what are the recurring play activities (the core gameplay loop)?
2. What specific comics aesthetics does the game include? Which elements of comics (panel and gutter, print formats of strip or page, speech bubbles, thought balloons, sound-words, etc.) are used, and how are they modified to facilitate play?
3. What is the topic (with particular attention to agency)? Is the plot concerned with agency, are choice and consequence a theme, do dialogues touch upon the topic?
4. What kind of agency is found in the example? Are effect and consequences of actions clear, how frequently do players get to exert agency, what elements of the game are under their control?

To contextualize both the (lesser known) examples and this analysis framework, it makes sense to have a cursory look at two better-known and influential earlier games. Telltale Games' aforementioned *The Wolf Among Us* (2013) is one of the developers' early iterations on their signature formula of an adventure game with a twist, namely an emphasis of character- and dialogue-driven narrative instead of the traditional creative manipulations of environmental objects. Like the other

Telltale games, it adheres only in the vaguest sense to comics aesthetics by using flat textures alluding to hand-drawn illustrations, which gives it much more similarity to animation than comics. While the game's narrative could be said to touch on agency – a central plot device is a ribbon that deprives young women from speaking the truth – it is hardly a central element of the game or gameworld. But the game regularly communicates the importance of player decisions by claiming that other characters will remember their actions, while, at the same time, including reflex-based activities for variety's sake, yet allowing to retry them without negative consequences. In sum, *The Wolf Among Us* manages to infuse its decision-making with a feeling of consequence not only by thematizing the potential consequences of actions but also by complicating these decisions through constant time pressure and offering a multicursal narrative structure that reflects player decisions in the plot.

Applying this heuristic of gameplay, comics aesthetics, topic, and implementation of agency to the second better-known example, *Framed* (2014), it becomes apparent how different a successful combination of comics aesthetics and agency can be. *Framed* is maybe the best example for what might be considered a comic-game in a strict sense. The title is, of course, already a pun on its style and subject matter: It tells the story of a thief who is framed for murder and has to run from the police, and it uses comics frames both as its central narrative device and its core gameplay principle. Framed presents the player with a varying number of frames on a screen in horizontal orientation, with the first and the last frame usually forming fixed starting and end points of the playable figure's movement "across the page." Upon entering the page, the player sees the playable figure progress through the panels, until they meet an obstacle (e.g., a waiting police officer). The player then has to re-arrange the panels so as to create a path that bypasses the obstacle, sometimes by re-ordering them, sometimes by turning them.

What makes *Framed* a standout example for the combination of comics aesthetic and gameplay is how it manages to keep the gutter relevant despite animations within panels. In many other examples (like *Liberated*, which will be discussed below) all relevant action happens within panels, and the gutter is reduced to a break in narrative and ludic progress. It becomes a mere caesura, instead of being the indicator for instances where the reader has to mentally construct closure between the separate events of consecutive frames (McCloud 1993, 60–92). In *Framed*, however, important action happens between frames, across gutters, and the puzzle-solving challenge for the player is to identify which events happen between two specific panels.

The panel's prominent role is further emphasized through the user-interface layout: The game signals to the player which panels are locked in place and

which can be manipulated through a simple formal language. The former have no sharp borders, but appear as if painted on a page. The latter have a black frame and a slight drop-shadow to suggest that they are floating over the page and can still be moved. Panels that the playable figure has already moved through turn from color to grayscale (see Figure 1). In this fashion, *Framed* not only draws on comics conventions when communicating the game state to the player but also highlights the importance of the frame and the different styles and types of frames we might find in a comic.
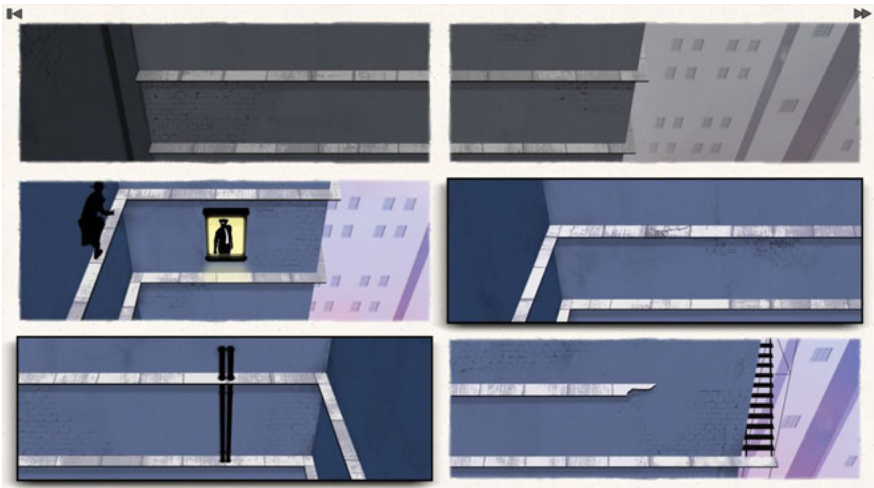

Figure 1: *Framed* (2014) works with the rearrangement of frames, highlighting them with color, frame design, and drop shadows.

Agency is, however, often limited to a binary in *Framed*. The player has to plan and make decisions and will see unequivocally and immediately what consequences their actions had. And while there are some non-interactive sequences, the player exerts agency continuously throughout most of the game. But by virtue of being a puzzle game with limited elements and minimal context, players can successfully resort to trial and error, and the game's feedback about consequences always pertains only to the result itself, not to the reasons for success or failure. Moreover, the narrative is completely fixed and linear, limiting agency to the ludic domain.

Analyzing the Corpus

Against the background of *The Wolf Among Us* and *Framed*, the four more recent examples selected for the main corpus of this study emerge as calculated explorations of tendencies already present in this previous generation of comic-games.

Liberated (2020) is possibly the most directly inspired by *Framed*, down to its title, which might be taken as an oblique reference to the older game. An ambitious attempt at creating what Goodbrey would consider a true "hybrid," *Liberated* has varied gameplay, drawing mostly on side-scrolling platformers and stealth shooters, which includes not only staples of this genre (such as timing puzzles during which periodic bursts of hot steam must be avoided), but minigames like lock-picking puzzles, quick time events, and access to backstory via data files scattered throughout the gameworld.

In terms of comics aesthetics, the game includes the whole range of medium-specific characteristics. Instead of levels, the player chooses to play issues of a comics series, which then flip open and guide them through extensive comics sequences across whole pages set up in an expert layout of frames, gutters, and splash pages, filled with atmospheric high-contrast greyscale art. The frame content is often subtly animated, with speech-bubbles fading in and out, and accompanied by detailed soundscapes and dialogues, but only to a degree found in virtually all current comic-games. Narrative and gameplay are, on a formal level, perfectly integrated: When a narrative sequence ends and gameplay commences, the virtual camera moves from one panel to the next, only that the new one is fully animated and rendered in 3D graphics.

The narrative of *Liberated* deals with a surveillance state, where the government used an act of terrorism to institute a totalitarian regime based on constant monitoring of citizens through their smart devices and social media activity. The first "issue" presents an exposition of this system and its antagonists, focusing on the son of the prime minister, who becomes a part of the resistance, while the second "issue" presents the cause from the opposing view of a high-ranking police officer who hunts resistance fighters despite his misgivings about the system. In this fashion, the narrative engages with societal agency in a very foregrounded manner. The repressive government's infringement on the freedom of the individual is shown as an inability to act (or not act) out of one's own volition, and the resistance fighters discuss at length how they need to act violently to take back the people's self-determination.

Liberated thus sets the stage for an in-depth engagement with comic-game-specific agency. The execution ultimately falls short of the sophisticated goals, as reviews scathingly point out:

> Really, the comic book presentation of *Liberated* makes the gameplay portions feel like an afterthought, shoehorning some weak gunplay into a tale that's really more about political intrigue and moral quandaries of balancing safety against the preservation of personal freedoms. (Hornshaw 2020, n.pag.)

Or, put more simply: "Liberated isn't a terrible game, but it's a painfully average one" (Vincent 2020, n.pag.). In the moment-to-moment activity, minimal strategy and planning is required, with a shooting gallery of enemies lined up on a string and simple puzzles (see Figure 2). The player has no agency on the plot-level either; the narrative proceeds linearly. The "hybridization" of comics panels and game elements also produces problems, as long stretches of gameplay are often located in single frames (within which many individual actions happen and a lot of space is depicted through scrolling), which makes the gameplay-panels appear more like arbitrary rectangular windows into a 3D world than like the carefully composed panels of a comics.

Figure 2: *Liberated* (2020) sets all actions in a static frame and extensively uses soundwords.

In sum, *Liberated*'s ambitious combination of game and comic produces many interesting effects, and ultimately, it is often unclear whether these effects are intended or not. The best example is the execution of a flashback in the second "issue." When opening the "issue," the first several pages appear blank and are skipped. Towards the end of the episode, the protagonist reminisces, which prompts an automated flipping back in the issue, where the player then is presented with a flashback printed on the first, previously skipped pages of the

issue. Whether this is a very involved commentary on the nature of time and memory that recontextualizes the comic as a character's manifest biography, or a flashy stunt rooted in a misunderstanding of the nature of flashbacks is impossible to say.

At the opposite end of the spectrum of ambition, so to speak, we find *All You Can Eat* (2017), a short, experimental game. *All You Can Eat* is little more than a prototype for executing the venerable ludic format of the graphic adventure as a three-panel funny strip. Mechanically, the game is completely conventional: The player controls a single character, who wants to prevent the imminent foreclosure of his favorite pizza place. To this end, the player navigates a small number of locations and has conversations with a single character at each place, learning about the world and collecting items, which are stored in an omnipresent inventory at the bottom of the screen and which can be used on objects, persons, or on each other (to create new objects).

The comics aesthetic of *All You Can Eat* is very sparse, but consequent. The layout of the three-panel funny is adhered to almost without exception, with the crude black-and-white drawings remaining un-animated and without voiced dialogue. Whenever a line of panels is filled, the virtual camera moves downward, with a fringe of the previous frames still visible at the top and a suggestion of coming panels at the bottom of the screen, thus constantly suggesting an endlessly scrolling page of a comics. This strict adherence to comics aesthetics is even more strongly emphasized when, at the end of the short game, the player is offered to export a PDF of the comic resulting from their personal playthrough (see Figure 3). This in itself quite simple reframing of the game as a comic produces a surprisingly deep reference to the history of graphic art, because it essentially recaptures a three-frame newspaper format as a book in much the same way that reprints of early funnies did.

As much as the farcical tone and brevity of the narrative allow for such a judgement, *All You Can Eat* deals with issues of agency: The pizza parlor is threatened by the seemingly overwhelming economic power of the (unsubtly named) "Megaslime Corporation"; the owner feels helpless, and the protagonist only succeeds through a combination of sheer luck and blackmail. The player has, however, rather little agency in the game, or just as much as is customary in the graphic adventure genre. The milestones in the genre require much lateral thinking, not the least because they confront the player with a large collection of items, characters, and places, and therefore often require ingenuity or trial-and-error to solve the puzzle of what fits where with what effect. In *All You Can Eat*, this challenge (and thus the emphasis on making meaningful choices that bear consequences) is greatly reduced by the very limited scope. And while there is no way in which the player can influence the linear plot, the final rendering of the

Figure 3: The interactions of *All You Can Eat* (2017) are presented in a three-panel comic strip format, which can be saved on collated pages after play.

game as a comic emphasizes how many variances there are in the narrative satellites based on the simple choices the player is allowed to make.

Void Bastards (2019) takes a completely different route than the other games presented here. In its core gameplay, it is unquestionably a first-person shooter, albeit one with a number of unusual features. Set in the future in deep space, the game justifies the death and rebirth of the avatar in an unusual

fashion: The playable figure is working together with (or maybe rather for) the artificial intelligence of a prison spaceship. When the ship needs spare parts, a prisoner is sent to derelict ships drifting in a nebula to find the missing equipment. The player controls these prisoners, and whenever one of them dies, the next one is released to the player's control. The new prisoner – or, in the corporate-speak language of the game, "client" – inherits the spare parts to repair the mother ship or to craft new, more efficient tools and weapons. In this fashion, *Void Bastards* integrates elements of the rogue-like genre into the first-person-shooter formula, and further adds elements conventionally associated with the survival game genre, particularly an extreme scarcity of resources (including oxygen and bullets). The result is a series of short supply runs to spaceships overrun with mutants and murderous robots, which are a success if the playable figure makes it back to their shuttle with some loot, even if they have no chance to survive the next encounter.

Void Bastards already evokes comics on the menu screen, which is executed as a facsimile of a comic book issue. It uses secondary colors with very flat shading throughout, with a narrative arc and characters reminiscent of Jodorowski and Moebius's *The Incal* (2014) and art that eerily resembles Dave Gibbons's style. The narrative passages are executed as comics pages with a quasi-narratorial voice-over of the monologue of the ship AI, and they are seamlessly integrated with the game's menus (see Figure 4). The gameplay is presented in a familiar first-person-shooter configuration with only two, albeit very fundamental, aesthetic evocations of comics: The flat lighting and the desaturated secondary colors carry over from the comics segments to the ostensibly unmediated perception of the gameworld, and all sounds in the gameworld are visualized as floating sound words in different locations and sizes, to indicate the position of hostiles. In this fashion, what could have been a token reference to comics aesthetics (as the same practice might be seen in *Liberated*), *Void Bastards* finds a way to utilize a comics convention to support its gameplay (because there are even sound words in cases where there is no sound per se, as in "float") while constantly reminding the player of the importance of comics for the game.

In terms of topic, the game saliently deals with the loss of agency. The prison system is a fully commercialized part of a cynical corporate dystopia, where dehumanizing practices and the disregard for the wellbeing of clients are couched in corporate lingo (e.g., "blunt force therapy"). All visited spaceships bear witness to a world in which every part of society exists only for the enrichment of corporations, and where the function of the individual is exclusively to serve as a consumer. Administration complexes only produce more bureaucracy, hospitals offer only bizarre cosmetic surgery ("Mucuous Membrane Makeovers"), and at every milestone, the futility of the playable character's

Figure 4: *Void Bastards* (2019) uses comics aesthetics to create pastiches of concrete artists and narrative conventions of surreal science fiction.

actions are made clear. At some point, they are ordered to forge an identification card, a contribution to the ship's mission that awards them a reduction of their sentence that is smaller than the additional sentence for forging the document. In short, *Void Bastards* portrays a world in which individuals no longer have social agency, and where even their utmost struggles to effect change only lead to more or less predictably cynical ends.

The ironic treatment of agency continues in the gameplay. The game gives the player agency on different levels by integrating an element of strategic decision-making in practically all aspects of the game. These decisions are often deeply entwined with the narrative: Every new "client" has random positive or negative abilities, making some of them highly valuable and others utterly useless, which means that sometimes, it would be strategically best for the player to kill off a character and hope for better odds next time, aligning their interests and their own ruthlessness with those of the evil corporation they play against.

Metropolis: Lux Obscura (2017), my final example, combines a decision-based, branching hypercomic with the casual-game staple of match-three mechanics (as popularized by *Bejewelled* [2000] and *Candy Crush Saga* [2012]). The hypertext results from simple and binary choices: visit one place first or the other, be forceful or friendly in a conversation, hand over an object or keep it. The game combines this interactive comic format with an unusual application of the match-three genre. It uses a 7 x 8 playfield and eight different token

objects to represent fights: three physical attacks, two special attacks (poison and a taser), first aid, rage, and police interference (see Figure 5). The inclusion of the last two token types infuses this interpretation of the match-three principle with a degree of strategy: Collecting "rage" tokens results in a damage multiplier for attacks, while the police tokens must be avoided, lest the player character suffers additional damage. Opponents differ not only in their strength and endurance, but attack in different patterns that leave more or less time for preparation and healing – and after each fight, the player chooses a modifier for the player character, leveling him up in one of twelve skills.

Figure 5: The match-three puzzles of *Metropolis: Lux Obscura* (2017) are used as a strategic fighting minigame.

In style and content, *Metropolis: Lux Obscura* implements digital comics aesthetics with a version of the "guided view" technique found in mobile comic reader apps: While we do not see whole comic pages, the images are explicitly presented as framed and often organized around gutters. A virtual camera pans over images, suggesting a reader's gaze, accompanied by the soundtrack of dialogue, music, and foley noises. The art style is vaguely reminiscent of "adult oriented" American comics in the vein of early Image or Top Cow publications. The game is also full of textual references to relevant comics: Goldie the stripper and the governor's pervert son reference Frank Miller's *Sin City* series (1991–2000), Mob boss Falcone references Batman history, and the introductory fight between

an aging hero and some thugs stealing the rims off an expensive car is unquestionably a nod towards James Mangold's film *Logan* (2017).

In terms of agency, the relative simplicity of the hypertextual structure is effective, because moments of decision are frequent and their consequences initially very immediate, insinuating that the following ones will be, too. Once the player reaches one of the game's four endings, they are informed how many more are left, implying what led to this outcome and what can be done differently. While the player is given agency over the plot in this fashion, this agency is limited, because the decisions are not informed but rather based on speculation, which also goes for the consequences. Still, the minimal branching structure and the casual gameplay together form an artifact distinctly more game-like than an interactive comic, demonstrating that comic-games do not depend on the elaborate game design found in some of the other examples.

Conclusion

The analysis of a small selection of recent examples presented here shows the diversity of comic-games quite clearly. Beyond the rather well-known examples of the Telltale-style interactive narratives and the puzzle gameplay of *Framed*, we find adherence to comics principles – from situating play in page-layouts with frames and gutters (*Liberated* and *All You Can Eat*) to functional integration of stylistic elements into gameplay (sound words in *Void Bastards*) – combined with very sparse (*Metropolis: Lux Obscura*, *All You Can Eat*), innovative (*Void Bastards*), or eclectic (*Liberated*) gameplay and narratives that all touch in some form on the topic of agency.

What this brief survey of agency in comic-games shows is that there is no "natural" form of agency that is inherent to or suggested by comics aesthetics. Quite the contrary, the implementations of comics aesthetics in different game genres and the resulting forms of agency employed in them are much more diverse than one might imagine. And while agency still remains a somewhat unspecific and evolving concept – with some research identifying (inter)passivity as a significant factor in the enjoyment of digital games (Fizek 2018) – it allows to distinguish between the ways in which players act in these games in non-obvious and non-trivial ways. A broader, more systematic study of these phenomena, particularly in a more longitudinal, transhistoric perspective would, of course, render the diversity and intricacy sketched here in greater detail. Yet, it should already have become clear that there is not one form of agency typical of comic-games – there are many.

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