

## **Making TV and Video Games Play Nicely**

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As the proverbial side dish to the main course, downloadable content (DLC) is typically seen as a value-added addendum, or more cynically, a publisher-backed cash-grab aiming to eke more money out of a flagging title. Yet producers are increasingly turning to DLC for extended and emergent storytelling. And although game sequels often expand a franchise's storyline (as they do in film and television), smaller narrative-focused DLC (which cannot be played without the core game) share critical design strategies with television. DLC is a place where the televisual and gamic overlap, where these cultural forms "play nicely" to use this panel's turn of phrase. What follows is a wildly provisional stab at making sense of story-driven DLC's design strategies, and how its aesthetic form and industrial logics are informed, in part, by television.

In *Flow*'s spirit of intellectual provocation, let us begin by hijacking Silicon Valley's hyperbolic vocabulary to say that video games are "disruptive" stories. On a functional level, games relegate "the telling" of the story to "the doing" of the game. A player's narrative experience is, in most cases, epiphenomenal to their control or mastery of the game system. (To wit, a player cannot discover that "the princess is in another castle" if that player can't get Mario past Bowser.) Playing the game is the first hurdle to experiencing the story.

Games are challenging, too, for the ways they deviate from the fixed structure of film and TV narratives. We know, for instance, what to expect from the classically constructed feature-length film or half-hour sitcom; or, at least, we know *when* to expect certain elements. We are introduced to the film's characters and goals in the first act, bear witness to escalating conflicts over the second act, and see the subplots and narrative enigmas answered in the final act. Interrelated chains of cause and effect lead from point A, to point B, to points beyond. Even in postmodern films with complex, video game-like narration—be they "mind-game" films with nonlinear chronologies and/or questionable narrators (e.g., *Memento*, *Old Boy*, *The Game*), or iterative "time loop" films with protagonists who replay sequences to achieve different outcomes (e.g., *Groundhog Day*, *Run Lola Run*, *Source Code*, *Edge of Tomorrow*)—story events remain fixed within the 90-120 minute runtime. Viewers experience all of the film's content, even if they don't necessarily understand it. There are no such guarantees in video games.

Whether it is due to time, skill, or choice, the performative requirements of gameplay and the open-endedness of their virtual worlds present interactive contingencies that differentiate narrative DLC from fixed televisual content. And, yet, I want to argue that evocative narrative-focused DLC creates novel storytelling opportunities precisely when it innovates on television's seriality *and* when it takes advantage of its own medium-specific ability to uncouple game-story events from linear game-time. I'll now dig into these differences.

Story-driven content comes in two main flavors: *DLC as episodic series* where interdependent installments build upon one another (think of a TV/radio soap opera);

and/or, as modular *world-expanding content* where some material (e.g., storylines, characters, levels, assets, etc.) is added to an existing world. Telltale Games' "point and click"-style franchises offer prime examples of *DLC as episodic series*. Following the success of their *The Walking Dead* adaptation, Telltale Games grew their studio by creating similarly stylized "choose your own adventure" versions of popular IP from the world of games (*Tales from the Borderlands*, *Minecraft: Story Mode*), film (*Batman*), and television (*Law and Order: Legacies*, *Game of Thrones*). In these titles, players make moral decisions and explore multiple story pathways. Many of the games' most difficult decisions are made in limited time and with limited information. Thus, the player's experience of the game-story and their experience of its game-time are closely linked. One feels pressure to make the right choice, both for the character, and to achieve the desired narrative result. Experientially, it is more akin to watching a controllable TV show where one can inhabit characters' headspaces over many hours of serialized gameplay; indeed, their DLC is even organized into episodes and seasons. This genre does not typically privilege quick-twitch control typical of shooters, the exploration of space, or toying with gameplay mechanics typical of role-playing games.

On the other hand, *world-expanding DLC* grants players with access to new stories for an established universe where players are freer to discover and engage narrative events in an order of their choosing. Here, game-story and game-time are frequently uncoupled from one another. For instance, the DLC for *GTA*, *Far Cry*, *The Witcher*, *Fallout*, and *Borderlands* contain quests with recommended sequences of completion. But because players can tackle them in an order of their choosing, and because some missions may be skipped, while others may be unknowingly missed, world-building DLC shifts how players engage and experience those universes. Said differently, in sacrificing narrative tightness, one enjoys a greater sense of serendipity and discovery—the joy of stumbling upon an emergent happening that one can choose to engage or ignore.

Moreover, because the game-story is not always tightly tethered to a singular game-time pathway, story space can be reimagined in new and interesting ways. The DLC for *The Witcher 3* introduces new crafting systems that change how the player fights, which affects how they complete story quests. *Grand Theft Auto IV*'s DLC changes the player's perspective by giving them new characters with competing agendas. The DLC for the *Borderlands* franchise frequently star the main game's peripheral characters, giving them new humor and life. And the DLC for *Red Dead Redemption* reimagines the classic American West as a zombie-filled nightmare. To extend the metaphor, if episodic series DLC are interactive soap operas, then world-expanding DLC are televisual "spin-offs."

DLC is an understudied artifact where we can examine common design conventions shared across games and TV. Perhaps the best way to conclude this response to a question is by posing another: namely, are the televisual elements found in narrative-focused DLC the result of deep structural similarities of form, or are they simply the inevitable consequence of two mediums in transition responding to similar market pressures and abiding by broader transmedia production logics?