

Exploring how players create emergent narrative and character in strategy games

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INTRODUCTION

Emergent narratives are created by players through their gameplay (Moser and Fang 2015). Research into emergent narratives has focused on simulation games, such as *The Sims* (Maxis 2000-2019) (Murray 2006; Perlin 2006), while other game genres with the capacity for players to create emergent narratives, such as strategy games, have remained underexplored. Strategy video games typically use few narrative elements (characterisation, cut-scenes, and linear plots) when compared to other video game genres such as action-adventure (King and Krzywinska 2002). Instead, the gameplay focuses on players selecting a faction, raising armies to conquer neighbouring factions, or engaging in diplomacy with them, and administrating cities (Ghitta & Andrikopoulos 2009). However, there is evidence that players still find narrative resources through this gameplay. Friedman's (1999) analysis of the strategy game, *Civilisation II* (MicroProse 1996), found that players exploration of the geography within the game and the changes they made to it provided them with a story. Furthermore, players of developer Paradox's 'grand strategy games' (Paradox Development Studio 2000-2019) are known to create 'After-Action Reports' (AARs), in which players using screenshots and text create long and detailed accounts of their gameplay that are more like stories, rather than factual reports (Mukherjee 2016; Poole 2018). These are similar to how authors of walkthroughs can present their instructions as a story, rather than a list of directions (Consalvo 2003). Narrative is a sense-making activity that may be undertaken simultaneously or retrospectively by players (Walsh 2011). Therefore, further exploration of emergent narratives in strategy games will lead to greater understanding of how players make sense of their gameplay sessions.

The *Total War* (Creative Assembly 2000-2019) game series represents an opportunity to undertake this exploration as not only are they strategy games, but they also contain several game systems that can be used to create emergent narratives. For example, the series uses a family tree in several games, which visually depicts the

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relationships between the characters, also known as units, belonging to the faction the player is controlling. The characters also have different traits and entourage members (Ghitta and Andrikopoulos 2009). This research explores how players use the family tree mechanic as a prompt for the creation of a story and as a way of making sense of, and adding meaning to, their gameplay of a strategy video game.

Over 800 comments were downloaded from online threads hosted on *Total War* forums and analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) methods and guidelines. Thematic analysis was selected because it is a flexible method that can be applied across a range of theoretical approaches (Braun and Clarke 2006) and can be used to understand how people feel, think, and behave in specific contexts (Guest et al. 2012). The coding was informed by non-participatory netnography, an adaptation of netnography (Scholz and Smith 2019), which does not involve interacting with research participants and community members. Instead, the researchers assumed the roles of active story interpreters, which requires immersion in the context surrounding the data to explore the phenomenon being investigated (Reid and Duffy 2018). This immersion involved playing various *Total War* games (Creative Assembly 2000-2019), reading AARs, news articles about the *Total War* games, online fansites based around the games, and other posts on the forums, prior to the data analysis.

The research found that players expressed emotional attachment to the characters they were controlling and they imbued these characters with personalities, motivations, and values that were constructed by the players during their gameplay sessions. Players also created in-game tributes to their units, or allowed them to retire, despite there not being any strategic in-game benefits. Furthermore, players created and used emergent narratives to make sense of their gameplay indicating the appropriateness of the concept to the research and exploration of players' interaction with strategy games.

BIO

Dr Jacqueline Burgess' research focuses on the production and brand management of narrative brands, ranging from video games to television shows, and she has published her work in multiple peer-reviewed journals. She tutors and course-coordinates business courses at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia.

Dr Christian Jones is Professor of Interactive Media and the leader of the Engage Research Lab at the University of the Sunshine Coast. His research focuses on human-computer interaction, interactive media, and affective computing. He leads multiple large-scale, collaborative projects and his research has been published in over 100 international, peer-reviewed conference and journal articles. His work has also been covered by various journalists in news outlets..

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