Not Choices Matter, but I Matter! Multiple Endings as Quantified Self

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INTRODUCTION

What drove the 'choices matter' controversies of the early 2010s was – for some players – a desire to see the self given grounding in a personalised, sharable, comparable and equally flattering ending. That is – players wanted a quantified self. This paper argues that the quantified self – normally a neoliberal tool for 'self-knowledge' – exists in a similar way within interactive narratives, but that it can be reclaimed as a tool for playful self-creation. Multiple endings, character and faction favour, and alignment systems all exist as different ways of grounding the player's sense of self in a visual image which provides a basis for a 'bottomless' postmodern subject (Garrison, 1998, 111-112), and can serve as a form of 'enunciative productivity' (Fiske, 1992, 37-38). It was not choices matter, but *I* matter! Even so – the self-effacing fictionality of gaming allows players to reclaim the quantified self in a liberating way that is not constrained by the demands of neoliberal capitalism.

Some scholars (Jayemanne, 2017, 293; Nay and Zagal, 2017) have tied three specific games to these controversies, namely *Mass Effect 3* (Bioware, 2012), *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012) and *Life is Strange* (Dontnot Entertainment, 2015)*.* A fixation on 'closure' was present with all three games as players felt like the consequences that were implied by choices were not delivered. While this helps explain the furorore over some choices – in reality choices in these games significantly influenced the story in a number of ways. For example, your choices could prevent Kate Marsh's suicide in *Life is Strange*, or determine the end of the Geth-Quarian war in *Mass Effect 3*. Choices mattered, they just did not particularly effect the ending. In *Life is Strange* the '#bae>bay' outcry on twitter indicated that this was an issue with polysemy. The queer coded ending was denigrated and treated as lesser than the relatively more utilitarian ending (Butt and Dunne, 2017, 5-7). Yet as Stang observes (Stang, 2019), players recontextualised the game through a pop-culture response. It was not enough for some player's self-expression to be validated through pop-culture discourse, but it needed to be treated as equal within the game itself. Comparing these two reveals a broader fixation on *endings*. Some players wanted their ending to be an equally flattering embodiment of the choices they made throughout the play experience. What they wanted was a quantified self.

The quantified self is a tech movement emerging out of the 'californian countercultural ideology' (Jethani, 2021, 25-28) that promotes a community of self-knowledge through self-tracking technology. Quantified self users often compare their data within what Lupton calls a 'show and tell culture', and gain self-understanding through comparison (Lupton, 2016, 12-16). The quantified self is any technology that aims to instantiate the self through personal data, and in doing so

creates a way for users to 'know thyself' and ultimately improve themselves through technology. Code often presents itself in a 'quasi-objective' (Beck, 2016) way, hiding biases within code. The BMI and other weight-measuring systems are a good example of this (Crawford, et al, 2015). More recently, pop-culture personality testing has promised to help users discover a supposed 'hidden self' that can be revealed and compared with others (Stein and Swan, 2019). These personality tests aren't scientific, but present themselves as objective. They also tend to present users with equally 'flattering' (Berberick and McAllister, 2016) personality outcomes.

The quantified self is a neoliberal technology that fits well with interactive narrative. As Eli Cook argues, interactive narratives have their own origins within neoliberalism, and a culture which elevates 'choice' over 'voice' (Cook, 2020, 9). Yet at the same time I argue that some interactive narratives unlock what Jethani calls the 'liberatory latencies' (Jethani, 2015, 39) of the technology. This is because games have a self-effacing fictionality that undermines any claimed objectivity. Few are claiming that 'Chaotic Good' is an objective measure. In addition – player identification with avatars is inherently deniable given the negotiated nature of their ingame performance. Player's might be engaging in an experimental version of themselves, for example. This self-effacing fictionality generates space for players to freely interpret their data. For example, in the computer roleplaying game *Tyranny* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2016)*,* the player's actions are presented as a conflicting set of data points. Most of the player's actions are simultaneously approved of, and disapproved of, by different characters. These characters are presented as diagetically flawed agents, with their own conflicting worldviews. By presenting player data in this self-effacing, contradictory manner the game generates space through which players can choose to creatively interpret their data in a way that is not determined by any 'quasi-objective' standards. The playful space of the game allows players to engage in creative self-construction in a way that is not constrained by the demands of neoliberal capitalism.

BIO
Antranig Sarian is a PhD candidate at Swinburne University of Technology. His research focuses on how interactive narratives help generate a sense of self for players. He has published his research in *Games and Culture, Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture,* and *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*. He is also currently working as a part time narrative designer for Golden Celery games.

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