1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

In recent years, the video game industry has seen a surge in popularity. A video game genre that has drawn in millions of players is Role-playing Game, which is abbreviated as RPG. One of the earliest definitions of RPG is that of Lortz (1979), who defines RPG as "any game which allows a number of players to assume the roles of imaginary characters and operate with some degree of freedom in an imaginary environment" (as cited in Zagal & Deterding, 2018, p. 22). Hence, the allure of RPGs stems from various inherent elements. First, what sets this genre apart from the other genres is the element of role-playing as characters. Players have the capability to create and govern the actions of one or more characters, thus defining and following their individual objectives, while having a considerable degree of autonomy in selecting the actions that they seek to accomplish (Zagal & Deterding, 2018). Additionally, RPG games have rules for character progression, tasks, and combat resolution (Zagal & Deterding, 2018). Players gain a sense of achievement once they reach their personal or game-constructed milestone. For instance, there are battle sequences within RPGs that, when players finally triumph, not only reward them with in-game items to level their characters, but also grant plot progression.

Ultimately, the determinant that creates appeal in RPG games is the interactivity of the story. Because of this, experiencing storytelling in RPGs is markedly distinct from other media that have a linear form of storytelling (Schules et al., 2018). Since the player is given the affordance to choose an action as the characters in the game, they can experience a significant sense of immersion in the story. The act of being involved in the character's decision-making as well as in determining their fate may evoke a deeper connection between the player and the character they are playing as (Bowman, 2018). For example, whatever stakes the character has in the game are likewise applied to the player through the enactment of the character. Moreover, the story in RPG games is contingent upon the player's choice, which causes it to fork into different storylines (Jara & Torner, 2018). It is then up to the player to choose which route they wish to experience completely, which is distinct from other mediums where the audience gets tied to a linear story, restricted from interactivity. Therefore, the features of role-playing, progression systems, and interplay of stories that are present in RPG games are what captivate players into the game genre.

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This particular genre piqued interest for analysis as it is diverse in scope. Zagal and Deterding (2018) argue that due to the social construction of RPGs and the wide variety of their forms and characteristics, attempting to capture an "essential nature" in a definition is fruitless. Instead, a more productive approach is to empirically describe and study the diversity of RPGs from various disciplinary perspectives. Consequently, the focus should be on exploring the insights gained when examining them through specific lenses. From this diversity of form and style, some RPG games have proven to be a means of interdisciplinary studies. By doing this, we do not ask *what* RPGs are, but *how* when examined from different perspectives.

One indie RPG game developer is Omocat. Omocat is recognized as an artist, niche apparel brand, and indie game studio (*BIO — OMOCAT*, n.d.). Most importantly, Omocat is widely known as the creator of the RPG game titled *OMORI*. Prior to its launch, Omocat released a *Kickstarter* campaign for the game in 2014, and was successfully funded over its goal of $22,000 within one day (Suszek, 2014). During the game development, Omocat hired additional team members to aid in the game's development, while keeping a small team size (Omocat, 2014). *OMORI* was first released on macOS and Windows via Steam on December 25, 2020 (*OMORI on Steam*, 2020). Following this, the game was released to Nintendo Switch, Xbox One, and PlayStation 4 (Romano, 2019). In its first week of availability in Japan, *OMORI* for the Nintendo Switch was the nineteenth best-selling retail game in the nation, selling 2,903 physical copies (Romano, 2022). By December 31, 2022, *OMORI* had sold one million copies since its initial release (Sinha, 2023). Furthermore, *OMORI* received two honorable mentions at the 2021 Independent Games Festival (Smith, 2021). Lastly, *OMORI* has received three DreamHack 'Dreamies' nominations in 2021 and won the award for "Daringly Dramatic" (Haring, 2021).

OMORI stands as the only game developed and released by Omocat. As Omocat's first and successful entry into the gaming industry, the critically acclaimed game has sparked community discussion and received praise for its narrative. In contrast to other RPGs, which emphasize gameplay, such as "grinding"—the repetitive completion of tasks to enhance the abilities of the player's character—the appeal of *OMORI* lies in its narrative, with gameplay integrated into it. According to a review by Alex Franiczek in RPGFan (2023), it is observed that the RPG mechanics of *OMORI* may not exhibit an outstanding level of intricacy or thrill. However, these mechanics operate effectively, and certain battles offer a more lasting impact due to their meaningful integration into the narrative. The primary appeal of the game resides in its complex and somber storyline, which has influence over multiple aspects of the overall gaming

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experience. In essence, *OMORI* is distinct from other RPGs in its excellent integration of a melancholic narrative within the gameplay, thereby yielding a unique and thoughtful gaming experience. The critical acclaim renders the game a subject of interest for analysis.

By acknowledging the captivating nature of storytelling and gameplay integration, *OMORI* creates a form of interactive narrative. An interactive narrative, according to Marie-Laure Ryan (2009), is created through the cooperation between the machine and the user. Specifically, the computer manipulates data generated by humans in response to the user's input. In the context of computer and video games that portray a fictional game world, narrative serves not only as a tool for the sense-making process, but also as a vital component of the game itself, allowing players to interact with the game product. In the latter case, video games can also be viewed as narrative artifacts—an instance of interactive narrative. Hence, the active involvement of players in the narrative is key to understanding the game as a form of interactive narrative where players engage with the story rather than passively receiving it. However, this raises the question: "Are games interactive narratives?" After comparing eight definitions of game, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman come up with their definition: "A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome" (2004, p. 80). Regarding digital games, they add four characteristics that encapsulate the distinctive attributes of digital games: 1) immediate but narrow interactivity; 2) information manipulation; 3) automated complex systems; and 4) networked communication (pp. 87-91). According to this definition, it is evident that interactive narratives are not always considered games because they often do not result in a quantifiable outcome. Thus, examining the definition of narrative and narrative text is required to answer the question.

Scholars have written definitions of narrative and narrative text. Narrative, as defined by Onega and Landa (2014), is "the semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way" (p. 3). Mieke Bal defines a narrative text as "a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee ('tells' the reader) a story in a particular medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof" (2017, p. 5). Within the field of narratology, which is the systematic study of narrative, the concept of narrative can be divided into different layers. As an example, Bal presents a three-tier framework: text, story (referred to as "discourse" by other theorists), and fabula (referred to as "story" in other models). After analyzing the definitions pertaining to narrative, we can conclude that if a story is revealed to the player while they are playing a game, the game can be classified as a

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narrative text. With the above definition of interactive narrative, therefore, such games are interactive narratives. According to Huaxin Wei (2011), this domain of research lies in the intersection between digital games and interactive narratives, which she refers to as story-based digital games. Opting for story-based games, as opposed to non-game interactive narratives, for the study provides the research with better access to primary (e.g., the games themselves) and secondary resources (e.g., previous analyses).

> *Explore a strange world full of colorful friends and foes. Navigate through the vibrant and the mundane in order to uncover a forgotten past. When the time comes, the path you've chosen will determine your fate... and perhaps the fate of others as well.*

While the above game information from Omocat's official website gives a vague notion of what the game entails (*OMORI*, n.d.), based on the user-defined tags for the game on Steam, *OMORI* is a story-rich, psychological horror RPG game with pixel graphics (*OMORI on Steam*, 2020). The story of *OMORI* is set in the context of the game's real world, known as Faraway Town, and an imaginary one called Headspace, where a boy named Sunny and his imaginary self, Omori, the player character, explore the two worlds to uncover his mysterious past before he moves out of town. As he explores, Omori has to face various things that remind him of his past. The game information also notes that when it is time, the game will show the fate of the player character as well as the other characters. Players are given the chance to choose which action to take and, subsequently, the narrative they will experience. Despite the limited and enigmatic game information, it remains focused on its narrative.

After conducting a thorough examination of games as interactive narratives, this thesis specifically delves into the realm of narrative design in digital games. Literary studies, as a discipline, attempts to understand *what* texts mean (*hermeneutics*) and *how* they evoke these meanings (*poetics*). According to Jara and Torner (2018), past studies on RPGs have chiefly adopted two major manifestations of literary studies: *textual analysis*, which is concerned with the meaning and interpretation of RPGs, and *narratology*, which focuses on formally describing how RPGs and their stories are constructed. Jara and Torner (2018) argue that RPGs *become* literature when we choose to read their texts in a literary fashion. Literary studies focuses on verbally encoded affixed language. Spoken or written language is often the main substance of gameplay in RPGs (Jara & Torner, 2018, p. 266). RPGs can be viewed from different viewpoints in literary studies. According to Katie and Zimmerman (2003), games are complex as they are "products of *human culture* that fulfill a range of needs, desires, pleasures, and uses, and *design*

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culture that reflects a host of technological, material, formal, and economic concerns." Thus, it would be ineffective to view such a complex phenomenon from a single perspective. They propose the solution of *game design schemas* to tackle this complexity. A *schema* is a way of framing and organizing knowledge. A *game design schema* is a way of understanding games, a conceptual lens that we can apply to the analysis or creation of a game (2003). They organized the points of view according to three primary schemas: *rules, play, and culture*. Among the three primary schemas, the *play* schema contains "experiential, social, and representational game design schemas that foreground the player's participation with the game and with other players" (2003). By recognizing the *game design schema*, we can look at games as storytelling systems. In other words, we explore *how* digital games present meaningful stories. In the context of story-based games, the fictional world is capable of conveying a narrative. Hence, this thesis adopts the perspective of viewing games as *narrative play*, framing the space in video games as a narrative space, and delves into the intricacies of narrative design within digital games.

1.2 Statement of the problem

I aim to explore what narrative and gameplay techniques are used in the narrative design of *OMORI* and how the techniques incite certain perceived emotional immersion in the player.

1.3 Purpose of the study

In this study, I will reveal that the game uses unpredictability and trauma-driven narrative as a guiding principle in the narrative design and explain how unpredictability incites immersive horror and trauma-driven narrative develops a sense of emotional connection in the potential player experience.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study specifically addresses an observable gap in the current research on narrative structure in the game *OMORI*. Academic research on *OMORI* thus far covers the game's environmental design (Younis & Fedtke, 2024). Hence, this study may contribute new insights to the field of game studies by analyzing the narrative structure of *OMORI*.

Moreover, this research expands the understanding of multimodal narratives by bringing together the fields of game studies and literature studies. In the particular context of the English for Creative Industry program, this study serves as a novel attempt to explore video games as a means of storytelling, inspiring future studies and encouraging more extensive exploration of games alongside traditional literary and cinematic forms.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

In this thesis, I will use Bal's (2017) theory of narratology to clarify the specific narrative layer I will analyze. Bal describes narratology as a collection of theories related to narrative analysis (p. 3). Middeke et al. (2012) describe narratology as studying how narrative devices and elements work together (p. 225). Bal's (2017) three-layer model distinguishes between different layers of narrative, defined as follows:

1. A *text* is a finite, structured whole composed of signs. These can be in words and sentences, or cinematic shots and sequences.

    (a) A *narrative text* is a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee ("tells" the viewer) a story in a medium, such as languages, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof.

2. A *story* is the content of that text and produces a particular manifestation, inflection, and "coloring" of a fabula.

3. A *fabula* is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors.

From the aforementioned definition, it is evident that there are various levels in narratives. Wei (2011) argues that Bal's model is suitable for game narrative analysis because it addresses the *narrating* or *story* layer in games (p. 31). Other models do not address aspects relevant to game studies, such as narrative space and interactive process in gameplay, and thus, they cannot contribute significantly to the analysis. Wei's (2011) framework will be used to identify and analyze narrative and gameplay techniques that contribute to unpredictability and trauma-driven narrative. Since games require player involvement for the narrative to unfold, considering the player's role is essential (Wei, 2011, pp. 13-14).

The story-based game analyzed in this research features a pre-established "skeleton" narrative. According to Wei (2011), the "representational" aspect of narrative in digital games implies that the story must exist before its narration or rendering for the narrative to accurately depict events (p. 34). Game designers provide a partial narrative, leaving room for players to engage and contribute through their actions. This approach creates narrative gaps intentionally, adding interactivity while maintaining narrative coherence. Key features of game narrative include its procedural nature and interactivity, where players collaboratively shape the final story as they engage in gameplay. As such, this study adopts an integrated view of narrative and gameplay, as well as taking into account players' role in advancing the narrative.

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Wei's framework considers four aspects in a game narrative: time, space, game text, and game plot. These aspects examine the temporal and presentational structure of narrative techniques. The temporal structure involves the arrangement of events and their sequence, while the presentational structure focuses on how the game world is presented, including visual, auditory, and textual information (Wei, 2011, p. 64). *Order* in games refers to the connection between the order of storytelling events and the order of events in gameplay (Wei, 2011, p. 41). In other words, the temporal structure focuses on the arrangement of events and the order in which these event are told while playing.

Narrative space in games is critical for storytelling. Wei (2011) explains that when reading a narrative text, the audience works on the mental construction of the *storyworld* to comprehend the narrative space (p. 54). The *game's storyworld* is where both scripted events and player actions take place. The key characteristic of game space is that it is dynamic and can be interacted with (p. 54). Clearly, the audience has more visual cues to construct the storyworld for narratives in screen-based media. Furthermore, games often use embedded narrative as a way to convey stories. According to Wei (2011), games with environmental storytelling convey narratives not only through characters but also through objects (p. 81). These brief narratives frequently have an unidentified narrator. In games, non-textual artifacts are found in the form of audio tapes and pictures that convey stories.

The concept of epistemic plot helps explain the outcome of techniques that manifest a trauma-driven narrative. Wei (2011) explains that the epistemic plot revolves around the curiosity to uncover information, as seen in mystery stories. Ryan (2008) describes it as a combination of two stories: one formed by the events that took place in the past, and the other by the investigation that leads to their discovery (p. 7). Narrative tension arises from the balance between revealing and withholding information (or presenting them with the wrong information), challenging the audience to engage actively in sorting through clues and piecing together the story (Wei, 2011, p. 99). This engagement is crucial in trauma-driven narratives, where the uncovering of traumatic events and their implications creates emotional and cognitive tension.

Unpredictability in narrative structure creates uncertainty and surprise for players, which are essential components in horror and trauma narratives. Techniques such as jump scares and unreliable narrators contribute to unpredictability. Jump scares are "scripted moment (as in a film or video game) intended to startle the audience" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Effective jump

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scares divert from players' expectations, requiring precise narrative ordering and presentation to maximize their impact in giving the player a sense of fear, tension, and emotional engagement. Unreliable narrators, on the other hand, provide inaccurate or insufficient information, causing players to doubt the narrative and question their understanding of the story (Phelan & Booth, 2010, p. 388-392). The recounting of the story and events by characters can be unreliable in certain ways. Phelan and Booth identified six kinds of unreliability: misreporting, misreading, and misregarding; under-reporting, under-reading, and under-regarding. Narrators potentially become unreliable in recounting by being inaccurate or insufficient toward the mark (Phelan & Booth, 2010). Game characters can tell inaccurate or insufficient information to players, thus leading them to second-guess the recounting from characters. This may render doubt and uncertainty in the player, subsequently contributing to unpredictability.

To help identify and analyze elements that manifest a trauma-driven narrative, I will explain about trauma narratives. The word *trauma* comes from the old Greek word *traumat*, which means 'wound.' Narrative theorists are interested in trauma theory because trauma is seen as an aberration from normal memory, which hinders an individual's capacity to narrate events in a typical way and develop a personal story (Kacandes, 2010, p. 615). Trauma narratives often involve fragmented and non-linear storytelling, reflecting the disordered nature of traumatic memories. Key concepts in trauma narratives include agency, non-chronological order, and repetition (Kuznetsova, 2017). Laurie Vickroy (2002) argues that trauma narratives allow readers to reflect on themes of loss, death, and suffering, exploring marginalized experiences and raising awareness about the impact of trauma (as cited in Kuznetsova, 2017, pp. 17-18). In digital games, trauma narratives provoke empathy and critical thought (Kuznetsova, 2017, p. 15). Examining these elements in game narratives helps gauge their effectiveness in evoking empathy and critical thought in players.

To understand how unpredictability incites immersive horror in players, it is essential to clarify the concepts of horror in games and immersion. Horror games evoke fear, tension, and revulsion (Prohászková, 2012). Perron (2012) argues that horror games create novelty, hence evoking fear in players in various ways. Some techniques pertain to the visual elements of the game environment, such as darkness, strangeness, and blurriness; others pertain to the narrative itself, such as nightmares, isolation, and paranoia; and others pertain to the game's audio, such as suspenseful music and eerie and terrifying sound effects (Demarque & Lima, 2013). Horror has its significance as Carroll (2003) states, "horror attracts because anomalies command

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attention and elicit curiosity" (p. 195). The setting of tension, fluctuations in the story structure, and abrupt scares may fulfill the psychological needs of the viewers (Zhang, 2022, pp. 11-12). Schaeffer and Vultur (2010) describe immersion, in a general sense, as a state of absorption in some action, condition, or interest (p. 238). In digital games, immersion is a fundamental aspect of human consciousness, not limited to gameplay, taking many forms and encompassing a variety of experiences with distinct cognitive and emotional processes (Bowman, 2018, p. 379).

Furthermore, I will apply the theory of narrative tension to explain how unpredictability may incite immersive horror in players. The theory of multidimensional narrative tension by Bermejo-Berros et al. (2022) combines theories of curiosity, interest, and enjoyment, explaining emotional and cognitive tension in narratives. This tension involves a gap between the information provided and the outcome, creating suspense and surprise that increases enjoyment. In games, cognitive and emotional elements may cause players to analyze and emotionally react to the unsettling narrative, adding to horror experiences. Moreover, unpredictable events and narrative twists in games maintain suspense and surprise, keeping players engaged and emotionally invested in the story. Lastly, the resolution of narrative tension provides cathartic enjoyment, even within a horror context, as players navigate through fear and uncertainty to reach a satisfying conclusion.

To explain how trauma-driven narrative may develop a sense of emotional connection, I will apply transportation theory by Green and Brock (2000). Transportation theory posits that individuals become absorbed in a narrative. Stories are effective means of engaging people into an experience through creating an attachment between the audience and the narrative events experienced by the characters (Green & Brock, 2000). When absorbed into a story, viewers can be more receptive to its messages and themes, possibly influencing their real-world beliefs and attitudes. Furthermore, characters play a role in emotionally connecting players. Bopp et al. (2019) argue that game character attachment is an important factor to engaging and emotional player experiences. As players become the characters themselves, who become active participants in the story, it increases the chance of forming attachment to game characters.

1.6 Organization of the Study

This study is organized into three chapters. The first chapter provides an overview of the background of the text used in the research, as well as explain the theoretical framework that will be applied in this study. The second chapter includes the application of theories in order to facilitate the analysis of the subject matter, while also presenting evidence from the text to

support the arguments. The third chapter will encompass the research's conclusion and the references used the preceding chapters.