

Functions and powers of barks in video games: reclaiming the margins of video games narrativity

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INTRODUCTION

This paper offers a quick study of the effects of video game barks within the narrative experience of the game. Those dialogues are often defined as lines told by NPCs to which the player-character is unable to answer (when they are walking in the streets or in a fight, for example). Narrative designers tend to consider those “short” (Sabbagh, 2020) “disconnected” (Mikkelson, 2020) dialogues as secondary in the narrative. Players and journalists frequently make fun of their repetition and absurdity (Despain, 2008; PC Gamer, 2020). Contrary to branching dialogues, they are seldom studied by researchers. Video game barks are thus collectively relegated as one of the margins of video games narrativity. However, those barks seem less inconsequential when their experience and temporality are considered: they take a long time to write, and they are heard over and over again by players. Studying barks is thus an opportunity to understand how a margin, constructed in the collective imaginary, is individually negotiated in the experience of designing or playing a game.

TYOLOGY OF BARKS

Using of the concept of “effect” (Barthes, 1968), the first part of the study is a formalist analysis grounded in fiction theory (Eco, 1985; Dolezel, 1998), research on video game narrativity (Murray, 1998) and immersion (Calleja, 2011; Couturier & Trépanier-Jobin, 2018), as well as analysis of secondary characters (Samoyault, 2008; Daunais, 2018). Barks are analysed as units which encompass (written or voiced) text, characters, behaviours, sound design, and programming elements. A corpus of six contemporary RPG allows us to distinguish three main categories of barks, which are not mutually exclusive.

The first function of barks is to give a gameplay clue. However, this information is redundant: other semiotic elements (visual effects,...) give the same instructions. Those barks thus have a kinaesthetic effect: the words are less important than the fact that

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something is said. Like a faint music in the player's ears, they give the tempo of the play and contribute to systemic immersion (i.e. the absorption of the player in the action).



Figure 1: Gameplay bark. *Divinity: Original Sin* (Larian Studios, 2014)

The second function of barks is diegetic. They participate in the creation of the illusion of an autonomous, complete, and coherent world, because they give incomplete stories that may be finished by the player, because they are both optional and seem to exist without the presence of the avatar (feeling of non-agency for the player). The barks also characterise the NPCs: representing their relationships or their interior life, they give them a shred of personality. However, rather than creating individuals, they build types of characters. The barks also contribute, by a mirroring effect, to define the player-character, because they are the subject of comment or because they are either part of the constituted groups or not. Individually, each bark has an immersive narrative effect because they illustrate the world encyclopedia and give flesh to the characters, but collectively those short dialogues create sensorial immersion thanks to their indetermination. When there are a lot of one-liners, when barks overlap each other, they become noises that materialize the sound colours of the fictional world.



Figure 2: Worldbuilding barks. *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (Square Enix, 2020)

The third function of barks is reflexive. Barks not only have immersive effects, but also tend to create distancing attitudes for the player, relying on the connivance between the developers and the audience. They are often used for humour, jokes, and intertextual

references to other games or cultural objects. Because they can be memorable (be it on purpose or accidentally), they are also prime material for fan participation: some of them become memes.

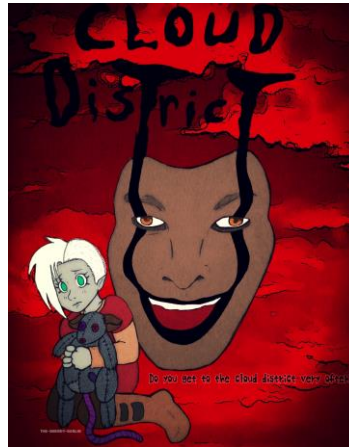


Figure 3: Personal interpretation of a *Skyrim* meme (Bethesda Game Studio, 2011). The-Gnerdy-Goblin, « Cloud DistrIcT », Deviant Art, 17/0720. URL : <https://www.deviantart.com/the-gnerdy-goblin/art/Cloud-DistrIcT-849064462>

The three functions of barks show that they are always small, redundant, optional, incomplete pieces of content that potentially have strong effects (systemic, diegetic, sensorial, spacial, emotional, metamediatic engagement). The importance of the barks in the play, the fact that they are central or not in the experience, depends on the actualisation of the game by the player. The barks are a narrative entity which shows how much the margin is always negotiated, inside and outside the game.

POWERS OF BARKS

The formalist analysis of barks in existing games leads to question the powers of barks, and more precisely their ethical potentials. Because of their specific status, as edges of the narrative which can quickly become the centre of the attention, the barks are an interesting element not only to give gameplay information, to create characters, to build a world, or to make a humourous comment, but also to tackle political questions regarding social issues such as sexism, racism, and ableism. The second part of the paper focuses on the research-creation project RecovR (The Seed Crew, 2021), a game which talks about different kinds of discriminations and oppressions. Using the methodology of a storytelling of the artistic practice, based on documentation and noticeable events (Paquin, 2019), we use this experience to question how barks, as marginal spaces, can interrogation social experiences of the margin.



Figure 4: Barks in the current version of *RecovR* (The Seed Crew, 2021).

The fragmentary representation of everyday life events, with its myriad of discriminatory comments, is a great way to create a sense of familiarity for the player. It is a useful way to present ethical problems, without being too instructive or patronizing. However, because the barks of *RecovR* were first conceived as rumours, they could be experienced as violent, because the player didn't have the chance to confront the authors of oppressive statements. The system was changed to give agency to the players. The short, optional dialogues are still in the margin of the main experience, but can easily be appropriated by the player who deems the small stories important.

Finally, we argue that the minor status of barks allow them to be a relatively free creative space within often very normative design practices, and thus are empowering creative tools that can be used by queers and marginalized people in the industry.

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