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# Expanding Network Narrative: The Impact of Social Networks on Meaning Construction in Cinematic Digital Games - The Analysis of Detroit: Become Human[1]

## *Ağ Anlatıyı Genişletmek: Sinematik Dijital Oyunlarda Sosyal Ağların Anlam İnşasına Etkisi Üzerine Detroit: Become Human İncelemesi*

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**ABSTRACT:** This study questions why player comments and collective meaning-making processes generated on social networks should be considered in the analysis of network narrative structures in cinematic digital games. The dominant formal network narrative analysis examples encountered in the literature treat the narrative as a structural framework through nodes, edges, and paths. However, these studies encountered during the review process fall short of explaining how the player experiences this structure, how they emotionally appropriate it, and how they transform it on social networks. To address this gap in the literature, player comments on the game *Detroit: Become Human (Quantic Dream, 2018)* on the Steam platform were analyzed using the Constructivist Grounded Theory method. Systematic coding of 75 user comments revealed that players shaped the narrative around five main categories: Narrative Appropriation and Emotional Investment, Interface and System Intervention in the Narrative, Collective Narrative Positioning, Desire to Fill and Complete the Narrative Gap, and Post-Narrative Lasting Impact. These categories empirically reveal the shortcomings of formal network narrative analysis in explaining player experience. More importantly, however, they demonstrate that the inclusion of social network data in network narrative analyses is a methodological necessity. The study concludes with a proposed "Digital-Social Network Narrative Model" that integrates formal network structure with social network content.

***Key Words:*** *Network Narrative, Digital Games, Constructivist Grounded Theory, Cinema, Detroit: Become Human.*

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**Öz:** Bu çalışma, sinematik dijital oyunlardaki ağ anlatı yapılarının analizinde, sosyal ağlarda üretilen oyuncu yorumlarının ve kolektif anlam inşa süreçlerinin neden hesaba katılması gerektiğini sorgulamaktadır. Literatürde karşılaşılan ve hâkim olan biçimsel ağ anlatı analizi örnekleri anlatıyı düğümler, kenarlar ve yollar üzerinden yapısal bir çerçeve olarak ele almaktadır. Ancak tarama esnasında karşılaşılan bu çalışmalar oyuncunun bu yapıyı nasıl deneyimlediğini, duygusal olarak nasıl sahiplendiğini ve sosyal ağlarda nasıl dönüştürdüğünü açıklamakta yetersiz kalmaktadır. Literatürdeki bu boşluğu gidermek amacıyla, *Detroit: Become Human (Quantic Dream, 2018)* oyununa dair Steam platformundaki oyuncu yorumları, Yapılandırmacı Gömülü Kuram yöntemiyle analiz edilmiştir. 75 kullanıcı yorumunun sistematik kodlaması sonucunda, oyuncuların anlatıyı beş ana kategori etrafında şekillendirdiği tespit edilmiştir: Anlatısal Sahiplenme ve Duygusal Yatırım, Arayüz ve Sistemin Anlatıya Müdahalesi, Kolektif Anlatı Konumlandırması, Anlatı Boşluğunu Doldurma ve Tamamlama Arzusu, Anlatı Sonrası Kalıcı Etki. Bu kategoriler, biçimsel ağ anlatı analizinin oyuncu deneyimini açıklamakta yetersiz kaldığı noktaları ampirik olarak ortaya koymaktadır. Fakat daha önemlisi, ağ anlatı çözümlemelerine sosyal ağ verilerinin dahil edilmesinin metodolojik bir zorunluluk olduğunu göstermektedir. Çalışma, biçimsel ağ yapısı ile sosyal ağ içeriklerini bütünleştiren "Dijital-Sosyal Ağ Anlatı Modeli" önerisiyle sonuçlanmaktadır.

***Anahtar Kelimeler:*** *Ağ Anlatı, Dijital Oyunlar, Yapılandırmacı Gömülü Kuram, Sinema, Detroit: Become Human.*

## INTRODUCTION

Digital games, which can be said to constitute the final link in the chain of narrative today, stand out as the latest breaking point in the evolutionary process of narrative. Whether in the pages of any classic novel or in the scenes of any film, traditional narratives place the viewer or reader in a relatively passive position. In traditional narratives, the narrative inevitably progresses along a predetermined path set by its creator, and the role of the experiencer is limited to following and interpreting this path. However, in contrast, digital games fundamentally shake this accustomed and accepted paradigm. They place action and decision at the very center of the narrative. Unlike the traditional viewer or reader, the player is not merely an agent directing a character. They also rise to the position of co-producer of the narrative (Laurel, 1993, p. 134). Yet, this process of co-creating a narrative inevitably raises some fundamental questions, some such as: what exactly constitutes a narrative, where does it begin and end, and who truly shapes it?

One of the most striking examples of this profound transformation can be found in cinematic digital games, which merge the visual and narrative language of cinema with the interactive nature of gameplay to deliver an intertwined, multi-layered experience (Galloway, 2006, pp. 62–65). In this study, "cinematic digital game" does not simply mean a game with movie-like cutscenes. It's a production that brings formal and narrative elements from cinema—camera work, editing, mise-en-scène, sound design, and emotional experience—straight into interactive play. Drawing on Galloway (2006), cinematics here is not a genre label; it's a set of design strategies that shape how the player relates to the narrative. This operational definition lets the study approach games like Detroit: Become Human as structures that go beyond branching narrative schemas—they provoke emotional investment and collective meaning-making. For example, games with multiple choices and endings, such as Detroit:

Become Human and Cyberpunk 2077, give the player not only the opportunity to watch a story unfold, but also to weave the fabric of that story with their own hands, determining how it will end. Of course, each choice activates a new node in the narrative network, closing some paths and opening others. This is an experience that classical cinema could never offer, excluding the very limited number of recent productions that are debated as to whether they are interactive films or games. Two people watching the same film twice in a cinema usually see the same thing; however, two people playing the same game twice usually experience two completely different stories.

One of the narrative studies and theories that examine narrative structure in both cinema and games is network narrative. Although it is considered a relatively new theory in literature, cinema, and games, it has been used in more than a dozen studies in both domestic and international literature to date. However, when looking at how it has been applied so far, it is seen that existing 'network narrative' theories are generally insufficient in analyzing the narrative by limiting it to the branching networks within the story. Existing network narrative analyses treat the narrative as a formal graph structure of nodes, edges, and paths (Ryan, 2006; Herman, 2002; Ciccoricco, 2007), but they fail to account for how players emotionally experience, appropriate, and socially transform this structure. This form of analysis is, of course, successful in making visible the structure hidden in the game's code or flowchart. The researcher can map all the possibilities embedded in the game's database, schematically showing which decisions lead to which outcomes. However, when this approach is chosen, the narrative is treated merely as an architectural plan. It describes the structure itself, but ignores the experiences, emotions, misunderstandings, and networks of meaning constructed among those who live within that structure.

However, when examining the narratives of today's networked society (Castells, 1996, pp. 412-418), a game's narrative extends beyond the game engine. It is reproduced, discussed, and transformed into Reddit forums, Steam comments, YouTube videos, Discord servers, and all other virtual media platforms where opinions can be shared. A point that a player cannot reach within their own experience can gain new meaning when combined with another player's narrative. Similarly, unlike the formal structure of the game, a character's motivation can be collectively reinterpreted by the community. In some cases, players even develop 'alternative story interpretations' (headcanons) that the game doesn't officially offer and circulate them within the community. In short, network narrative is not merely the formal structure within the game. The layer of social text woven around that formal structure in virtual networks is also an integral part of network narrative.

At this point, the fundamental problem of this study becomes clear: Existing network narrative theories confine narrative within formal boundaries and ignore a

second narrative life that begins in social networks. However, for someone experiencing a work, the narrative experience is not limited to what they see on the screen. Even after the work ends, the narrative continues to live on in minds and environments. This is true for films as well as games. A player writes a review on Steam; this review is read by another player and influences how they play the game. A discussion thread is opened on Reddit; dozens of players gather around the question, "What would have happened if I had done this in that scene?" Alternative ending videos are viewed millions of times on YouTube. What needs to be underlined here is that all these interactions collectively serve to expand, transform, and multiply the narrative of the game.

Therefore, based on all the stated reasons, this research, proceeding from the assumption that narrative is not merely a text but a social action, points to a critical gap in existing network narrative theories: their failure to focus on how social networks absorb, transform, and reinterpret narratives by the collective mind. Looking at the current theoretical framework, it appears adept at formally defining 'what' a narrative is; however, despite its competence, it remains silent on how narratives circulate, are negotiated, and reconstructed among actors. Indeed, the subject of this study is to examine this gap and empirically investigate the interaction between the formal and social structures of narratives.

In this context, the main research question underlying this study is: *In cinematic network narrative games, what meaning-construction processes regarding the narrative are reflected in the comments and discussions that players generate on social network platforms like Steam and Reddit?* Based on this main question, the following sub-questions will be addressed: How do players' comments on social networks relate to the formal narrative structure offered by the game? How do collective discussions on social networks transform the player's individual narrative experience? In light of these findings, how should the methodological framework of Network Narrative theory be expanded?

**1. Network Narrative and Cinematic Digital Games**

This section will address two main conceptual axes that form the theoretical basis of this research. First, the historical development of network narrative theory, its origins in cinema, and its adaptation to digital games will be examined. The fundamental components of formal network narrative analysis (node, edge, path, flowchart, replayability), which dominates the literature, will be introduced, and the limitations of this approach will be discussed. Then, the question of the narrative language of cinematic digital games and how meaning is constructed in these games will be addressed within the framework of the three levels of the concept of cinematicity (language, form, experience). Finally, at the intersection of these two axes, a

theoretical foundation will be laid for the questions of how the player negotiates narrative in social networks and participates in collective meaning-making processes.

### 1.1. An Overview of Network Narrative Theory and the Limitations of Formal Analysis

It would not be wrong to define network narrative as one of the narrative forms that best reflects the characteristic features, scientific and technological advancements, and social dynamics of the contemporary era. Network narrative can first be seen in the works of David Bordwell. Bordwell (2006) included the concept of network narrative in his theoretical framework to explain the narrative transformations experienced in Hollywood cinema after 1990. According to him, this concept refers to film narratives constructed around multiple main characters living in geographically separate locations, but whose storylines are intertwined (p. 99). However, with the development of digital games, the concept of network narrative has not been limited to cinema alone. It is particularly used to analyze the narrative structures of choice-based digital games.

Bordwell (2006) states that the origins of the network narrative form extend deep into literary history, but attributes its prevalence in the contemporary period to the network theories that developed in the 1980s and 1990s. Considering it as a narrative form depicting the intersecting lives of multiple characters, he argues that advancements in communication technologies and globalization have made this narrative form more meaningful, both aesthetically and thematically (pp. 100-105). From another perspective, scientific and technological advancements have developed in parallel with researchers' discovery of the interconnectedness of small-world networks and the phenomenon of randomness. In this context, chaos theory is popularly described as the "butterfly effect," while network theory has found its place in popular culture with the concept of "six degrees of separation." This concept is a sociological assumption that suggests there are at most six social connections between each two individuals. This sociological assumption forms one of the fundamental theoretical foundations of network narratives in contemporary cinema.

Among the most accomplished examples of network narrative in cinema are Alejandro González Iñárritu's Amores Perros (2000) and Babel (2006), which powerfully illustrate how the lives of characters situated in entirely different geographical locations, and completely unknown to one another, are nevertheless linked by unseen threads. Turkish cinema has also produced equally successful applications of this narrative technique; Ümit Ünal's Anlat Istanbul (2005) and Fatih Akın's Yaşamın Kıyısında (2007) stand out as particularly noteworthy examples in this regard (Bordwell, 2020, p. 191).

When the theoretical roots of the network narrative concept are situated within the digital realm, discussions of hypertext and cybertext immediately command attention. Landow (2006, pp. 2–5) describes hypertext as a decentralized, non-hierarchical model that enables multiple pathways of movement, thereby dismantling the traditional linear structure of the text. Aarseth (2017, pp. 1–4), on the other hand, defines cybertext as a set of dynamic narrative forms in which the reader or participant assumes an active role in the mechanical process of text production itself. These theoretical foundations are indispensable not only for understanding network narratives, but just as critically for comprehending the complex branching story structures found in contemporary digital games. As Jenkins (2004, pp. 119–124) makes clear, narrative in games is not simply built from cutscenes and dialogue; it also emerges through a phenomenon he designates as "environmental storytelling"—an approach grounded in the purposeful design of spaces, the calculated positioning of objects, and the meticulous construction of atmosphere. Seen through this lens, network narrative reveals itself as something considerably beyond a fixed formal schema; it becomes a multilayered construct that players experience and live through, in real time, as they explore and interact with the game world.

As previously stated, the dominant formal network narrative analysis in the literature treats the narrative as a graph structure. According to this graph structure approach, the narrative structure of a game is modeled like a mathematical graph. According to various researchers (Ryan, 2006, pp. 45-52; Herman, 2002, pp. 112-118; Ciccoricco, 2007, pp. 33-41), the basic components of this model are: **Node:** Each decision point or event point in the narrative. For example, the moment the player decides whether to initiate a peaceful protest or a violent uprising is a node. **Edge:** The concept given to the transitions between nodes, that is, the path from one decision to another. For example, the new chain of events that opens when the player chooses the 'protest' option is an edge. **Path:** The unique narrative route that the player follows from the beginning to the end of the game, created by the choices they make between nodes. Each player's path differs according to the choices they make. **Flowchart:** A visual map showing all the possible nodes and edges of the game. Some games show the player their path on this chart at the end of the game, and some even at the end of each level. **Replayability:** The ability to re-experience the same narrative in different ways by making different choices.

As stated in the introduction, the formal analysis detailed in the previous paragraph is successful, even masterful, in making visible the structure hidden within the game's code or flowchart. The researcher can meticulously map all the possibilities embedded in the game's database and schematically reveal which decision leads to which outcome. However, the formal approach treats the narrative almost like an architectural plan; it describes the structure itself but ignores the experiences, emotions, misunderstandings, and networks of meaning constructed among those

living within it. Yet, when we look at the narratives of today's networked society (Castells, 1996, pp. 412-418), a game's narrative extends beyond the game engine. It is reproduced, discussed, and transformed on various virtual and social platforms and all other virtual media channels where opinions can be shared. In short, network narrative is not merely the formal structure within the game. The layer of social text woven around that formal structure in virtual networks is also an integral part of the network narrative.

Consequently, a fundamental existential deficiency overlooked by researchers working on network narrative theory is thus revealed: their failure to theorize the mechanisms of collective meaning-making in social networks (Couldry & Hepp, 2022, p. 178). While traditional network narratives present a closed system of nodes under the control of the author, meaning on virtual media platforms can be manipulated by algorithms, constructed collectively and fragmentedly, and subjected to instantaneous change. All this and more can be said for meaning making. Because, as Marwick and Boyd (2021, p. 204) point out, meaning in social networks is a constantly negotiated phenomenon. For all these reasons, it is an unavoidable necessity to expand network narrative studies to account for the meaning-making practices of digital society.

**1.2. The Creation of Meaning in Cinematic Digital Games**

When examining the relationship between cinema and digital games, it's important to note that both media have had complex interaction throughout their history. Today, the term 'cinematic game' doesn't simply mean games with many cut-scenes. The term *'cinematic' is* also used to describe productions that integrate the visual language, narrative structures, and emotional experience of cinema into the gameplay. In this context, *cinematicity* can be considered at the three fundamental levels mentioned earlier (Galloway, 2006, pp. 62-65).

The first level, cinematic language, refers to the fundamental elements that constitute the grammar of cinema. Elements such as mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing, and sound are the building blocks of cinematic narrative. Naturally, the transfer of these elements to an interactive environment shows how close a game visually and audibly approaches cinema. Often, motion capture is used in such games. Facial expressions obtained through mocap technology offer a subtlety close to that of acting performances in cinema. The second level, cinematic form encompasses higher-level narrative elements such as narrative structures, genre codes, and thematic frameworks. For example, *Detroit: Become Human* explores the theme of 'the boundary between man and machine' in the science fiction genre, following the classic three-act narrative structure and the hero's journey template. The third level, the cinematic experience, refers to the emotional and cognitive relationship that the

viewer or actor establishes with the narrative. Immersion, identification, and emotional participation are the fundamental components of this level.

In digital games, experienced in various ways due to their existential justifications, meaning is produced in fundamentally different ways than in cinema. Jesper Juul (2005), who studies games, explains them with the concept of 'half-real'. This means that games are systems that operate with real rules on the one hand, but on the other hand, they offer fictional worlds. Thus, this dual structure shows that the meaning in games enters a two-way meaning-production process through both rules and representations. Within this two-way meaning-production process, the formation of meaning in digital games takes place in three basic layers (Sicart, 2009, pp. 75-82). The first of these is the meaning of design, produced through the rules and mechanics of the game. For example, in *Detroit: Become Human*, the limited time given to make choices allows the player to experience decision-making under pressure. The second is the meaning of narrative, corresponding to the narrative content conveyed through cutscenes, dialogues, and texts. The third layer pertains to the meaning that arises from the player's actions—meaning that flows directly from the choices the player makes and the consequences those choices bring about. This final layer may be regarded as the single most defining characteristic that sets games apart from other art forms, as it ultimately rests on the active participation of the experiencer. Unlike the audience of a film or the reader of a novel, the player does not simply interpret a world that already exists; through their actions, they actively shape, transform, and even recreate that world.

A close reading of the game studies literature shows that the most fundamental debates concerning the narrative nature of games almost always revolve around the long-standing tension between ludology and narratology. On one side of this theoretical divide, Eskelinen (2001, p. 178) insists that games exist to be played and realistically cannot be taken apart using narrative theories, while Frasca (2003, pp. 222–223) maintains that games function more as simulations than as narratives. Murray (1997, pp. 126–130), however, comes at the matter from a markedly different angle, drawing attention to the holodeck-like narrative potential that digital environments can offer to the five human senses and arguing that games, far from rejecting narrative, actually transform it and extend its reach.

In the end, though, these theoretical debates become most concrete in the active role the actor takes in shaping the narrative. Adams (2013, p. 154) highlights the power the actor holds over the story's direction. It comes down to the decisions they make. He even argues that, in building a narrative, the actor and the director carry equal weight. Furthermore, Sayılgan's (2014, p. 72) doctoral study on actor reception practices empirically demonstrated that participants systematically exhibited a tendency towards co-authorship. Consequently, these findings show that

the actor not only experiences a predetermined narrative but also actively reconstructs it through their own acting practices.

However, when considering the qualitative formation of meaning and the aesthetic adequacy of narrative, narrative depth is sought in games, as in all works of art. The narrative depth of cinematic digital games is constructed not only by the player's choices but also by the game's audiovisual design. King and Krzywinska (2006, pp. 143-145) state that cinematic games inherit and transform elements of camera use, editing, and mise-en-scene from cinema. In addition, Tavinor (2009, pp. 61-63) considers games as an art form. He argues that the aesthetic experience of games parallels cinema but differs from it in its interactive dimension. On the other hand, Bogost (2007, pp. 28-35) suggests that games can present arguments about the real world by modeling processes and systems through a mechanism he calls 'procedural rhetoric'. Especially in games with moral choices, the player's choices directly affect the course and ending of the story. The choices each actor makes naturally reflect their own values, priorities, and moral stance. Faced with a pivotal decision—saving one character, sacrificing another—the actor imbues the role with personality and projects their own worldview onto the performance. This kind of involvement necessitates a far more active form of participation from the audience, extending considerably beyond mere passive reception.

**2. Method**

This study employs Kathy Charmaz's (2006, pp. 10–15; 2014, pp. 17–22) Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) as its qualitative research framework. The fit is an apt one: the research seeks to develop an exploratory, process-oriented model of how players negotiate narratives within social networks. CGT rests on the premise that the researcher is never positioned outside the data as a detached, neutral observer; instead, meaning is co-constructed through an ongoing exchange between the researcher and the data, spanning from the initial collection of material through to the final analysis. This epistemological stance renders the method particularly suited to examining the kind of naturally occurring data that players voluntarily produce when sharing their gaming experiences on platforms like Steam.

The study sample was drawn from the top 75 user reviews of Detroit: Become Human on Steam, selected through the platform's "Most Helpful" filter. This filter was deliberately chosen for a specific reason: reviews that the community marks as most helpful—those receiving the highest ratings from other players—tend to generate the most discussion, contain the richest content, and offer the most in-depth assessments of the narrative. In total, 75 reviews were recorded, and each participant was assigned a unique identifier code from DBH-P1 to DBH-P75. The playtime data within the dataset displayed considerable variation, spanning from a mere 1.5 hours to an extensive 229.8 hours. As a result, the selected reviews encompass both the

immediate reactions of players just embarking upon the game and the considered evaluations of experienced players who had completed it multiple times.

The data analysis phase was carried out in accordance with the systematic stages of CGT. In the first stage, open coding was performed; each interpretation was read line by line, the question "What is going on here?" was posed, and codes were created in gerund format—for instance, "Filling the Narrative Gap," "Being Subjected to the Imposition of the Interface," "Discovering an Alternative Path" (Charmaz, 2014, pp. 109–113). In the second stage, focused coding was employed to group analogous codes into overarching categories; using the constant comparative method, each new piece of data was systematically checked against existing codes and categories. The third stage involved theoretical coding to model the relationships among these categories. The fourth and final stage consisted of a comparative analysis, in which formal network narrative codes drawn from the literature—Node, Edge, Path, Flowchart, Replayability—were used as analytical templates and compared with the social network codes derived from the analysis. This comparative process unfolded in three systematic steps: first, each formal code was operationalized as an analytical template based on definitions from Ryan (2006), Herman (2002), and Ciccoricco (2007); second, the five social network categories that had emerged from the focused coding were revisited to identify which player experiences aligned with which formal code. For instance, comments about emotionally charged turning points were mapped onto “Node,” while talk of interface-imposed barriers went under “Edge.” In the final stage, we formulated a limitation statement for each formal-social pair, spelling out precisely what the formal code left unaccounted for. The mapping was carried out iteratively by two researchers, and whenever a point of disagreement arose, we talked it through until consensus was reached. The full outcome of this comparative analysis is laid out in Table 6.

Theoretical saturation was reached when no new codes showed up and the existing categories stopped changing—for 20 reviews in a row (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 96–100). Out of all 75 reviews we analyzed, the last 20 added nothing new. The five main categories we’d already built didn’t shift at all. Taken together, these signs point to saturation for Detroit: Become Human. So we didn’t need to gather any more data.

These findings come from Steam reviews of a single game. They may not extend to other platforms, game genres, or player populations—that’s something future research would need to explore.

**3. Findings: The Detroit: Become Human Case**

Through the systematic coding process at the heart of CGT, five main categories took shape from the player reviews of Detroit: Become Human. These five categories reflect how players experienced, interpreted, and discussed the narrative on social networks.

### 3.1. Category 1: Narrative Ownership and Emotional Investment

This category reveals the deep emotional connection players develop with the game's narrative and characters, and their tendency to personalize the narrative. Players don't simply watch a story unfold; they, at the same time internalize the narrative, making it part of their own experience. Representative quotes related to this category can be seen in the table below:

**Table 1: Representative quotations related to the narrative ownership and emotional investment categories**

| Participant | Playing Time | Direct Quote | Code |
|---|---|---|---|
| DBH-P7 | 14.4 hours | *"Around 5 AM, Detroit Becomes... " I finished Human with the worst possible ending. I was going on a long trip around 6, but I didn't want to turn it off before it was over, so I stayed up all night. I was crying while getting dressed."* | Experiencing Narrative Regret |
| DBH-P17 | 11.8 hours | *" Connor taught me that morality is a choice, not a code; Kara taught me that the value of love doesn't depend on who the other person is; and Marcus taught me that control is more powerful than anger. "* | Identifying with the Character / Extracting the Moral Lesson from the Narrative |
| DBH-P25 | 22.3 hours | *"Now, before going to sleep, I think not about the stupid things I did 5 years ago, but about the bad decisions I made under pressure."* | Experiencing Narrative Regret |
| DBH-P28 | 16 hours | *"For me, it's the best game of all time. Sometimes I open it up and watch it again and again, time passes, then I watch videos of it… Hank and Connor are my favorite characters in the game."* | Becoming Emotionally Attached to a Character |
| DBH-P63 | 11.5 hours | *"I fell in love with Kara."* | Becoming Emotionally Attached to a Character |

### 3.2. Category 2: Interface and System Interference in Narrative

This category describes how the game's technical infrastructure, control scheme, and interface design affect, guide, or sometimes sabotage the player's narrative experience. In particular, Quick Time Event (QTE) mechanics and timers stand out as elements that prevent the player from following their desired narrative path in this

category. Representative quotes related to this category can be seen in the table below:

**Table 2: Representative quotations related to the category of interface and system intervention in narrative**

| Participant | Playing Time | Direct Quote | Code |
|---|---|---|---|
| DBH-P14 | 16.6 hours | *the QTEs that appear during action scenes, your characters can die. When your characters die, the game doesn't give any gameover or anything like that. Your characters die in the usual story and you can't bring them back."* | Experiencing the Permanence of Character Death |
| DBH-P16 | 19.7 hours | *"However, when making choices, you need to make quick decisions within time limits. Play the game on easy mode. If you play on hard mode, you might miss certain animations, leading to character loss and making it difficult to steer the story in the direction you want."* | Making Decisions Under Interface Pressure |
| DBH-P29 | 22.4 hours | *"The dialogue selection time given to the player could have been longer."* | Reacting to the Restriction of Freedom of Choice Due to Time Constraints |
| DBH-P54 | 45.5 hours | *"If you're playing with a keyboard and mouse , you might sometimes encounter problems with large screens. For example, in a few levels that required quick reflexes, I had to replay the level from the beginning because the mouse wasn't properly detected."* | Being Subjected to a Control Scheme Sabotaging the Narrative |

### 3.3. Category 3: Collective Narrative Positioning

Looking at the third category that emerged, it was observed that the actors compared their own narrative experiences with the experiences of other actors. In addition, the actors showed a tendency to measure how 'common' or 'unusual' their choices were through statistical data and to position their narrative identities through this comparison. Representative quotations related to this category can be seen in the table below:

**Table 3: Representative quotations related to the collective narrative positioning category**

| Participant | Playing Time | Direct Quote | Code |
|---|---|---|---|
| DBH-P23 | 1.5 hours | *"You have the option to compare your choices with your friends and other players around the world. You'll see a poll option on the far right of the main menu."* | Socially Positioning Elections |
| DBH-P29 | 22.4 hours | *"It was nice to see the percentage of players who chose which options at the end of the episode. That way I could see how many people thought like me."* | Statistical Sense of Belonging / Curiosity About the Community's Path |
| DBH-P71 | 24.4 hours | *"The first time I finished it, I finished it thinking about whether it was right or wrong. Now I've finished it again, this time playing it from the perspective of what I would do if I were completely myself. So I've finished two different games."* | Changing Narrative Identity in Multiplayer |
| DBH-P45 | 12.7 hours | *"After watching it repeatedly from different streamers, I finally had the chance to play it myself this year."* | Learning Alternative Paths from Others |

### 3.4. Category 4: The Desire to Fill and Complete Narrative Gaps

The fourth category refers to players' preferences to fill, complete, or reframe narrative elements that the game intentionally leaves open or insufficiently explained, through their own interpretations. Representative quotations relating to this category can be seen in the table below:

**Table 4: Representative quotations related to the category of desire to fill and complete narrative gaps**

| Participant | Playing Time | Direct Quote | Code |
|---|---|---|---|
| DBH-P30 | 32.5 hours | *any spoilers about its story, I'd just like to talk about its function and say that it 's almost a mythical savior among androids . Considering that we make all the decisions in the game, I think rA9 is us. Us as the players."* | Filling the Mysterious Element with One's Own Interpretation / Repositioning the Divine Agent of the Narrative |
| DBH-P67 | 44.8 hours | *"Although the story and plot are good, there are some missing and unexplained aspects. I don't know if it was done that way to make it mysterious and intriguing for the user, or if it's being kept secret for a sequel, but Cyberlife and Kamski are* | Identifying the Narrative Gap / Feeling the Desire to Complete the Missing Knot |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | *left very much in the background in the game."* | |

### 3.5. Category 5: Post-Narrative Lasting Impact

This category refers to the narrative continuing to live on in the player's mind, emotions, and daily life after the play has technically ended. Representative quotations related to this category can be seen in the table below:

**Table 5: Representative quotations related to the post-narrative lasting impact category**

| Participant | Playing Time | Direct Quote | Code |
|---|---|---|---|
| DBH-P17 | 11.8 hours | *"Do you know what the only problem is right now? How am I going to GET OUT of the effects of this game?"* | Post-Narrative Emotional Humming |
| DBH-P25 | 22.3 hours | *"Now, before going to sleep, I think not about the stupid things I did 5 years ago, but about the bad decisions I made under pressure."* | Keeping the narrative alive in your mind after the game ends. |
| DBH-P31 | 6.8 hours | *"I've finished this game from beginning to end countless times... It's the kind of game that makes you wish your memory would fade so you could play it again from start to finish."* | The Desire to Erase Memory |
| DBH-P42 | 15.1 hours | *"I can't write a review for this game, it should write one for me."* | Describing the narrative experience as indescribable. |
| DBH-P65 | 23.6 hours | *"It's a game I wish my memory could be erased so I could play it again with the same excitement I felt the first time."* | The Desire to Erase Memory |

### 3.6. Comparative Evaluation with Formal Network Narrative Analysis

In this section of the research, the basic methodological approach applied is concretized. The relationship between the formal code template in the literature and the categories obtained from social networks is presented comparatively in the table below:

**Table 6: Comparative analysis of formal network narrative codes and social network categories**

| Formal Code | Social Networking Category | The Equivalent in Player Experience | Limitations of Formal Analysis |
|---|---|---|---|
| Node | Narrative Appropriation | For the actor, the climax is not just a turning point, but a moment of emotional investment. | It counts the nodes as structural units; it cannot measure their emotional load. |
| Edge | Interface Intervention | The edge isn't always a seamless transition; it can be obstructed by the interface. | It assumes edges are abstract connections; it doesn't account for technical/interface friction. |
| Path | Collective Positioning | A path is not only an indicator of identity, based on one's own route, but also on comparisons with the paths taken by others. | It lists the paths as equivalent routes; it doesn't see how the player makes sense of their own path by comparing it to others. |
| Flowchart | Filling the Narrative Gap | A flowchart is not just an analytical tool, but an incomplete puzzle that needs to be finished. | It accepts the schema as the given structure of the game; it fails to see that the player perceives the schema incompletely and is trying to complete it. |
| Replayability | Lasting Impact After Narrative | Replaying is not merely a quantitative option, but an emotional need and a quest for identity. | It measures replayability by the amount of content; it fails to grasp that the player is playing with a different "self" on the second playthrough. |

### 3.7. Inter-Category Relationships: The Cyclical Model of Player Experience

The theoretical coding phase of the CPA applied in the research should not only define the categories but also make the relationships between these categories visible. The five categories that emerged from the examination of the *Detroit: Become Human* dataset with 75 comments are by no means disconnected from each other. On the contrary, each exhibits a network structure that feeds and complements the others. These relationships can be modeled as follows:

Firstly, Narrative Ownership (Category 1) is a prerequisite for Post-Narrative Lasting Impact (Category 5). A player's inability to escape the influence of the narrative after the play ends (DBH-P17) is only possible because they have formed a deep

emotional connection with the characters. Because without emotional investment, lasting impact does not occur.

Secondly, Interface Interference (Category 2) can both strengthen and weaken Narrative Ownership (Category 1). As DBH-P14 points out, failing in QTEs and losing a character can increase a player's emotional investment in the narrative ("your characters die in a story you know"). On the other hand, as DBH-P16 indicates, being unable to make the desired choice due to time constraints can weaken the sense of ownership by undermining the player's sense of control over the narrative.

Thirdly, Collective Positioning (Category 3) is the trigger for Filling the Narrative Gap (Category 4). When players compare their paths to those of other players (DBH-P23, DBH-P29), they also become aware of alternatives they haven't experienced in the game. This awareness makes gaps and missing nodes in the narrative (DBH-P67) more visible and encourages the player to fill these gaps (e.g., DBH-P30: "rA9 is us").

Fourthly, Post-Narrative Lasting Impact (Category 5) fuels Collective Positioning (Category 3). After the play ends, the player who cannot escape the impact of the narrative (DBH-P17) turns to social networks to mitigate or share this impact; they read the comments of other players (e.g., DBH-P45: "I watched it many times from different streamers"), comparing their own experience to theirs. Thus, the individual narrative experience transforms into a collective negotiation process.

Considering this entire network of relationships, it can be concluded that the actor's narrative experience is not a linear but a cyclical and multi-layered process. Therefore, the following conclusion emerges as the ultimate result of the research: The narrative begins within the game; however, it is continuously reconstructed through the actor's emotional investment, interaction with the interface, comparisons with other players, and post-game mental processes.

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, it can be clearly stated that this study empirically reveals how actors negotiate narratives on social networks in *cinematic* network narrative games, using the case of *Detroit: Become Human* as an example. The five categories obtained from the constructivist embedded theory analysis are: Narrative Appropriation and Emotional Investment, Interface and System Intervention in Narrative, Collective Narrative Positioning, Desire to Fill and Complete the Narrative Gap, and Post-Narrative Lasting Impact. These revealed categories demonstrate that the actor does not experience the narrative merely as a formal network structure.

Based on the findings of the study, it can be said that formal network narrative analysis successfully maps the narrative. However, it is also concretely proven that it is insufficient in explaining how the player experiences this map, what they feel during the experience, what meanings they compare it to, and what meanings they use to complete it. In other words, for the player, the narrative is not merely a graph structure consisting of nodes and edges. The narrative is a multi-dimensional experience in which emotional investment is made, the interface is struggled with, comparisons are made with other players, deficiencies are completed, and it continues to live in the mind even after the game ends.

Furthermore, when these research findings are considered within a broader theoretical framework, they align with current discussions on how digital platforms transform meaning-making processes. Van Dijck (2021, p. 89) analyzes how data flows and algorithmic arrangements restructure meaning-making in platform society. Couldry and Hepp (2022, p. 178) draw attention to the collective construction of meaning in the deep mediatization process and the central role of social networks in this construction. Marwick and Boyd (2021, p. 204) emphasize that meaning is constantly negotiated and not static in the networked public sphere. In short, the collective meaning-making processes observed in the Steam reviews of *Detroit: Become Human* players are actually only a micro-level reflection of a broader societal transformation.

These findings demonstrate that incorporating social network data into network narrative analysis constitutes not merely a supplementary addition, but an essential methodological requirement.

This study carries several limitations that should be taken into account. First, the sample is confined to 75 user reviews drawn from a single platform, Steam; although the "Most Helpful" filter was purposefully employed to surface community-endorsed, content-rich commentary, Steam reviewers cannot be said to represent the entire player population. Individuals who take the time to compose written reviews may differ in systematic respects from those who remain silent—they may be more emotionally invested in the game, more critical by temperament, or simply more adept at articulating their thoughts. Furthermore, Steam's user base leans predominantly toward PC gamers, thereby systematically excluding those players who experienced Detroit: Become Human on PlayStation entirely.

A second limitation arises from the fact that this analysis concentrates on a single game; although Detroit: Become Human was deliberately chosen as a paradigmatic case of cinematic network narrative, the Digital-Social Network Narrative Model we have proposed still awaits testing across a wider spectrum of games encompassing different genres, narrative structures, and platform ecologies—Life is

Strange, The Witcher 3, and Cyberpunk 2077 would all constitute strong candidates for such examination. The findings reported here, consequently, are best viewed as exploratory in character rather than generalizable in any statistical sense.

Third, the study draws exclusively on publicly available written comments and does not encompass other forms of social network activity—such as video responses on YouTube, real-time discussions on Discord or Reddit threads, and image-based material like memes and fan art—all of which may carry distinct and significant layers of collective meaning-making.

Future research should tackle these limitations by, first, conducting systematic comparisons of Steam comments with those originating from other platforms—such as Reddit, YouTube, Discord, and console-specific forums—so as to shed light on the degree to which platform culture molds the discursive patterns that surface; second, extending the same analytical framework to a wider corpus of games sourced from a range of genres, thereby evaluating the model's broader applicability and theoretical scope; and third, integrating multimodal data—including video, images, and live chat—in order to grasp the full texture and complexity of collective meaning-making processes as they take shape within social networks.

Beyond these limitations, the Digital-Social Network Narrative Model clears a path for several avenues of further theoretical and empirical development; the model need not remain restricted to Steam reviews alone, but may be fruitfully extended to other platform ecologies—such as Reddit discussion threads, YouTube comment sections, and Discord servers—each of which fosters its own characteristic mode of collective meaning-making. Furthermore, the model supplies a sturdy framework for cross-platform comparative research, making possible, for instance, an inquiry into how the same game's narrative is pieced together in substantially different ways within synchronous spaces like Discord as opposed to asynchronous environments such as Steam or Reddit. Studies of this kind would put the model's central premise—that narrative is co-constructed across formal and social layers—to the test, and likely refine it in the process.

In response to this gap, we put forward a Digital-Social Network Narrative Model that fuses formal network structure with the effects generated across social networks. The central premise driving this model is that narrative extends well beyond the nodes and edges that make up the internal structure of the work itself. The model aims to theorize that narrative is also a dynamic structure constantly expanding through interactions, interpretations, discussions, and collective meaning-making processes among the actors. The model consists of three fundamental components that are not independent of each other: **Formal Layer**: The nodes, edges, and paths existing within the play's structure. **Experiential Layer**: How the actor emotionally

appropriates this formal structure, how they negotiate with the interface, and how they make sense of their own path. **Social Layer:** How the actor shares their experience on social networks. How they compare it with others, and how they rebuild it together. These three layers are in a constant condition of interaction and transformation, compelled by an unavoidable existential logic: the narrative is continuously regenerated precisely at the active intersection of these three layers. When the play ends, when the experience concludes, when the curtain falls—the narrative does not simply terminate; it persists, transforms, and expands across social networks. Any analysis of network narrative that neglects this reality can only ever expose the bare skeleton of the narrative, for the flesh, blood, and perhaps even the soul of the narrative remain concealed in the interpretations that actors share within those social spaces.

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