Playing with plot and fabula: a case study of Golden Glitch's *Elsinore* (2019)

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1. ABSTRACT

This paper consists in a case study of how the player can change Hamlet's plot and fabula in the Golden Glitch's videogame *Elsinore* (2019).

1.1. Keywords

Elsinore (2019), videogames, stories, interactive matrices, narrative nodes, chronotopes

2. INTRODUCTION

Elsinore (2019) is an adventure game developed and published by Golden Glitch inspired by Shakespeare's play *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. The player takes the role of Ophelia, one of the secondary characters of the play, but with a twist: whenever Ophelia dies, she is brought back in time while still remembering all that has happened to her in the previous timeline(s).

In the prologue, Ophelia/the player's role is that of secondary character, not dissimilar from the one she has in Shakespeare's play. However, once the prologue is over the Ophelia's/the player's interpretation of her character can start to create new takes on the story, which are necessary to investigate Elsinore's castle, its characters and events. By doing so, the player and Ophelia will solve mysteries and gain new information that can be used to influence the other characters' opinions, feelings, desires and objectives. The player can use this knowledge to alter the timeline by manipulating the characters and events, becoming less of a character or an actor and more of a director, eventually able to completely rewrite the play's story.

As Novitz (2020) observes, this approach to adapting a play into the medium of videogames requires the player to interactively engage with the narrative of the original play through the game's mechanics, thus allowing the player to "explore the ludic nature of the play itself, with its multiple layers of commentary and performance and convergences of characters and plotline" (Novitz, 2020, p.9).

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My objective with this paper is to analyze how *Elsinore* allows the player to engage on a metanarrative level with the fabula, the events, and the existents (things, places and characters). Firstly, I will use three different frameworks to analyze the game and compare how effectively do they describe how the player interacts with the game to create stories and how they use the mastery creating stories to complete the game.

The purpose of this case study is to analyze how *Elsinore* requires the player to play on a metanarrative level to complete the game. After summarzing the game to give context to this analysis [Section 3.], I will argue that the player creates stories by interacting with *Elsinore* [Section 4.], and that the understanding how to use this videogame's characters and game mechanics to create different stories is necessary for the player's success [Section 5.].

It is important to note that the three frameworks I have adopted in this analysis are fundamentally disagree on the nature of videogames and game sessions as narratives. In this paper, I argue that Gabriele Ferri's (2027) definition of videogames as interactive matrices of game-texts accurately describes how *Elsinore* affords the player to create stories. Consequently, before adopting Christoph Bode (2013) and Sebastian Domsch (2013) concepts of narrative nodes to describe one of the elements of *Elsinore* as an interactive matrix that allows the player to change *Hamlet*'s story, I will argue why videogames are not narratives and that the narrative "forms" identified by Domsch are better described as narrative elements [Subsection 5.1.1.]. For the same reason, before using Espen Aarseth (2023) concept of game sessions as chronotopes generated by playing a game, I will argue that, while it is true that very often game sessions are not stories, it would not be possible to describe the player's experience of playing *Elsinore* if not also as the experience of creating different fabulae and plot and seeing them playout as a story [Subsection 5.1.2.].

3. THE TRAGEDY OF OPHELIA: A SUMMARY OF *ELSINORE* (2019)

In both the play and the videogame, Ophelia is the daughter of Polonius, the consoler of both the late king Hamlet and the new king Claudius. She is advised by both her father and her brother Laertes to end her romantic relationship with the prince Hamlet, as she wouldn't be able to marry him because she isn't of noble birth.

Right after receiving this advice, in the videogame Ophelia goes to sleep and dreams of how the play will continue: she sees Hamlet being visited by his father ghost, Polonius being killed, her own death by drowning, the duel between Hamlet and Laertes, Queen Gertrude drinking poisoned wine, and King Claudius being killed. She's then woken up by Hamlet storming into her room to tell her that he has spoken with old King Hamlet's ghost, thus confirming at least part of Ophelia's dream.

Figure 1: The start of a new timeloop.

The player cannot change the plot of the play yet, but as Ophelia they can start to investigate to acquire information that will be recorded in the User Interface as a "Journal". The Journal contains three sections: (1) the Leads [*Figure 2*], objectives to pursue and mysteries to uncover, (2) the Characters [*Figure 3*], with updated information about the other characters, and (3) the Hearsay [*Figure 4*], pieces of information that Ophelia can share with the other characters to influence their actions and desires. The player will explore the castle, talk to and follow the other characters, and witnessing or spying on scenes. These scenes will also be recorded in the User Interface as Events placed on a visual representation of a Timeline, showing which Events have happened and which characters have been involved in them.

Figure 2: The "Leads" section of the Journal.

Figure 3: The "Characters" section of the Journal.

Figure 4: The "Hearsay" section of the Journal.

Figure 5: The options to talk to or follow Polonius.

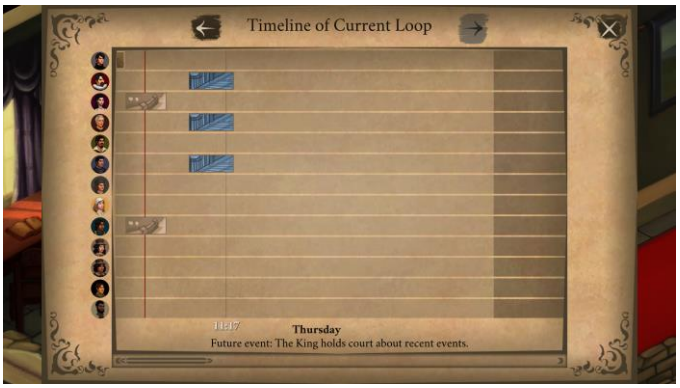

Figure 6: The "Current" section a Timeline on Loop 30.

After the announcement of Polonius death, the player will have little time to continue Ophelia's investigation before she's approached by a hooded and masked figure who reveals to be working towards the kingdom's demise. They kill Ophelia, with the plan of making it look like a suicide, because of her investigations. Instead of dying, Ophelia will wake up to the morning after her prophetic dreams, with the knowledge of future Events, recorded for the player in the Timeline from the User Interface, and new Leads to follow.

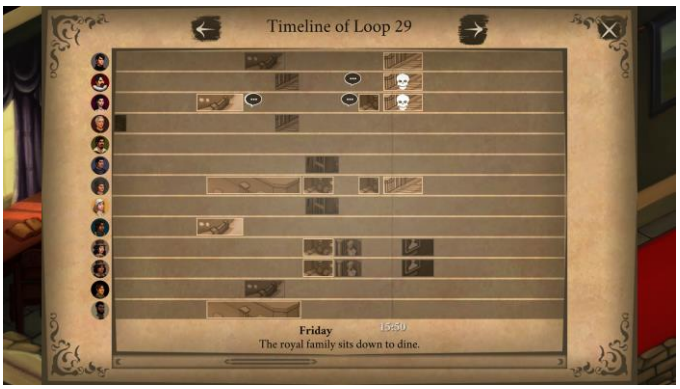

Figure 7: The "Timeline of Loop 29" section of a Timeline.

From this moment forward, the player will be able to use the Hearsay [*Figure 8*] that they have gained to influence the other character's actions, changing some Events,

preventing some from happening, triggering new ones to take place. This will allow them to discover more about each character, whose stories and backstories have been expanded for this re-telling of *Hamlet*. The player will have to play through different versions of the Timeline in order to discover and follow new Leads, and eventually will discover why does Ophelia keeps being brought back in time instead of dying. Peter Quince, the playmaster hired by Hamlet, will present himself as unfortunately trapped in the timeloop like Ophelia, and will suggest her to find the Book of Fates to understand the nature of the curse the they are experiencing.

Figure 8: Dialogue options that allow the player to share Hearsay with Polonius.

Further investigation will reveal that Quince is actually a malevolent character who has the power to create timeloops and is trying to manipulate Ophelia. If the player uses the Book of Fates to select one of the possible Endings that they have discovered, Ophelia will be free from the timeloop, but the book and its power will return to Quince.

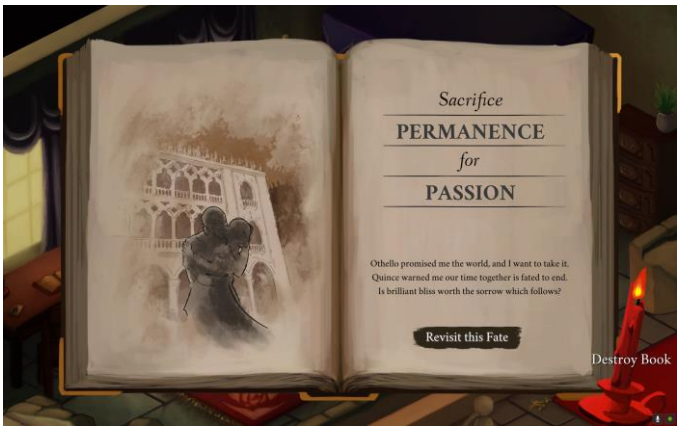

Figure 9: A page of the Book of Fates and the candle that can be used to burn the book.

Alternatively, to these Endings, the player can also decide to burn the Book of Fates, which will solidify Ophelia's decision to refuse to give the power of the book back to Quince. Another alternative ending is to have Ophelia choose to join Quince's side and becoming another creature who uses the power to control time to create new tragedies in different worlds.

None of the possible Endings offered by the Book of Fates nor the other two alternative endings are presented as the "clearly preferable outcome or obvious reward" (Novitz, 2020, p.13). All of them require Ophelia to sacrifice either herself or other characters,

with the only true defeat of Quince consists in accepting the endless continuation of the timeloop. Is defeating Quince worth Ophelia's endless torment? Is becoming free by using the Book of Fates worth allowing Quince to create more tragedies? Or is becoming a creator of tragedies a conclusion that fits Ophelia's development from character, to actress to playmaster? It is up to the player to decide what ending fits the game.

4. A GAME ABOUT CREATING PLOTS AND FABULAE

According to Espen Aarseth (2012), a narrative is made of a story and a discourse. The story consists in events and existents. The events have a chronological order, called fabula, and these events in the story are arranged as a plot, which can either follow the order chronological of the fabula, or re-order past, future and present events in different orders. And the existents are all the things, places and characters present in the story. The discourse instead consists in the narration, meaning how the story is told, and a chain of signs, meaning the words, sounds or images that are being used.

By analyzing the player's experience with *Elsinore* through this model, it is possible to observe that playing *Elsinore* consists in manipulating the characters of *Hamlet* into enacting different events, thus creating a new fabula (and a plot that has a 1:1 correspondence with the fabula) for each timeline. The fabula will then playout as a story with the game representing the Events as scenes that the player can witness and/or see represented on Timeline [Figure 7].

The following Figure 10 illustrates where the various elements of *Elsinore* and the player's interaction with it would fall in Aarseth's model (2012, p.3). Since this case study's focus is only on stories, discourse and narration are not discussed in this analysis:

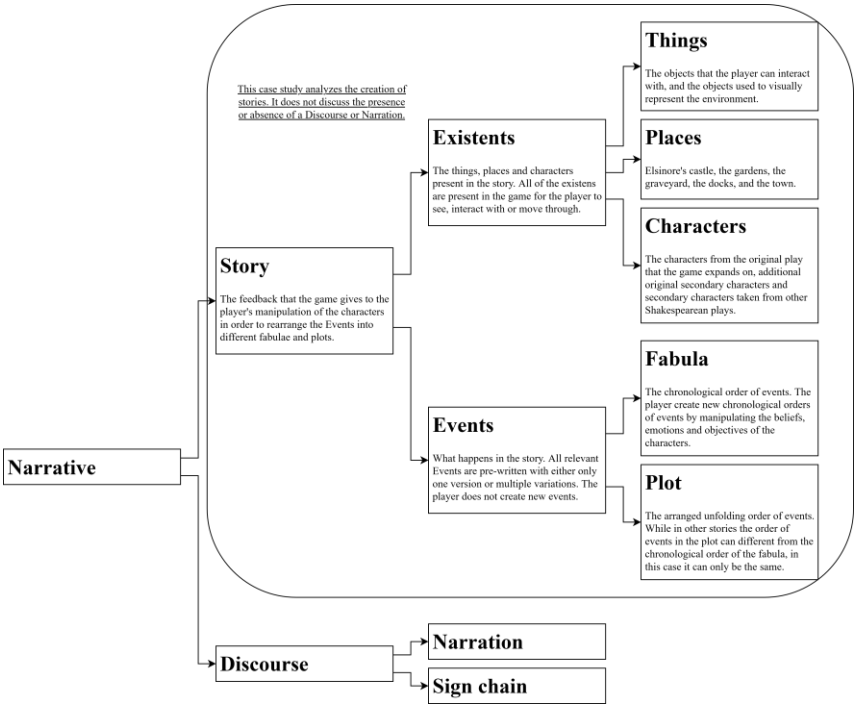

Figure 10: Espen Aarseth's (2012) hierarchical model to describe narrative and the elements that constitute it applied to *Elsinore* and the player's experience of playing it.

5. ELSINORE AS AN INTERACTIVE MATRIX

A useful framework to analyze how stories are created from the interaction between the player and *Elsinore* are Gabriele Ferri (2007) concepts of "interactive matrices" and "game-texts". According to Ferri (2007) videogames are interactive matrices, which are composed of various elements, from the mechanics and rules of the game to audio, visual and textual elements. The interaction between the player and the videogame/interactive matrix actualizes one of many potential game-texts that a playthrough can take the form of. Game-texts generated by the interactions between the interactive matrix and different players, or even with the same player in different moments in time, can vary to a lesser or greater degree depending on how the interactive matrix has been constructed.

Tying back to Aarseth's (2012) model: the characters and events are elements that are part of the interactive matrix created by Golden Glitch, and the player can manipulate the characters to create new fabulae and plot with these pre-written events, and the interactive matrix's feedback to the player interaction is the story of the resulting game-text. The orchestration of new fabulae is needed in order to solve the Leads and to choose and ending for Ophelia's story. Thus, understanding of how *Elsinore* works as an interactive matrix that they can use to create new game-texts is indispensable to succeed when playing this videogame.

In order to determine how a timeline will develop, the player needs to collect Hearsay by talking to characters and spying on them as pre-scripted scenes that the game calls "events" take place. This unlocks new dialogues options with the other characters, that allow the player to influence what the other characters know and feel about Ophelia, other key characters, and what they want to do. Since the mental state of the characters can determine how they will respond to the new information, the moment and the order in which the player chooses to share a hearsay with a character is key. A good understanding of how all these elements can be combined allows the player not only to determine at what point in the timeline that Event will be triggered, but can also create differences in how these events play out and create the possibility for otherwise locked events to take place.

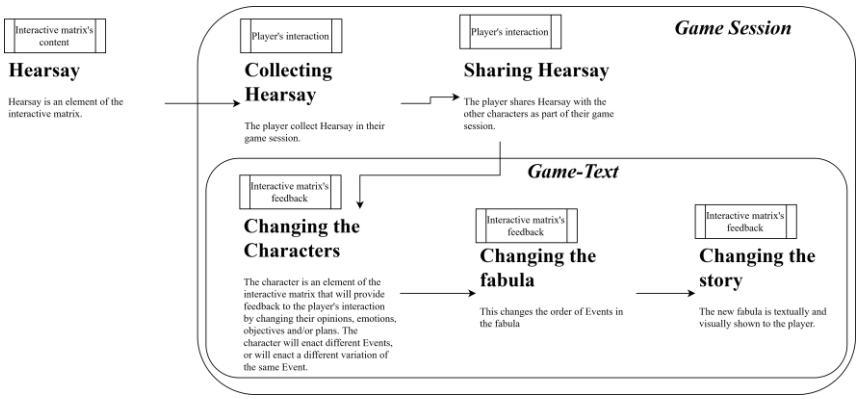

Figure 11: The player interacting with the interactive matrix during a game session generates a game-text.

5.1. Narrative nodes as an element of the interactive matrix

The game mechanics that allow the player to create a fabula and plot of their choosing are a fundamental element of *Elsinore* as an interactive matrix.

5.1.1. What are narrative nodes?

Christoph Bode (2013) defines a Nodal Narrative as a Future Narrative: a type of narrative that presets at least one nodal event, meaning "a situation that allows for more than one continuation" (Bode, 2013, p.VII), as opposed to what he defines as Past Narratives, which present nodeless events. Building onto this concept, Sebastian Domsch (2013) applies the concept of Nodal/Future Narratives to videogames, and distinguishes between three types of narrative forms that are often used in this medium: (a) passive narrative forms, (b) actively nodal narrative forms, and (c) dynamic narrative forms. The player cannot interact with the passive narrative forms present in videogames, such as cutscenes, written exposition, etc., but can interact with actively nodal narrative forms and dynamic narrative forms. Actively nodal narrative forms are nodes that require the player's input in order for a continuation to be possible, such as dialogue options and other kinds of explicit choices. Dynamic narrative forms on the other hand, are situations where the Event can evolve in different ways regardless of the player intervention, but can be influenced by the player if they decide to take action.

While Domsch's work is helpful to identify different elements of *Elsinore* as an interactive matrix, before applying them to this analysis it is important to note that from the prospective of the model proposed by Aarseth (2012), Domsch's (2013) assumption that videogames are narratives is inaccurate: videogames do not contain a fabula or a plot, without which it is not possible to have a story and a narrative. This is something that Ferri (2007) also argues when defining videogames as interactive matrices: a videogame/interactive matrix has a potentially infinite number of different fabulae and plots, but none of them are actualized until the player starts to interact with it and creates a game session/game-text. From this prospective, what Domsch are not "narrative forms" present in videogames, but rather narrative elements. However, the concepts of "passive narrative" elements, "actively nodal narrative" elements and "dynamic narrative" can provide us with a vocabulary to describe how the player can interact with the basic nodes.

5.1.2. Narrative nodes in Elsinore (2019)

In *Elsinore* the pre-written "passive narrative" elements consist in the textual and visual exposition. The player cannot interact with cutscenes like the one showing Ophelia's dreams of how her and the other characters will meet their tragic ends, with the description of the characters in the Journal or stop an Event from playing out once it has started. Nevertheless, these "passive narrative" elements give a necessary context to the player's and Ophelia's goals. Without them, the player wouldn't know why Ophelia wants to change the curse of *Hamlet*'s story.

The "actively nodal narrative" elements are represented by dialogue options, which the player can use to gain new information or to share it to manipulate the other characters. The presence of "actively nodal narrative elements" in *Elsinore* is what opens up the game-text that the player is currently creating to different possible continuations of its fabula and plot. Once the player has interacted with the nodes, the interactive matrix will schedule the future Events by using a propositional theorem proving, which prevents Events with a higher priority to conflict with Events of a lowest priority (Butler & Siu, 2016, p.252).

Exploring the castle and knowing when and where future Events tied to other characters will happen will also allow the player eavesdrop on them, thus discovering new information and unlocking new Events and dialogue options. While scenes that visually

and textually represent how an Event plays out if it hasn't been prevented are "passive narrative" elements, the Events as a whole are better described as "dynamic narrative" elements. The characters are programmed to enact a pre-determine order of Events if the player does not intervene, but they will diverge from this pre-determined order if the player influences them into acting differently (Ștefan, 2021, p.33).

When the player starts intervening to modify the fabula a and plot for the first time, their knowledge of the different possible continuations to each node is limited, which means that they can only create small variations. However, Ophelia remembers the Hearsay that she has gained in the previous timelines, which allows the player to unlock new Events when they are presented with the same node once again. And finally, as the player gains mastery of how to orchestrate the game's events, they become able to change the sequence in which the nodes present themselves.

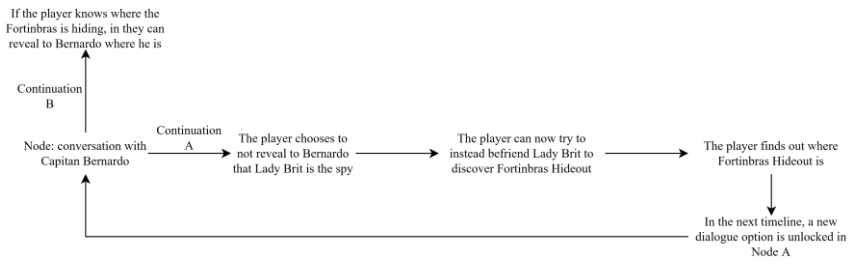

Figure 12: Going back to the same Node in a different timeline after collecting new Hearsay allows the player to follow a different continuation.

5.2. Exploring social chronotopes

To change the order to Events with the objective of creating a different fabula and plot, the player needs to also alter the web of character relationships that constitutes Elsinore's court, which can be defined as a social chronotope: a social space overtime.

5.2.1. What is a chronotope?

Aarseth (2023) describes game sessions as chronotopes[1] and games, including videogames, as metachronotopes, machines that create chronotopes. From this perspective, Aarseth (2023) argues that neither the videogame or the playthrough can be described as stories (Aarseth, 2023, p.7). The chronotope, as a space overtime, is experienced by the player, but while the player can then tell a story based on that experience, the experience itself is not fictional as it is the player, a real person, that is creating the chronotope, exploring it, making choices, uncovering mysteries etc. (Aarseth, 2023, pp.7-8).

While it is true that in many cases there is no temporal overlap between the player's experience of a game session and the story of that game sessions, I argue that this is not always the case. For example, it wouldn't be possible to accurately describe the player's experience with *Elsinore* without including their act of creating a story. If the player does not use the characters and Events to create different stories, they will not be able to succeed in the game. And if *Elsinore* wouldn't in real time present the fabula that the player has created by manipulating the characters the videogame would not work as intended by the developers. Thus, creating a story by combining the elements

[1] Chronotope in this context is defined as "a place or a space overtime" (Aarseth, 2023, p.7).

provided by the developers and seeing that story unfold is part of the player's experience with *Elsinore*.

At the same time, understanding *Elsinore* not only as an interactive matrix of game-texts, but also an interactive matrix of chronotopes is useful to analyze an aspect of the player's experience that is not explored by Ferri (2007) and Domsch (2013): the virtual space overtime that the player navigates. This is especially important in Elsinore, because it is through the characters, so Elsinore's social chronotope, that the player can change the order of Events.

5.2.2. Exploring Elsinore's chronotopes

In *Elsinore* the player explores two types of spaces: Elsinore as a location and Elsinore's court as a social space. As a location, it is made of the castle, the garden, the dock, the cemetery and the nearby town, and the player needs to explore it in order to investigate the various Leads. As a social space, it is made of the relationships and power dynamics between the various characters. While both spaces change overtime over the curse of each timeline, the one that can undergo the most drastic changes the social space.

In each timeline the player is given a handful of days to put a strategy into action and create a specific version of the social chronotope that they want to explore. The choice of using Ophelia as the focus character through with the player navigates Elsinore is also not indifferent. In *Hamlet*'s narrative, Ophelia is given very little to no agency at all depending on the text's interpretation, both because of her status as a woman who is not of noble birth, and because as a character she is not written has having any particular motivation to act. The game does not ignore the obstacles that a person like Ophelia might encounter in a world where she is an active character motivated to change the course of events. She does not have the authority to prevent the other characters' deaths and Fortinbras invasion on their own, so the player needs to influence the other characters into action and alter the relationships that constitute this social space.

If, for example, the player wanted to put together a fabula where all the characters survive, Ophelia needs to explore multiple social chronotopes to obtain all the Hearsay that she needs:

- To prevent her father Polonius' death, she needs to know how it happened by following him into the Queen's chambers where he's spying the confrontation between Hamlet and Gertrude. In order to do so, the payer needs to befriend the cook Irma, who is Gertrude's confidante. In the next timeline Ophelia will be able to warn Polonius of the danger.
- To prevent Helmet's and Gertrude's deaths Ophelia, needs to first know that they will be poisoned by King Claudius at the end of the timeline. Then she needs to know where Claudius keeps the poison in his chambers, which can happen only if Ophelia first shares pieces of Hearsay that will cause Queen Gertrude to kill herself, and then starts a relationship with the Claudius. Once she has this information, she can then share it with Polonius in the next timeline. The Hearsay must be shared only with Polonius, because he will dispose of the poison in secret, while revealing it to anyone else will cause either Claudius, Gertrude or Ophelia to die.
- To prevent Fortinbras invasion, Ophelia needs to know the location of his hideout, so that she can reveal it to Bernardo the captain of the guards. Ophelia needs to first discover the identity of Fortinbras' spy, Lady Brit, and her motivations. Then, she needs to use this information to try to befriend her, this

will lead to a conversation where Brit will reveal herself to be the spy and will show Fortinbras' hideout to Ophelia.

- Additionally, to prevent the duel between her brother and Hamlet, Ophelia needs to create a chronotopes where: Hamlet makes amends with Laertes for his past behavior, Polonius does not die and Hamlet does not marry Lady Brit.

Exploring these different social chronotopes, in which the player alters the relationships between the various characters, will give Ophelia all the Hearsay that the player needs to prevent everyone's deaths and prevent Fortinbras invasion.

However, the curse that Quince is inflicting upon Ophelia does not allow her to hold on to any of the social chronotopes that she creates, including this one, because he will take her back to the start of the timeloop. From this prospective, Quince is not only Ophelia's diegetic antagonist, but also an element that prevents the player to have full control over the metachronotope: he gives Ophelia the possibility to change Elsinore's social chronotope but he always erases her creation. The player can decide to attempt to banish Quince and defeat him in the hope that this way Ophelia can escape his curse without using the Book of Fates. The conflict between Ophelia and Quince thus becomes a conflict of control over the metachronotope. Unfortunately, exploring this chronotope will reveal that Quince cannot be killed and the only way to prevent him from taking the book back is to burn it.

6. CONCLUSIONS

On a superficial level, it is clear that playing *Elsinore* (2019) consists in engaging on a metanarrative level with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: the player can explore different what-if scenarios, and discover which Events are what Chatman (1978) defines as kernels, events that characterize a specific story, and which are satellites, events whose removal or alteration would not make the story unrecognizable. However, a more in-depth analysis shows that this metanarrative gameplay consists in playing more in general with the elements that constitute a story, and with how the player needs to use *Elsinore* to create different stories.

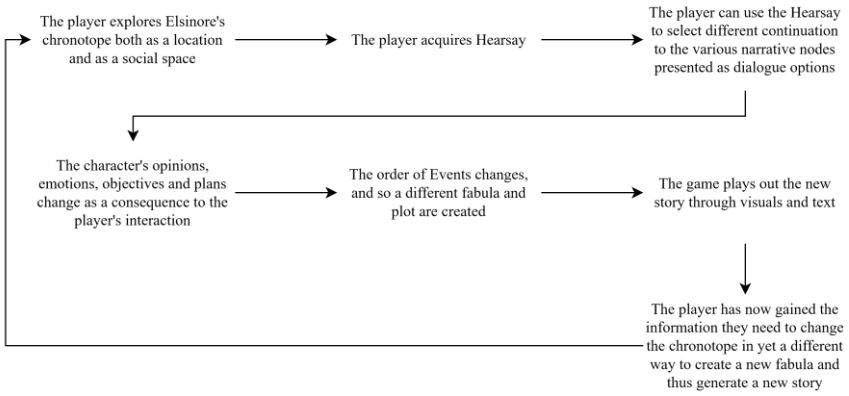

Figure 13: The player needs to understand how this process works in order to progress in *Elsinore*.

As an interactive matrix, *Elsinore* presents the player existents and events inspired by Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and with the means to interact with them by influencing the characters' actions and through these characters changing the fabula, and from this interaction a game-text is created, that can consist in a variation of *Hamlet*'s story or in a completely different story altogether. The elements that allow the player to interact *Elsinore* as an interactive matrix are the actively nodal narrative elements and the dynamic narrative elements: the former consists of dialogue options that the player can

use to change the chains of Events, which is the latter. In order to unlock new continuations to the narrative nodes, the player needs to explore different variations of Elsinore's social chronotope, where the stories generated by their interaction with the interactive matrix take place.

The player does not create the content of the story, as all of it has been pre-written by Golden Glitch's developers, and different variations of the fabulae that the player can create are limited by the game's design. These limitations make sure that the metanarrative's gameplay remains coherent with the themes and questions that the developers wanted the player to engage with. By making it impossible for the player to create a story where Ophelia succeeds in destroying Peter Quince, the developers confront the player with the fact that Ophelia cannot avoid tragedy in this game. However, she, and consequently the player, has the agency and the responsibility to choose which tragedy is worth living.

By making the creation of stories part of *Elsinore*'s gameplay, its developers effectively utilized the medium of videogames to invite the player to actively play with the narrative elements that stories are made of and to reflect on *Hamlet*'s tragedy in new ways.

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7.3 Illustrations sources

Figures 1-9 are screenshots from *Elsinore* (Golden Glitch, 2019)

Figure 10 is based on a model illustrated in *A Narrative Theory of Games* (Aarseth, 2012).

Figures 11-13 have been created for this paper.