

## **Does narrative transportation imply high forms of narrative agency? The case of board games**

### **ABSTRACT**

This study explores narrative agency and transportation in narrative-focused board games, developing a typology of narratives that balance immersion and player agency. Highlighting dynamic narratives as a model of ludonarrative harmony, the findings offer insights for cultural industries, suggesting how participatory mechanics enhance audience engagement in museums, theaters, and music venues.

### **KEYWORDS**

Narrative agency, narrative transportation, ludonarrative dissonance, board games, arts and culture management

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Narratives have long been recognized as a means of constructing reality across disciplines (Bruner, 1991; Deighton, 1992; Levy, 1959). Similarly, consumers exhibit agency in interpreting brands, often beyond the control of marketers when engaging with artworks or brand communications (Feiereisen et al. 2021; Holt, 2002; Kozinets, 2001). Despite narratives' significance in marketing and consumer research, studies on narrative agency—consumers' ability to influence narrative worlds, characters, and plots (Murray, 1997)—remain scarce, with few exceptions (e.g., van Laer and Orazi, 2023). Likewise, narrative transportation, where consumers become immersed in narrative worlds, has received limited exploration in marketing and consumer research (Green and Brock, 2000; van Laer et al., 2014).

This knowledge gap is particularly notable in arts, culture, and creativity. This is in stark contrast to the growing emphasis on immersive narratives in cultural brand strategies, as seen in augmented reality experiences and transmedia content (Bourgeon-Renault, Jarrier, and Petr, 2015; Jenkins, 2006). Similarly, it contrasts with the efforts of cultural institutions, such as museums, which have spent the past fifteen years redefining their roles by emphasizing audience participation and enhancing their sense of agency (Cruikshanks and van der Vaart, 2019; Simon, 2010).

To address this gap, this research examines how narrative agency and transportation interweave to shape (un)successful audience experiences. We focus on narrative-driven board games to propose a typology of narratives and identify those that maximize agency and transportation while minimizing ludonarrative dissonance. This study not only sheds light on an underexplored area of the cultural industries but also informs participatory practices in theaters, museums, and concerts, where, following the example of the Punchdrunk theater company, audiences increasingly seek both agency and ludic entertainment.

### **PLAYER'S NARRATIVE AGENCY AND TRANSPORTATION**

The notion of agency in gaming disrupts traditional storytelling by introducing player-driven interactions (Cheng 2007; Hammond, Pain, and Smith 2007). However, reconciling agency with coherent narratives presents challenges, as unrestricted agency often clashes with authorial control over story progression, a conflict Hocking (2009) termed ludonarrative dissonance. Design strategies like drama managers aim to balance player autonomy with narrative coherence (Magerko and Laird, 2003; Riedl, Saretto, and Young, 2003), yet they often fall short. Scholars have redefined agency to address its complexities. Harrell and Zhu (2009) and Zhu and Harrell (2009) stress the contextual nature of agency, shaped by player interpretations and system affordances, showing how reduced control can convey narrative meaning. Mateas (2001) and Wardrip-Fruin et al. (2009) explore the interaction between player expectations and computational models,

while Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum (2010) redefine agency as a commitment to meaning rather than unrestricted freedom. Empirical studies have examined agency's dimensions and link it to factors like choice diversity, emotional engagement, and narrative flow (Cardona-Rivera et al. 2014; Fendt et al., 2012, Vuorre and Metcalfe, 2016). Carstensdottir et al. (2021), through qualitative interviews with players of narrative video games, demonstrate that agency is a multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon shaped by individual differences, with no single factor exclusively defining the player's experience. Instead, players continually re-evaluate their sense of agency before, during, and after gameplay.

Narrative transportation refers to a mental state where individuals immerse in a story, disconnecting from immediate reality (van Laer et al., 2014). Research has identified factors like schema incongruity and emotional engagement that enhance transportation and strengthen narrative connections (Houghton, 2023). Green and Brock (2000) emphasize empathy with characters and vivid mental imagery as critical to immersive storytelling. Transportation also influences persuasion, shaping audience attitudes and beliefs through reduced counterarguing and heightened emotional resonance (Bourgeon-Renault et al., 2019; Thomas and Grigsby, 2024). Narrative transportation intersects with agency, where audiences actively influence story progression. While transportation fosters immersion, agency introduces co-creation, enabling participants to shape outcomes. This interplay deepens engagement as active participation strengthens connections to the story world (Van Laer and Orazi, 2023).

In conclusion, research highlights the importance of narrative agency and transportation and their dynamic interplay. However, no studies have specifically examined this relationship in arts management, particularly regarding its potential to generate ludonarrative dissonance.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Willing to explore the different types of narratives that cultural institutions or brands could develop—and their effects on audience agency and immersion—this research employed a qualitative analysis of 30 narrative-driven board games through participant observation and introspection.

Modern board games, though rich in interactive storytelling opportunities, remain underexplored in academic research. Yet they offer a unique lens for examining narrative agency and transportation, blending storytelling with gameplay to reveal how audiences actively engage in meaning-making processes. The methodology combined iterative theoretical exploration with empirical observation, consistent with grounded theory approaches (Charmaz, 2006). Through participant observation, introspection, and ongoing dialogue with gaming studies literature, a typology of narratives was systematically developed. Initial categories drawn from theoretical frameworks (Aarseth, 2012; Sullivan and Salter, 2017; Taly, Nugue, and Freudenthal, 2021; Dubbleman, 2016; Ryan, 2007; Klastrup and Tosca, 2004) were refined through empirical insights, following the constant comparative method, where theory and data inform each other

iteratively (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The resulting typology captures the diversity of narrative structures in narrative-driven games, ensuring comprehensive classification within this genre.

## **FINDINGS**

This research highlights five narrative types based on the levels of immersion and agency they offer: Co-Created Narratives, Integrated Narratives, Scenario-Based Narratives, Immersive Narratives, and Dynamic Narratives. The typology emphasizes the tension between fixed (embedded) and player-driven (emergent) narratives and explores how games cater to player preferences for agency and/or immersion. It also examines how aligning narrative goals with gameplay mechanics fosters ludonarrative harmony rather than dissonance.

Due to space constraints, this paper focuses only on Dynamic Narratives, which best achieve ludonarrative harmony by balancing game mechanics with narrative elements. Dynamic Narratives combine participant agency with system adaptability, offering co-authored and personalized experiences where the story evolves with player actions. As a hybrid of Scenario-Based and Immersive Narratives, they incorporate both emergent and embedded storytelling. Examples include *Pandemic Legacy*, *Paleo*, *EASS*, *Sleeping Gods*, *Destinies*, *Bahoth*, *Nemesis*, and *Alice is Missing*. By dynamically adapting to player choices, these narratives align gameplay mechanics with the unfolding story, ensuring players' actions consistently shape narrative developments. This integration enhances immersion, emotional engagement, and satisfaction.

Dynamic Narratives also inspire agentic moments beyond the game (Zilberstein et al., 2024), where individuals assert their agency in constraining situations. Within the game, players navigate challenges, make decisions, and experience the consequences of their actions. This interactive process enables players to craft narratives that reflect their control and decision-making—both within the structured game environment and beyond.

## **CONCLUSION**

To conclude, we have shown that narrative agency requires a balance between embedded and emergent narratives. Players must willingly engage with and immerse themselves in the game's narrative—whether pre-existing or dynamically co-created—while being provided with narrative content, tools, and space to interact. Together, narrative transportation and agency create a nuanced mix of controlled decontrol and suspended disbelief. Ludonarrative harmony emerges when players operate within these conditions, enabling immersive experiences where they become active co-creators of personalized stories rather than passive spectators of predefined plots.

Our findings have implications for the cultural and creative industries. By aligning action, cognition, and emotion of the players, narratives, and game mechanics, these industries can deepen audience immersion into creative or critical worlds. Minimizing

non-interactive narrative sequences is key, as prolonged passive storytelling disrupts immersion and can make players feel like observers. Ludonarrative harmony can be pursued in museums (e.g., museum theater, AR experiences), theaters (e.g., immersive theater), and music venues, where artists enhance their audience's connection to their universe by aligning participatory mechanics with the music and its narrative.

## **REFERENCES**

*References available upon request*