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ENG-625-O

2 May 2016

Divisions in *Tom Clancy's: The Division*:

The Curiosities of Visual Rhetoric Methodology Applied to a Video Game's Transmedia

It wasn't until the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the entertainment industry began to stumble upon the benefits of utilizing transmedia, which moved companies into a strange territory where they were “no longer in competition but pioneered the new type of ‘franchising’ which...[is] call[ed] co-creation: ‘In co-creation, the companies collaborate from the beginning to create content they know plays well in each of their sectors, allowing each medium to generate new experiences for the consumer and expand points of entry into the franchise’” (Veugen). In our time, we can see this with how Disney has not only put *Star Wars* back into the film industry with *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, but also with comic books, novels, and video games subtly woven into a tapestry of connected storytelling across these media. It's a prime demonstration of how transmedia has become so commonplace and advanced that it seems expected. So, it comes as no surprise that video games have taken advantage of this for a younger, technologically-oriented audience.

This can be seen in how publisher Activision began to invest \$500 million in the science-fiction shooter franchise *Destiny* in 2014 with development and heavy marketing, which was considered to “likely be a record spent on a single game - especially one without an established track record” (Grover and Nayak). When contrasted with *Grand Theft Auto V*, which bears the name of an established franchise, that took “over \$260 million to develop, produce and market”

and made “\$2 billion in retail sales” (Grover and Nayak), the investment made in *Destiny* proves the game industry puts much faith in transmedia’s power. A relevant example is Ubisoft’s *Tom Clancy’s: The Division*, which made “over \$300 million worldwide in the first five days” of its 2016 release. It’s the highest selling game franchise to ever be released, and like the previous two games, the publisher relied on excessive marketing (Thier). However, *The Division* is the only game out of these three that not only used transmedia for advertising, but also for storytelling.

Whereas *Destiny* and *Grand Theft Auto V* have promotional material that didn’t really expand their stories, *The Division* boasted “an impressive advertising campaign that includes a tie-in novel and a live action miniseries released on YouTube.” (Poladian). There’s more to this diverse marketing, but a photo series called “Stories of The Division” stands out because it “offers an intimate look into the lives of 20 fictional New Yorkers living in the world of [the game]” (“Stories”). This means that the photos and their accompanying textual story excerpts aren’t only ads, but part of the game’s universe. In other words, the people they depict are canonical to the game, and when comparing how these two media choose to portray their respective characters, the differences in their creativity are fascinating to say the least.

Transmedia storytelling is specifically when a narrative “unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole,” according to Henry Jenkins (qtd. in Veugan). However, since the photo series in question doesn’t profile characters that appear in the game, it can be argued that it acts more like franchising, which “disperse[s] a story over different media, ‘but not necessarily...to extend the story in ways which expand...its scope and meaning’” (qtd. in Veugan). Nevertheless, I believe it still qualifies as transmedia storytelling because it contains “additive comprehension,” which “[augments] our

understanding of the narrative as a whole” and can be labeled as “intracompositional” since it’s a “multimedia [production]...normally not seen as entertainment media” (qtd. in Veugan). While it may be driven by anecdotal diaries next to each picture that give glimpses into a dystopian New

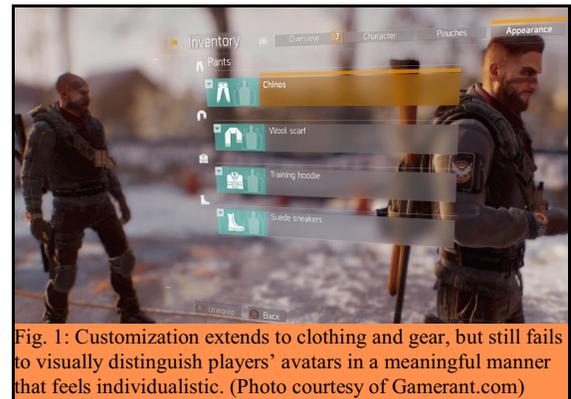


Fig. 1: Customization extends to clothing and gear, but still fails to visually distinguish players’ avatars in a meaningful manner that feels individualistic. (Photo courtesy of Gamerant.com)

York from personal angles, the composition and humanity evident in the photos themselves tell equally compelling tales with how subjects are depicted. Now, in establishing how the photo series and game share a fictional universe, I will contrast how they uniquely depict characters. This will entail dissecting three types of in-game characters: the players (i.e. Agents), civilians, and enemies. After examining how they’re presented to players, a close study of three photos depicting each character type will follow that employs photography concepts like composition, representation, and more. Finally, my observations will contribute to a discourse over why these differences exist by applying Stuart Hall’s ideas about encoding and decoding to transmedia.

### Through Play

Players are tasked with creating their Agent character before playing, and comparing this to how other games allow customization, *The Division* has fewer and more limited options. With a small palette of preset faces to choose from that can be slightly modified with different hair or tattoos, there’s only so much one can do with each ethnicity and gender. This results in being among a sea of other players that seem like they were drawn from a handful of archetypes (Fig. 1), which is prone to stifle emotional investment in these avatars, further amplified by the “close social distance” maintained by the player-controlled camera and with characters having no voice



Fig. 2: Civilians are celebrating Christmas, even in the face of a statewide pandemic that has struck everyone, fatally and figuratively. (Photo courtesy of Kotaku UK)

or personality (“Representation” 124). Agents aren’t prominent, individualistic heroes, but more like blank slates meant to deflect your attention toward the environments, outward action, and other characters. This seems more intentional in design since non-playable Agents

actually have unique personalities and dialogue, but it’s nevertheless strange since players’ role-playing avatars don’t allow for much “room for identification,” since they feel more like “stage characters” that are “part of the [game’s plot] scenario” with a simplified, functional purpose (Egenfeldt-Nielson, Smith, and Tosca, 203-204). More value must be sought, even visually speaking, outside of players’ avatars, which may be a sign of salience since their light presence is outweighed in “creat[ing] a hierarchy of importance among the elements of spatially integrated texts, causing some to draw more attention to themselves than others” (“Composition” 202). With texts, I presume Kress is figuratively referring to visuals with assigned meanings. But if avatars lack visual importance, do non-playable characters make up for this?

Analyzing the visual impact and intricacies of the environmental design is beyond the scope of this essay, but the characters who inhabit them are not, who are intended to play a small yet important role in immersing players. Civilians are a prominent example, who can largely be found en masse in the game’s “Base of Operations” (Fig. 2). Sheltered by the protagonists from the hostile forces outside, they talk amongst themselves about personal issues while trying to hold on to their previous lives. This is conveyed well with recordings and diaries scattered across the world that contain heart wrenching stories, which allow you to emotionally connect with

these strangers, but visually speaking, who we see in the Base can have the same effect since civilians engage in activities we take for granted that reflect the simplicities of life, such as eating together or instructing one's children. There's a narrativization to

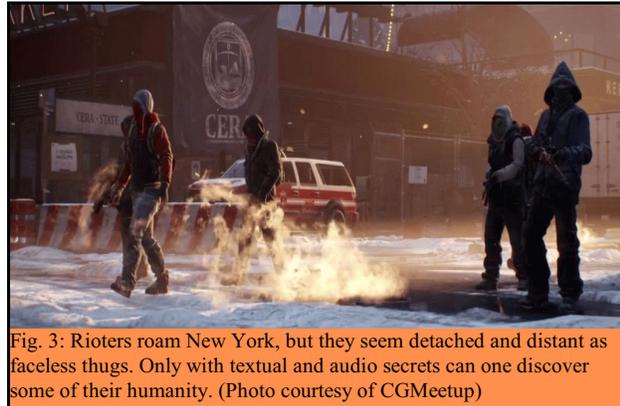


Fig. 3: Rioters roam New York, but they seem detached and distant as faceless thugs. Only with textual and audio secrets can one discover some of their humanity. (Photo courtesy of CGMeetup)

these composed scenes of community and harmony meant to elicit rare reactions from players in between all of the action (“Representation” 143). They are subtly motivated to seek out the tender storytelling in the environment here since the surface-level narrative is generic. The civilians help remedy this because they symbolize the Ideal to strive for inside the Base while pushing back the evil Real that's outside, and it's no accident the Base itself is at the game world's center, being a visual clue that motivates players to fight the dangerous New of a broken society to restore the Given of its former civility (“Composition” 181, 186-187). There is visual purpose in the layout and societal composition of the game world, so it's puzzling how civilians found outside the Base are underwhelming in their presence.

The positive visual development of civilians doesn't extend much to what one finds on New York's streets. Unlike the unique scenes at the Base, civilians on the outside are shallow means to ends, reduced to shells that exchange items with players or symbolic trophies of having completed a mission to level up. While there's nothing inherently wrong using characters in this way, *The Division* cuts off the game's visual strategy of humanizing them, hurt even more by their repeated lines, responses, and appearances. One could say this is a reversed type of “audiencing” that backfires with the “compositionality” of the citizens' scripted behavior and

actions, which fail to impact players and their sympathy since citizens only become sought out as sources for goods, rather than adding purposeful depth to how players see the world (Rose 22-23). Even the “social” aspect of audiencing is at play here, since citizens serve functionally different purposes inside and outside the Base, affecting the practices players employ in interacting with them through the game’s mechanics and systems. In the Base, they can only be thoughtfully looked upon as a separate observer, but outside of it, they can only be interacted with solely for selfish gain, which makes them more like venders than people (23).

Enemies suffer from one-dimensional, visual portrayals akin to civilians, who blend together as homogenous groups of thugs that rarely reveal any compelling motives, camaraderie, and individuality underneath the surface. Players are tasked to kill them sometimes for seemingly no good reason, which dehumanizes some of their legitimate concerns peppered in through optional diaries and recordings that can be found in the game’s world. However, this depth isn’t conveyed through their visual relationship and appearance to the player. They are just obstacles to overcome, but when the photo series shows off these antagonists, as well as civilians and Agents, it somehow tells viewers more about them with snapshots of frozen moments in some ways than what moving images accomplish through the game’s animated character models.

### **Through Lens**

Having briefly touched on the visual impact of the game’s character types, it’s time to shift toward a similar goal with the photos. We will begin with Agent Olympia, who immediately gives a striking appearance with her radically expressive hairstyle. It alone manages to defy the limited options of the game’s customization, which is evident in Agent Jen as well in photo #11 of the series, who’s somewhat elderly with wispy strands of white hair, packing a black



Fig. 4: Olympia has a semi-engaged position in relation to the viewer, turning to the side while looking into the camera. This body language parallels a hard lesson she learned in combat. (Photo courtesy of Gamespot)

tomahawk strapped to her back that cannot be found in the game. There's more individuality in these lone photos than with most of the options players have with customization in the game, but let's retain focus on Olympia. There's a satisfactory color sequence in the background with the freighter crates moving from right-to-left

with dark red, white, and back to dark red. The dominating color happens to be dark red too, and "the greater the weight of an element, the greater its salience" ("Composition" 202). While you can come to any conclusion about this, reading the text grants the viewer perspective about an incident where Olympia had to kill a treacherous man she thought was innocent at first. Perhaps the color symbolizes that blood is on her hands, but since the relationship between the words and photo is more word specific than interdependent because the picture "doesn't add to a largely complete text," this is at best a personal interpretation (McCloud 153). The most telling aspect of the photo is her involvement with the viewer. It's shot from an oblique angle with her facing the same direction as the crates, with vanishing points extending beyond the frame's boundaries to the left, but what strikes the viewer are the contrasting degrees of involvement and detachment ("Representation" 136). The oblique angles already communicate that "What you see here is *not* part of our world; it is *their* world, something *we* are not involved with," but Olympia's hardened gaze looks upon the viewer with a "demand" to realize that she isn't gullible or joyous as a heroic figure (6, 136). She will engage with you, but will do so with emotional distance and wariness since she almost died trusting a stranger's good word ("Stories"). It's thematically

reflected in her stance, providing a “double message: ‘although I am not part of your world, I nevertheless make contact with you, from my own, different world’” (“Representation” 138). It’s something not only communicated in her relationship to the viewer, but also to those in her own world, too. It’s a clever usage of narrativization with angles to illustrate part of her personality, which the game could have utilized more had players’ Agent avatars been given a voice and part in their interactions with others, but a limited vision was maintained for the game. The photos weren’t restricted in this area, so they could convey more personal backstories for Agents in a visual and textual manner.

Civilians in the world outside the Base result in straightforward encounters with repeated, uninspired visual patterns, but Carrie demonstrates a sliver of what could have been. The close personal distance invites the viewer to drink in her facial expression, neither intimidated nor empowered by



Fig. 5: Beautiful symmetry with great perspective and lighting are seen in this photo of a civilian. (Photo courtesy of Gamespot)

the shot’s balanced verticality (“Representation” 124, 140). The framing of the window in the background is noteworthy as well, basking Carrie in a warm, orange glow that gives her a dramatic, central appeal. The color is also a recurring one used with the game’s menu screens, logo, and Agent characters as a means of association (Bang 36). So, does the intense light behind Carrie indicate a certain level of involvement with Agents? Indeed, other civilian photos in the series have an overall absence of orange when their stories don’t involve Agents, but those that do have varying degrees of that color, with Carrie’s being the strongest for good reason. In her story excerpt, she almost witnessed civilians gunned down by rogue soldiers, but Agents were

able to save them before this happened, whom she took pictures of to prove their heroism. She admires them because of this, conveyed by the comforting aura of orange light around her, which almost makes the words and picture an additive combination since the words “amplify or elaborate on [the photo],” but it’s still more word specific in nature (McCloud 154). Another worthy point is how she’s the only one who’s career is likely revealed with her affinity with cameras in the story and picture. The former shows how she is obsessed with capturing the world around her even in the face of atrocities, but the latter shows Carrie lowering her camera in curiosity as she stares impassively at viewers from a frontal angle, involving them into her world (“Representation” 136). It almost feels like a questioning demand, asking viewers if they will become an Agent or not, which will determine whether or not she takes “the photos to prove” their heroism as well (“Stories”). It’s unfortunate that more intimate, unexpected interactions with civilians like this aren’t as prevalent in the game. What if civilians were more than trading posts and objective markers in *The Division*? What if they remembered your actions or independently interacted with you in a kaleidoscope of manners? This is but one photo that manages to explore these possibilities within its limited abilities to capture the universe and themes of the game.

Most of the enemy photos show their subjects at varying power angles where the “represented [participant] has power over the interactive participant,” though there are some curious examples where the opposite angle is employed to make the viewer feel encroached upon rather than in a higher position (“Representation” 140). Most have their weapons ready with obscured or grim faces, which is especially true for the shots of the “Cleaners” in photos #3 and #19 with their gas masks and flamethrowers. In many ways, half of these pictures complement



how they're painted in the game as generic obstacles.

However, some of their stories in the photos and game apart from the visuals offer understandable glimpses into why they joined the ranks of foes, which partially conflict with the stereotypes viewers see. The best photographic example of this is Jeremy, who's in an alleyway surrounded by flaming buildings. It's a scene shot sideways to maintain a sense of vertical, upward motion as flames dissipate into the midnight sky (Bang 44). It's a great way of using "size of frame...[to] suggest social relations between the viewer and objects,

buildings and landscapes" ("Representation" 127). It's like the viewer is standing in front of him, presumably as an Agent or co-conspirator, as he stares not with a disgruntled or hidden face, but one with an expression almost composed of regret or longing that people don't expect to understand him. After all, reading his story grants him no sympathy since he killed someone that assaulted him because Jeremy demanded food from him. He justifies this because "[t]hat's just how it is now, that's the reality. Law of the jungle" ("Stories"). There's an interdependence between these "words and [picture]...to convey an idea that neither could convey alone" because Jeremy would otherwise be dismissed as unredeemable by the reader, but as a viewer, too, one realizes that he "wants something from the viewers - wants them to do something...or to form a pseudo-social bond of a particular kind with the represented participant" (McCloud 155; "Representation" 118). This rarely occurs on a visual level in the game, so with lowered weapons and a possible color association with the Agents in the form of the fire, viewers are signaled to

look past social difference and evaluate how they see Jeremy as a foe depending on their view – or lack thereof – of “Rioters” as depicted in the game (Rose 7, 10-11). They instantly attack players even if they don’t provoke them, but scenes like this one with Jeremy – a moment of thoughtful evaluation – give viewers a chance to personally judge enemies, which is an element of interactivity that ironically doesn’t occur in the game. Other games like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and *Dark Souls* encourage players to choose who they fight by making room for self-driven direction that influences the role-playing aspects of their characters. *The Division* doesn’t allow for this, even though different paths are proposed in the story since Agents who have gone rogue exist as non-playable characters. Either way, this is just one photo poking at possibilities the game doesn’t explore due to its limitations, speaking for the impact of visual transmedia storytelling that builds a case for how Stuart Hall’s encoding and decoding works within it.

### Through Coding

Stuart Hall’s methodology is about broadly interpreting how messages have a “‘complex structure of dominance’ because at each stage they are ‘imprinted by institutional power relations’” (Hall 90). It’s a natural process because as messages are shared they are shaped and fit to the style and rules of each conveyer, such as with political news. When a controversial event unfolds, a left-leaning TV station will highlight, interpret, and deliver it in a way that fits their agenda and audience, just as a right-leaning talk show host will do this on the other end of the spectrum. Likewise, the raw writing of *The Division*, being the source of the characters, is channeled through people who give opinionated form, voice, and presence to them suiting how they envision them. This can be viewed as a broadcaster’s work being sent through “the apparatuses, relations and practices of production...in the form of symbolic vehicles constituted

within the rules of ‘language’” (91). This illustrates an internal transmedia-esque system practiced within game development involving all sorts of “language.” Ideas must be correctly transferred to writing with a coherent structure, followed by taking that message and giving it life through visual and aural design. This even takes place on a “ludological” level, meaning that the gameplay designers translate *The Division*’s fictional world through logical systems of play that don’t conflict with the tone and reality of the narrative. “[T]he fictional world is also needed in video games to enable players to infer the rules...which, in ‘good’ games are anyway hidden from immediate perception. [...] [It] reconciles literary theory and video games” (qtd. in Egenfeldt-Nielson, Smith, and Tosca 217). This demonstrates that a main goal in transmedia storytelling is to have stories make sense across different media. Geoffrey Long and Christy Dena believe that “the expansion to the original work has to ensure the continuation and maintenance of the fictional world’s lore, consequently, the storyworld should be canonical from the start. [...] [T]he planning of the narrative from the outset should be the key identifying element for transmedia storytelling, instead of the expansion of the storyworld” (qtd. in Veugan). This is how *The Division* was created as an “encoded [message] in the form of a meaningful discourse” that went through discursive “languages” so it would effectively be broadcast to its intended receivers (Hall 93). Once this was done, the process began anew between the finished game and photographers.

With the photo series, *The Division* was channeled through the “knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience” of photography. Because of this, the photographers were able to take the game’s character types and encode their own interpretations of them. But what happens when there are

varying audiences viewing the photos? With all encoding and decoding, there are “distortions' or 'misunderstandings' [that] arise precisely from the lack of equivalence between the two sides in the communicative exchange” (Hall 5). This might imply that messages transmitted several times over lose their meaning, but it could be argued that the opposite is happening here. In “distorting” the actual, visual presence of how characters appear in the game, the photos reveal untapped potential not with the plot of *The Division*, but its visual storytelling. “The more richly imagined a storyworld is from the beginning, the more stories can be told about it, and the more discoveries it offers to the user. This is why world-dominated narratives present much better material for transmedia storytelling than plot-dominated ones” (Ryan 5). *The Division* is suited for this since the photos take the game’s visual strengths and amplify them, which can give the wrong impression about how Agents, civilians, and villains are actually portrayed in the game.

Reactions to these images could range from positive to negative reception because of this. They’re intended and marketed toward fans of the game, so the photographers naturally impose “dominant or preferred meanings” on the photos because they have specific expectations about how they should truthfully reflect or add to the game’s lore and visual style, meaning this specific audience’s denotative interpretations are “fixed by certain, very complex (but limited or 'closed') codes” (Hall 98). However, other responses to the photos are possible from a more objective standpoint in the connotative realm because these “signs appear to acquire their full ideological value – appear to be open to articulation with wider ideological discourses and meanings – at the level of their 'associative' meanings” (97). It’s humorously ironic because since the photos are intrinsically connected to the game, that association becomes the denotative standard, whereas having no prior or little knowledge of it is connotative because it frees one to more freely analyze

the photos in themselves or compare them to completely unrelated pictures. It's similar to Rose's discussion of genres and how street and documentary photography can look similar but be intended for different reasons, which brings up issues of auteur theory and compositionality in influencing how audiences will respond (15-16, 19). In a roundabout way, just as *The Division* and its associated photos may share the same universe and general style, they differ in interpretive execution, thereby influencing how audiences react to the photos due to their awareness of the game or in which sequence they viewed these two media. The intended audience has a "dominant-hegemonic position...[that] takes...the connoted meaning...full and straight," which means it "operat[es] inside the dominant code" and makes their interpretation denotative (Hall 101). This perspective will likely consider the photos a mere commercial ad for *The Division* that only seeks to "[exploit] the commercial success of a narrative originally conceived as autonomous" (Ryan 5); to "reproduce the dominant definitions precisely by bracketing their hegemonic quality" through the professional code of photographers (Hall 101). However, operating outside this code or intended audience might allow others to conclude that the photos are a simple yet meaningful exploration of the human condition in the face of survival with thoughtful visuals and diary entries. It's incredible how these photos expand upon and echo the original source of game characters in a new layer of encoding, but how they're decoded in relation to the game is what's important for visual rhetoric. That connection can shape how audiences define a "message" if we apply Hall's methodology to how video games and photography work together and contrast each other with visual transmedia storytelling.

## Conclusion

It's easy to look at this photo series as an ad and nothing more. Even I looked upon it with

disinterest at first, but came to appreciate how it attempts to set the mood and emotion of what to expect from the game's characters, even though those expectations should be tempered due to their flawed, more narrow visual design. Regardless, this reveals an intricate process behind the various levels of encoding and decoding that take place within game development and beyond into transmedia storytelling to construct visuals, opening the door for examining how other video games and their associated media are related and translated. What is gained and lost in these transitions? What elements of a "language" are evident in a "message's" different layers of encoding? It may not seem obvious to connect Hall's methodology to transmedia storytelling, but the connection is too great to ignore. This may be a way to enhance a video game's storytelling, but it should be said that if "game franchises migrate away from gaming, the medium is cheapened and players become isolated from the story" (Filipowich). *The Division* clearly does this with its characters not only in the photo series to a degree, but also with its licensed video series, so the photo series shouldn't make up for the game's weaknesses in designing moving individuality, expression, and composition for all of its characters, whether they be an average citizen or major villain. Textually and aurally conveying this is one thing, but it's another to emotionally connect to what we see as well. *The Division* has a grasp on environmental storytelling, but bringing the people who inhabit it to life is something that could have been intertwined with the photographers' work with less distortion and more consistency. It demonstrates how visual rhetoric can have an important, unsuspecting role in not just a game's visual appeal, but also how we perceive and relate it across other media. Transmedia storytelling shouldn't only make up for its source material's shortcomings, but intersect and contribute to what it accomplishes by creating visual content that unifies rather than divides.

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