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LUDONARRATIVE ARCHETYPES IN FIGHTING GAMES: A STUDY OF SELECT STREET FIGHTER V CHARACTERS

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Abstract:

Storytelling is, as observed in the human acts of cave-paintings, singing, dancing, writing, oral narratives, and diverse textual and otherwise narratives, one of the key aspects of human existence. Since the dawn of recorded – or retroactively observed – human civilization, storytelling has evolved with each new technological breakthrough, even if said technology is the mere discovery of paint or stylus.

In the twenty-first century, with the proliferation of digital media and associated technology, narratives too have changed. However, the more it changes, the more storytelling appears to abide by the stereotypes, archetypes, and tropes that have become ingrained into the human psyche. Every new method of storytelling establishes its own preferred methods wherein the familiar archetypes, plots, progressions can be depicted in a way most relatable to the audience.

This paper seeks to observe select video games – particularly such that are bereft of more traditional verbal or textual narrative devices – in order to study the ways in which modern interactive media manipulates its rules in an effort to convey narratological (or ludological) tales which remain rooted in our collective cultural and literary heritage.

Keywords: Ludology, Narratology, Video Games, Interactive Media

First appearing in the game *Street Fighter Alpha* (1995) as a parody of rival fighting game developer SNK's *Art of Fighting* (1992) characters Ryo Sakazaki and Robert Garcia – of whom the former was influenced by the design elements of Capcom's own Ken – now-famous and fan-favourite Dan Hibiki was quickly established as a joke character. With SNK Corporation closing due to financial troubles in 2001, however, the context that was hereto parodied was removed and Dan Hibiki was initiated into an independent existence as a recurring character in the *Street Fighter* franchise. Following this and even earlier with his subsequent appearances in *Street Fighter Alpha 2* (1996) and *Street Fighter Alpha 3* (1998), Dan was attributed with personality traits such as strengths, weaknesses (weakness being the crux of his parody and also his defining characteristic feature), goals, ambitions, obstacles and interpersonal relations with other characters in the series – in turn changing him into a three dimensional character.

In literary contexts, the story of how Dan Habiki became a character from a mere joke is not an unprecedented event. The Fool archetype which he embodies had been popular both with the common and noble theatre-goers during the Shakespearean era – a popularity that has not decreased with the advent of motion pictures and even computer generated animation. With the

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rise of video games as an interactive story-telling medium, the Fool has, alongside several other literary archetypes, become a staple within the world of gaming, arguably offering a greater service to this newly risen medium than to textual mediums or even live-action motion pictures. Video games follow primarily an interactive narrative – ludology, as opposed to the narratology followed by textual and cinematic narratives – and as a result are subject to the a more active and visible presentation wherein characters are defined by their roles and archetypes. World building in video games is visual and established through interaction – although expositional narratives are employed in certain instances – and actions are performative rather than descriptive. Following this, it can be reasoned that video games are also primarily driven via characters rather than plots, because inserting the player's agency into the narrative is only possible through conscious actions, and not through non-participatory narrative. Archetypes have become an integral part of ludological storytelling even before digital gaming came into existence, due to the interactive paradigms that are required in order to establish characters within a video game. Characters within even the most linear and non-complex games during the 8bit console generation could be and in fact had to be divided into two broad categories – PC (player characters) and NPC (non-player characters – in order to delineate the character(s) that players can interact as, and the characters that the player can interact with. The broad categories bring with them certain aspects that are integral to the ludonarrative, among them primarily one of agency. NPCs cannot progress the story without the PC actively deciding to do the same. Further within the NPC cadre are subdivisions based on their nature of interaction with the PC, namely friendly and hostile NPCs. Within these further divisions can be found, such as quest-giver, mentor, healer, lore-keeper, hostage (includes the damsel-in-distress archetype), escort, minion, sub-boss, end or final boss, summons and such. In keeping with board game rules all NPCs could further be placed in the good, neutral and evil by lawful, neutral and chaotic alignment matrix wherein their personality types and hence the nature of their interactions could be designated a set of archetypical attributes. Several among these new-found archetypes have permeated the world of multi-media and can now be found in meta-fictional works both textual as well as cinematic.

Within the gamut of this paper, we shall look at how in Capcom's aforementioned *Street Fighter* series ludology attains greater success in characterization than narratology – particularly because combat-sports-driven tournament fighting games typically rely on a character's actions, design and archetype in order to tell a story, unlike plot-driven action, adventure, or role playing games. Due to *Street Fighter*'s long history and large cumulative roster, we shall only look at select characters.

Dan Hibiki, the character mentioned earlier, exemplifies several aspects of gaming and literary archetypes throughout the course of his in-game appearance. His original archetype was that of a joke-character, intentionally weak in order to ridicule rival company SNK while modelled after their seminal characters. Creating him as an uninformed fool would ill-suit the requirements of said parody, and thus Dan was attributed a martial arts background under the same teacher as *Street Fighter*'s flagship combatants Ryu and Ken Masters, during which he has also inherited the ultimate fighting capabilities as his colleagues. However, it was his lack of talent which resulted in Dan's inability to utilize said teachings, and as a result he was a direct contrast to the rest of the cast. He had walked among the masters of his art and yet fumbles when it comes to performance. *Street Fighter Alpha 3* onwards Dan starts maturing as a character and more humane attributes were imbued onto him. He assumed the role of a mentor, having somewhat completed his initial story arc in the previous entry, and despite his own feeble nature, his dedication towards his discipline and desire to support others in his albeit limited capacity shines through. Here as well as in the following entry *Street Fighter IV* (2008), Dan can be seen to have found a disciple in fellow combatant Sakura and has befriended certain other combatants such as Blanka, Guile, Alex and

Edward Honda, all of whom are within the good archetype spectrum. His status as a mentor, albeit an ineffectual one, has been embraced in later main-line entries as well as spin-offs such as *Street Fighter X Tekken* (2012) and *Street Fighter X Mega Man* (2012).

In his current stage of being, Dan Hibiki is feeble yet arrogant, knowledgeable yet ineffectual, and his entire move-set reveals his archetypal identity better than *Street Fighter*'s limited storytelling can. Unlike every other combatant in the series, Dan can taunt his opponents an unlimited number of times, highlighting his arrogant and flippant nature. However, his taunts can be cancelled and turned into combination attacks or combos, which although weak, still speak volumes about his mastery over martial arts. Dan's special attacks – namely his Gadoken, which is a parody of Ryo and Ken's Hadoken fireballs – have negligible reach and power, and yet become strong after they have been turned into super versions of themselves. His apparent uselessness and his ability to suddenly turn a losing match into an upset has made Dan Hibiki into a complex character. His constant drive to and resolution in the face of insurmountable obstacles, his disregard towards the status quo, his love towards his discipline, and his ability to punish overconfidence in his opponents make Dan a neutral good archetype who can also be classified as the Fool.

Typically, as exemplified by Dan Hibiki, *Street Fighter*'s roster is rich in comedic and light-hearted combatants who use their ludological archetypes to a greater fulfilment than comparatively stalwart characters who have received greater exposure throughout the series. The most recent entry within the series, *Street Fighter V* (2016), introduces a number of hereto unknown characters who outshine others despite limited to negligible history both with the series as well as within the series' plot. Among them arguably the most ludologically expressive yet simultaneously narratologically untethered is the combatant named G. appearing for the first time in the series' history during the third season of *Street Fighters V: Arcade Edition*, G carries no past bearing to either the thin plot of the series, nor connections to established characters. Unlike other new appearances such as Nekali, Falke, Rasheed and Abigail, he is provided with no background other than the fact that he announces himself as the President of the World, and seeks to unite humanity as the citizen of the earth. In an almost absolute narratological vacuum, G has yet become a well-defined character through his ludological storytelling.

G's design elements, as pointed out categorically by A.B.I. at SugarPunch Design Works (2019), work together in order to create his identity as a true President of the World. His one-line phrases establish this claim, followed by his visual design, his posture, his movements and his combat tactics that reinforce said claim. G's visual design is that of a leonine Abraham Lincoln, with the addition of golden facial hair and a golden map of the Earth visible over his skin. The colour gold features heavily in his colour pallet and visual effects, symbolizing wealth as well as natural resources. His costume, a black frock coat, black single-breasted vest, white shirt, black trousers, pocket watch on a chain, and President Lincoln's signature stovepipe hat, reinforce the US President archetype or an even more commonly portrayed leader archetype. His forward walking motion begins with a presidential wave towards the audience and his combat motions end with flourishes, bows and gestures that end with the tipping of his hat. He incorporates the vastly popular wartime recruitment persona of Uncle Sam – yet another nation and leadership themed cultural archetype which appears in several forms of visual media – and directs his panache towards the audience as well as to the player – taking advantage of the peculiar forty-five degrees facing stance fighting game characters adopt in order to both face their opponents and the players simultaneously. Throughout his matches, G presents and carries himself as if he is on the stage, addressing a vast audience and dazzling them with his strong yet graceful personality. His attacks incorporate the golden shine of wealth which is otherwise also present in his visual design, but he also incorporates magma-based attacks which further reinforce the idea that his personality is tied

to the very core of the Earth. His Critical Art attack is named Pangaea Burst, and his victory screens display him speaking of uniting the citizen of the Earth, as the concept of Pangaea embodies.

Similarly ludologically expressive despite lacking in narrative are characters such as Menat and Zeku. Appearing in *Season 4* of *Street Fighter V: Arcade Edition*, Menat is similar to G and stands apart from the other new and returning additions in that she has no prior appearances in the *Street Fighter* series or any other series from Capcom, and nor is she given a backstory. Like G, it is up to her design and actions to create a ludonarrative identity for her. Menat embodies several archetypes which assist her in developing her character. She hails from Egypt – the first in the game's history – and as such is a part of the popular Egyptian or Egyptian princess archetype. One small information that the game provides for her is that she is apprentice to Rose, an Italian fortune teller who has appeared in previous games and whose moveset she shares to a certain extent. The fortune teller is yet another archetype that Menat utilizes in her self-presentation. Her command normal attack is named Judgement of Anubis and her command dive is named Khamun Kick, the former referring to Anubis – the Egyptian god of the afterlife – and the latter relates to Tutenkhamen, the 18ᵗʰ dynasty Pharaoh. Her critical art move is called Nefertem, where Nephertem is another name for the Egyptian Sun god Ra. Her V trigger moves are named Wisdom of Thoth and prophecy of Thoth, Thoth being the Egyptian god of wisdom. Her after-combat clips depict her telling her opponents their fortunes. In all this she combines and displays both her Egyptian and fortune-telling heritage, especially since Egyptian gods and their domains are a part of fortune-telling processes such as Tarot reading. The two archetypes within her character blends seamlessly both in her combat style and the small amount of her non-combat interactions that are presented within the game. This is turn could also be linked to Thoth, who is also a god of balance – an in her personality traits are balanced in her actions and do not seem juxtaposed. Her visual design uses dark and sober tones of black and purple, accented with blue – a colour common in most Egyptian hieroglyphs – and golden highlights – a material associated with royalty in ancient Egyptian culture. Her costume also contains a cut-out around her belly-button which resembles both the Egyptian Eye of Horus, as well as the practice of using ground malachite as eye-shadow as popularized as a part of Egyptian makeup in modern media.

Her movements during combat reflect – alongside her heritage and influences – her personality. It exudes a casual energy and a carefree attitude which is bolstered by her out-of-combat mannerism. Her walk-cycle has been particularly highlighted by both SugarPunch Design (2018) and other critics due to the playful grace it displays. Her movements are frivolous and at times deliberately melodramatic, yet never unbalanced or devoid of fluid grace. Menat's body language expresses the surety of a fortune teller, that regardless of how playful or elaborate her movement is, she will emerge victorious. She also incorporates in her assemble and combat a crystal sphere, both as a symbol of her identity as a fortune-teller as well as a prop that allows her to display her sense of perfect balance, grace and playfulness during combat. Her combat moves are predominantly composed of cat-like motions – yet another Egyptian archetype – gymnastics and dance steps, using the crystal sphere as a projectile weapon – which ensures that an out-of-place martial art style is not juxtaposed into her perfectly balanced presentation. Furthermore, her projectile attacks require players to correctly estimate their opponent's movements, immersing the players themselves into the role of a fortune teller.

Appearing during *Season 2* of *Street Fighter V: Arcade Edition*, Zeku tells a similar tale through his ludonarrative, although unlike Menat and G, he has been given some extra-combat narrative. Zeku was first introduced in *Street Fighter Alpha 2* as a non-playable cameo. He was said to be the Bushinryu master who had taught veteran *Street Fighter* and *Final Fight* roster member Guy. His first playable appearance in *SF V* therefore is not as a completely unknown entity. His motivations

straightforward, in that he wishes to rebrand his martial arts in order to make it relevant in the modern day. His narrative fits the archetypes of both the martial arts master as well as the old man. He is also connected to the protagonist of *Strider* (1989), which takes place in a distant dystopian future, since he himself is the first to wear the mantle of Strider.

Zeku, however, changes his stereotypes, not through his narrative but his ludonarrative. The common old man or old master archetypes followed in popular media either lean towards characters bent and burdened with age, yet retaining their mastery, or are depicted as muscular individuals who have hardened with age and are capable of explosive demonstrations of power. A third variant of the archetype includes those who are visibly the former and yet can transform into the latter. Zeku redefines the old master trope by subverting each. He is an aged master, but in his physical prime. His build is neither ancient nor muscle-bound, but instead allows him to carry himself with a suave dignity. He borrows the third archetype's transformative prowess, but transforms instead into his younger self – that of the modern ninja archetype, in his role as the first Strider.

Zeku's older self combines in its design all aspects of his identity hereto known. He wears a blue ninja suit, which ties him to his Strider origin, an orange scarf which does the same, and a green ginbaori, signifying his status as the master of Bushinryu. Upon transformation, his younger self discards the green ginbaori in keeping with the fact that this self is not yet the master of his art, and retains the ninja outfit and scarf which he now uses to cover his face in the manner of ninjas.

In action, Zeku is arguably the series' most efficient yet demonstrative martial artist, which also contributes to his motivation of modernizing, rebranding, and selling his martial arts to the world at large. His attacks consist of moves that have previously been used by Guy, signifying that these are indeed moves of the Bushinryu style of combat. His Special Moves and Critical Art are similar to those used by Strider in *Strider*, done with kicks instead of swords, further tying Zeku to the Strider persona. His ninja origin is reflected in his precise and concise attacks, performed without any wasted movements, yet his recovery animations are among the most elaborate in the game, similar to those performed by Menat and G. he performs a different kata after finishing a different special move, which serves at once as a taunt to the opponent, a show of respect to his martial arts as a master, and demonstrate to the audience the beauty of it in order to popularize it further.

Zeku's name in itself contributes to his transformative archetype. The Zen Buddhist mantra Shiki Soku Zeku, Ku Soku Ze Shiki refers to the notion that everything returns to nothingness, and from nothingness all is born, and is chanted by Zeku before the commencement of his fights. Not only does it lend itself to his name and archetype, it also underlines his life as it is broadly known through his brief appearances and references. He has achieved the pinnacle of his mastery, and has then passed his mastery onto his disciple, in the process returning to nothingness. From this nothingness he has been reborn with a modernized style of his discipline and has embraced this mantra of impermanence to such a degree that his own form now undergoes reversion at will between the past, present, and the future. Zeku's acceptance of impermanence has made him a character beyond the old guy archetype, since while the old guy archetypes are associated with retention of old values or legacies while imparting onto the young said values and teachings, Zeku has completed his arc before being introduced into the narrative and is now reborn into a state of deliberate impermanence – creating his own alteration of the archetype.

Video games by their very foundational mechanism enforces an active story-telling, which rests in contrast to the narratology followed by print and cinematic media. This is one of crucial differences that resist adaptation and as a result creates a qualitative chasm between intertextuality which otherwise exists between print, graphic and cinematic media. A greater comprehension of ludological narrative and character establishment will not only allow for greater transition

between the respective disciplines, but may also pioneer newer modes of active storytelling in traditional as well as emerging media.

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