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“Reading” Japanese Role-playing Games:
On the Example of *Atelier Shallie* DX (2020)

Bachelor’s Thesis in Japanese Language and Culture

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[Abstract] The Japanese role-playing games attract players worldwide. Though, this is not necessarily due to a fascination with Japanese culture. While considering recent research on video games in Japanese Studies, especially the monograph by Rachael Hutchinson, this thesis puts an emphasis on Game Studies, as represented by Espen Aarseth. Accordingly, it asks whether the attraction of Japanese video games is primarily due to their game ‘play’, or their stories and narrated themes. In Game Studies this issue is known as the controversy between ‘ludologists’ and ‘narratologists’. Taking *Atelier Shallie* (2014–2020) as its main example, this study studies the different experiences provided by the ludic (gameplay) and the scripted parts (cutscenes). Ultimately it arrives at the conclusion that the combined theory of Ludonarratology has the greatest potential to account for all narrative factors in a video game such as *Atelier Shallie*. This includes possibilities for future interdisciplinary research.

「要約」この論文では、Espen Aarseth(エスペン・アーセス)に代表されるように、ゲーム研究に重点を置いています。したがって、日本のビデオゲームの魅力は、主にゲームの「遊び」によるものなのか、それとも物語やナレーション付きのテーマによるものなのかを調べていきます。ゲーム研究では、この問題は「ludologists」、所謂ゲームを研究する者、と「narratologists」、所謂ストーリーを研究する者、の間の論争として知られています。例としてシャリーのアトリエ(2014～2020年)を取り上げ、この論文はゲームプレイとストーリーによって提供されるさまざまな体験を研究していきます。最終的には、Ludonarratologyという結合理論がシャリーのアトリエを始めとする様々なビデオゲームのすべてのナラティブを分析し説明を可能とする重要なツールであることだという結論に達します。これには、将来の学際的研究の可能性も含まれます。

[Sammanfattning] De Japanska rollspelen, också kända som JRPG (Japanese Role-playing Games), tilltalar konsumenter över hela världen. Dock så begrundar det sig inte nödvändigtvis på ett övergripande intresse för Japansk kultur. Med inspiration av ny forskning inom Japanologi som på senare tid har studerat sagor och berättelser inom datorspel, med synnerlig åtanke på monografin av Rachael Hutchinson, så fokuserar den här studien på Spelstudier (i.e. Game Studies), på så vis som Espen Aarseth förespråkar det. Således ställs frågan över hur narrativ inom Japanska datorspel uttrycks i de berättelser som berättas av spelmediet, och hur själva spelandet, alltså “gameplay”, förhåller sig. I spelstudier så kännetecknas debatten för dessa två synsätt av disciplinerna ‘ludologi’, som främst studerar spelande, och ‘narratologi’, som studerar författade berättelser inom spel. Med *Atelier Shallie* (2014–2020) som exempel så utforskar den här studien de olika erfarenheterna som ludik, alltså spelande och interaktivitet, samt de författade delarna, alltså texturor och filmsnuttar (i.e. cutscenes), kan bidra med på tu man hand, och tillsammans. Slutsatsen är att den kombinerade teorin som kallas för Ludonarratologi möjliggör noggrannare studier av narrativ och berättande i datorspel.

Keywords: Japanese Role-playing Games, Video Games, Story Games, *Atelier Shallie*, Japanese Studies, Game Studies, Ludonarratology

Even as an outsider, the people here have shown me so much kindness.

I won't forget that. – Shallistera

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While working on this thesis over the course of seven months, I read hundreds of academic papers from various disciplines. This experience made me realize what the fictional character Totooria Helmold meant in the beginning of the Japanese game *Atelier Meruru* when stating that, “The most important thing is your motivation to learn” (Gust 2011). The writing process and outcome of this study would not have been the same without the much appreciated input by many people around me. To name just the most important: Discussions with my buddies Hannah S., and Akseli G. inspired the writing of this thesis in the first place, and with regard to its implementation I would also like to extend my thanks to Jaqueline Berndt and Ida Kirkegaard. The Shallistera fan-art featured in this thesis was generously provided by my fellow bachelor David M. Special thanks go to Alexander Kancans for awakening my passion in academic Game Studies through diligent mentoring since 2019, and the highly supportive staff at Linné University. Last but not least I would like to thank my mother and my cat Burma for their ongoing encouragement.



Note on Romanization and Manuscript Style

The romanization of Japanese words follows the revised Hepburn system. Extended vowels are marked by macron, except certain proper names (for example, Kodansha) and widely known place names (for example, Kyoto). Japanese names are indicated in the Western order. Globally used Japanese terms and names (for example, manga) are not italicized. All translations from Japanese have been performed by the author.

This thesis uses the Chicago Manuscript Style with in-text Author-Date citation.

Note on Appendix

The appendix for this bachelor's thesis is available in a separate document.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
1.1 Research Questions.....	2
1.2 Terminology.....	2
1.3 Perspectivation and Background.....	3
1.3.1 Perspectivation: Game Studies.....	3
1.4 Background: Japanese Role-playing Games.....	5
1.4.1 Reading, or Playing Games?.....	6
2. Theory: Ludology and Narratology.....	6
2.1 Previous Research.....	7
2.2 Material: <i>Atelier Shallie</i>	9
2.3 Method.....	14
2.3.1 Differentiation: Ludic/Scripted.....	14
3. Case Study: <i>Atelier Shallie</i>	15
4. Conclusion.....	25
Ludography.....	26
Bibliography.....	26
Endnotes.....	28

List of Figures

1f “Gameplay: Synthesis with Shallotte”.....	11
2f “Cutscene: Shallistera and Homura”.....	11
3f “LifeTasks”.....	12
4f “Variable Model: <i>Atelier Shallie</i> ”.....	22

1. Introduction

Atelier Shallie DX (i.e. Deluxe) received a Western localization and release in January 14, 2020, to—but not exclusively to, the gaming console Nintendo Switch. This game is a Japanese Role-playing Game, and it is studied in this thesis. While the original *Atelier Shallie*, which was released in 2014,¹ would be interesting to study, it is the (localized) DX edition that is. This is due to the additional story content that it offers. The game is produced by Gust Co. Ltd. and published by Koei Tecmo. Recently, video games, in particular Japanese Role-playing Games i.e. JRPGs, have gained attention in academics as a new form of storytelling alike film and literature. The Japanologist scholar Rachael Hutchinson states that the consumer culture in Japan is different to the West in the way that games often are developed and published alongside movies, light novels, manga and other outlets, which together bring the story of respective universes to the consumers. Games are thus considered a storytelling medium together with other media forms (Hutchinson 2019, 2, 5). A European voice that shares this viewpoint is Olga Tokarczuk, Nobel Prize Laureate in Literature 2018. She briefly argues during a speech in 2019 that games and movies have taken a place alongside literature in the art of storytelling (UR Play 2019, 24:28–25:27). As personal experience would have it, my interest in game studies started when I purchased a physical copy of a game from a Japanese store. The game had been shelved next to books and thus had the scent of books—something unfamiliar in the West. This inspired me to conduct research on the concept of “reading” video games, and to read up on game studies that treat video games as “literature”.

But, not all consumers or scholars ‘read’ video games, or focus on the story content when playing; it is common rather to forefront gameplay. Espen Aarseth is a scholar in video game aesthetics who studies ludology and ludonarratology. He considers narrative theory to be necessary, but also insufficient for studying games (Aarseth 2012, 133). He acknowledges that every element—player interactivity, imagery, game mechanics—etc. can be read (Aarseth 1997, 5), and that scripted narratives and interactive gameplay are interconnected. Further, he argues that games are “integrated crossmedia packages”, i.e., “a piece of software that does contain, among other things, a game” (Aarseth 2012, 130). Thus Aarseth suggests that games can be read, *and* played. But which is it that takes precedence in the eyes of the players, and what different potentials to entertainment, or critical thinking, do the two actions, playing and reading, incur? Andrew C. Turley is a scholar and teacher who has taught undergraduate literature students to read games (Turley 2018, 1). Turley’s approach can be explained as narratological as it sees games as texts worthy of critical exploration and interpretation. With this in mind, further understanding of how to read games may be beneficial not only for Game Studies but also for Japanology, as scholars from interdisciplinary fields are approaching the video game media rapidly. With academic books such as *Dialectics of the Goddess in Japanese Audiovisual Culture* (2018) edited by Lorenzo Hortelano, and *Japanese Culture Through Videogames* (2019) authored by Rachael

¹ *Atelier Shallie* was released in Japan in 2014 and was later localized and released in the West in 2015. The same is true for *Atelier Shallie DX* which was released December 25, 2019 in Japan and then three weeks later to the West in 2020 (Atelierfandom 2020).

Hutchinson, recent uses for narratological approaches specifically tailored for games have been put to use in the sake of researching Japanese phenomena.

It is the aim of this thesis to further study the application of ludology and narratology while playing, and experiencing, games, as to examine the perspectives that different theoretical frames illuminate. To do so, this thesis is divided in three main chapters, with the fourth bearing its conclusion (as is shown in the table of contents). In chapter 1, which is the current chapter: A history of research regarding games from several perspectives are brought to attention, as to understand the ambiguity of games, and of game studies—which are conducted by a number of scholars around the world. In chapter 2: Theories from ludology and narratology are consolidated, this is to deepen our understanding of how games have been, and potentially can be, “read” as narrative objects, and as texts. Material specifics, and methoding for the case study are also explained. And in chapter 3: A case study, i.e. analysis, of the Japanese game *Atelier Shallie* (DX) is conducted to see what both of the above theories are able to illuminate, and demonstrate, on their own and when interconnected. This case study is based on several play sessions, and it is also aided by a transcription, available in the appendix document. For each of these three chapters one sub-question is answered, with the intention to reach a conclusion for the core issue. See research questions below.

1.1 Research Questions

The core issue: What different narrative experiences can be provided to players when a Japanese Role-playing Game is read as literature, or played as a gaming product?

Each respective chapter examines the following three sub-questions in order:

1. What can be gained from Game Studies with regards to understanding narrative, and reading, in games?
2. How can theoretical framing aid the understanding of narrative and text in games?
3. What is perceived from reading, and experiencing, *Atelier Shallie*’s predetermined (scripted) narratives as a streamlined text, contra the undetermined (ludic) narratives that occur during gameplay when the player is in control?

The intention is that the perspectivation presented in chapter 1, just a bit below, procures an answer to the first sub-question. Then, in chapter 2, theory from two scholars: Andrew C. Turley and Espen Aarseth are consulted in favor of the second sub-question. And in chapter 3 the third sub-question is examined through analytical efforts based on several play sessions of the game *Atelier Shallie*. The core issue is thereof present throughout the entirety of the thesis, and an answer is established in the conclusion. Below is a brief terminology, followed by the perspectivation on game studies.

1.2 Terminology

JRPG means Japanese Role-playing Games. According to Hutchinson Japanese Role-playing Games features “deep immersion through strong emphasis on story and character development” (Hutchinson 2019, 105), and this definition is shared by the scholar in game

studies Gerald Voorhees (Voorhees 2012, 93), and game producer of the *Tales of* series Hideo Baba (Wallace 2013).

Cutscene, refers to the cinematic sequences often seen in games. Cutscenes are short animated movie clips that provide narrative setting in a game. They are referred to as “cut” scenes because they cut in during and in between gameplay. Classic JRPGs (and Western RPGs) use dialogue boxes with text, although with today’s technology it features voiceover and 3D-animations in addition to text (Hutchinson 2019, 115).

Ludology refers to the study of games, particularly the interactive mechanics i.e. gameplay (Ensslin 2014, 197). *Ludic* approximately refers to the “playful” properties within a game (Kapell 2016, 4).

1.3 Perspectivation and Background

The current affair of studying video games is grounded in several perspectives and approaches which differ in fundamental ways. Below, these are first described by looking at studies that criticize or analyze uses of games. Then studies regarding reading games, which is the purpose of this thesis, are considered (in the background, sections: 1.4/1.4.1).

1.3.1 Perspectivation: Game Studies

In a sociological bachelor’s thesis by Lujiaozi Wang and Siyu Zhu it was found that games have properties that attract players through positive intentions, but which can end with addiction. More precisely their study reveals that Swedish and Chinese students at the University of Gävle, Sweden, chose to play Massive Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) to fit in with other students i.e. to join a common human network. Personality also played a big part in it, as they found that people who are less prone to social interaction tend to use MMOGs as an online platform for chatting and playing together with other people. However, this had the potential to lead to addiction that would cause dangerous eating habits, poor social skills which could ruin family and friend relationships and worsening academic careers and grades (Wang 2011, 37–39). From another perspective, in a master’s thesis by Andrew C. Turley a test was conducted where undergraduate literature students were encouraged to read an RPG alongside a selection of literary books. It was found that a selection of undergraduate literature students in particular gained an interest in academic study and discussion with classmates by putting up games in the curriculum (Turley 2018, 69–70).

In reflection, the above studies could indicate that the reason and focus for playing a game is a factor for consideration; while students in Gävle were found to play games because they wanted to fit in with other people, Turley’s students were aiming to read a game as part of a curriculum with the task to think critically about its ethical story, characters and narratives.

Other researchers have emphasized detriments and regarded video games as a cause of aggression and addiction. In a study in Isfahan, Iran, Eshrat Zamani et al. finds that leisure time in Iran is spent playing video games by a large number of students. This would seem to occur whenever other forms of entertainment were scarcely prepared (Zamani et al. 2009, 99).

From certain perspectives, and regarding certain target groups Zamani et al. write that the “Development of electronic and computer games are a great threat for youth and adolescents and can lead to psychological disorders and depression” (Ibid.). They regard as worrisome that boys tend to choose competitive, and violent games—as emotional and human relationships may be hindered during adolescent development (Ibid.). In contrast, the scholar Oskar Henrikson refers to the game series *Super Mario*, as well as to the film series *The Lord of the Rings*, in his Swedish book *Ensam eller Stark: Åtta Principer för Framgångsrika Team* as conceptual bearers on how to improve teamwork efficiency across organizations, businesses and educational facilities (Henrikson 2017, 33–34, 116).

Switching over to a controversial aspect of gaming; gambling has in recent years been integrated in some forms of games. News writer Kumikones on the website Kakuchopurei explains a particular recent trend in the Japanese mobile gaming market that is known as *gacha*. The name is derived from the many machines scattered around Japan that sell Gachapon capsules which contain hidden items that are revealed first after they have been bought and opened. In 2019–2020 *gacha* was the focus of many mobile games. In-game/digital items can be purchased through *gacha* systems through microtransaction of real life money. Following the *gachapon* concept however, the actual item is revealed after the purchase, and a factor of luck is required to get the item that one may want from a *gacha*. Kumikones observes that recent trends and an increase in lucrative profit from mobile gaming has made the online microtransaction-based gambling form of ‘*gacha gaming*’ very successful (Kumikones 2019). The concept of “Loot Boxes” is—as Paul Lanois describes, —a Western counterpart, which has gained in popularity during the Covid-19 period. British government in particular has in collaboration with academic scholars and industry professionals begun to oversee this (as they define it) new form of gambling. In addition to overseeing loot boxes, focus is also appointed on further research regarding “designed addiction” (Lanois 2020).

From another perspective online games have the potential to aid in academic research. The Massive Multiplayer Online RPG *World of Warcraft* (2004) was subdued for a famous virtual epidemic that came to be known as the “Corrupted Blood” incident. The two epidemiologists Eric Lofgren and Nina Fefferman gathered data from this incident to calculate human behavior during epidemics and think that, “Online games provide an intriguing experimental laboratory” (Lofgren 2007, 628). It is speculated across news sites and epidemiological communities that their study method could be applied to tackle Covid-19 (Ouellette 2020).

And finally, in very recent times several researchers appreciate game studies as a cultural, political, and philosophical phenomena—and serious discussions of this nature are also gaining popularity in commonplace communities, not only academic (Seraphine 2016, 2). Scholars and academic institutions collectively think that games are a “sociocultural expression” (Antkiewicz 2017, 60) with literary merit (Joly 2016), that involve deep emotion (Sloan 2015, xii), and that “illuminate truths about our world, our societies, and ourselves” (LCAD). Shifting focus to scholars who have studied this on a close level, Martin Roth has dedicated his book *Thought-Provoking Play* to researching the potential that video games

might stimulate the potential to imagine a better world (Roth 2017, 1). After analyzing game mechanics, political themes, and several other elements in Japanese video games (Ibid., 77, 81), Roth argues “that videogame spaces can indeed make distinct contributions to the imagination of alternatives, and offer intriguing perspectives on the foundations of contemporary life” (Ibid., 177). Similarly, the YouTube channel: Games as Literature presents a literary analysis of *Final Fantasy VII* (1997), wherein an argument which shares the fundamentals of the latter perspective, is stated:

One of the strengths of fantasy and science-fiction when it comes to commentary on real life subject matter is its ability to bring existential issues to physical space. Untethered to the limitations of our reality a story can frame big, complicated questions in ways that allow for simpler, more direct commentary or ideas (YouTube 2020, 27:11–27:31).

In a more Japanologist approach as taken by Rachael Hutchinson, games have been studied as cultural products of their time. In her book, *Japanese Culture Through Videogames*, she argues that Japanese games can convey comments on the context of living in contemporary Japan (Hutchinson 2019, 5). She has studied Japanese nuclear discourse in the *Final Fantasy*, and *Metal Gear Solid* series, and in other Japanese games (Ibid., 129, 153). While these perspectives would have been interesting, I leave this research topic to other studies. However, to demonstrate Hutchinson’s studies briefly we look to her research of *Final Fantasy X* (abbreviated *FFX*), a Japanese Role-playing Game released in 2001. When the character cast in *FFX*, Tidus, Wakka, Lulu and Yuna are crossing a large river on a boat, they spot a city beneath the water. This sunken city was made with the forbidden “Machina” technology a thousand years ago. The character cast speak to each other about it, but Lulu tells everyone that this ancient machina city sunk because of its weight which made it impossible for its bridges to support it any longer. Tidus seems to think it a good idea to build a city that is close to water, however Wakka interjects that the city was built simply because humans wanted to prove that they could defy nature. Wakka continues, “When humans have power, they seek to use it. If you don’t stop them, they go too far, ya?”. Hutchinson interprets this scene in *FFX* as a “meditation on the human ability to use technological power versus the human responsibility not to abuse that power” (Ibid., 145–146). This is one of several observations during her research, and considering this style of narrative to be born from domestic Japanese influences, she argues that “the Japanese perspective enriches our own, allowing us to see the world from another angle” (Ibid., 255–256).

1.4 Background: Japanese Role-playing Games

Western scholar in game design, Ernest Adams, argues that Role-playing Games are known among game designers to present players with rich worlds, and a prevalent role in developing one’s character (Adams 2014, 73–74). What makes Role-playing Games that are made in Japan to stand out is that they are known in academics to feature long literary scripts and story writing on behalf of authors (Hutchinson 2019, 105), in Hutchinson’s words:

The JRPG has attracted much scholarly attention for its ‘textual’ or ‘literary’ nature, with tightly structured linear scripts, deep psychological character development, and the sheer length of the text, with many games taking 50–100 hours (Ibid., 6).

This is according to scholar Gerald Voorhees equally known amongst fans who say that “Story and character development are hallmarks of JRPGs” (Voorhees 2012, 93).

Considering that games in Japan are known to be sold and consumed together with other media products which together tell the full story of a universe (Hutchinson 2019, 2), this might be why Japanese game designer, and author Taiten Kawakami and his team of collaborators proclaim that the (J)RPG demands interprofessional work in their creation (Kawakami et al. 2018, 3, 5), and that it is one of the most popular game genres in Japan (Ibid., 13).

1.4.1 Reading, or Playing Games?

The academic study of content in games, distinct from investigations of their social impact or utilization, mainly comes from two fields that offer different tools and focal points: ludology and narratology. Matthew W. Kapell explains in the book *The Play Versus Story Divide in Game Studies: Critical Essays*:

At the dawn of the 21st century, videogame criticism was marked by a rhetorical battle between two academic camps: ludologists from computer science and mathematics backgrounds viewed games as interlocking systems of rules, while narratologists educated in the humanities and social sciences understood games as storytelling texts resembling film, literature and theatre (Kapell 2016, 71).

Kapell means that the two fields, narratology and ludology, divide scholars into “story people” who aim to understand what the stories in games do, and “play people” who prefer to label games as a new form of media that is best understood through studying the effect on narrative that player input and interactivity have (Ibid., 2–3). These ludological and narratological camps are known to be in debate. Aarseth points out that while the ludic field is critical in their research regarding narrative, the narratological field does not mind the technicalities of reading games, but instead focuses on a theoretical discussion of whether “games can be said to be stories” (Aarseth 2012, 130–131). This leads to the theoretical framework referenced for this thesis, which is introduced in the following section.

2. Theory: Ludology and Narratology

It should be possible to read the narrative of a game by paying attention to ludological perspectives (the gameplay), and to narratological perspectives (the cutscenes etc.), in conjunction to each other. However a study that analyzes what these two can achieve separately has not been done yet to great extent. This thesis investigates its example through the lenses of ludology and narratology respectively to answer the research question assessing what each theoretical frame makes visible on their own, and what when they are combined.

Ludonarratology interconnects, or to the very least acknowledges both ludology and narratology as part of studying narrative in games. Espen Aarseth attempts to distinguish and simultaneously provide leeway to potentially interconnect these two perspectives through his “ludonarrative variable model”. His variable model provides a list of four variables that have the potential to create narrative—either through player interaction and gameplay, or via the game author’s writing and pre-rendered and plotted story content. The four elements are: (a) World, (b) Objects, (c) Characters (i.e. Agents), and (d) Events (Aarseth 2012, 132). Aarseth separates between ludic, i.e. player-made, and scripted, i.e. author-made, narratives. In other words, the world and objects variables are largely susceptible by the player and reliant on player interaction, while the character and event variables are pre-programmed in the game and scripted to show up whenever the cue is right (when the player encounters a new character or a new location, or completes an objective etc.). These events are usually conveyed with text-assets and cinematic cutscenes. It is then that the characters commonly would enact as narrative agents to proceed the game storyline.

Strictly speaking narrative is different from story; because narrative can happen at all times through player effort as well as within a story (Ibid., 130). Thus, the question is not whether the player can change the story but to what degree player-made narratives can be regarded to affect the player’s experience of a game’s story.

2.1 Previous Research

This section aims to deepen our knowledge regarding these two theories, and therefore research conducted by the two scholars: Andrew C. Turley, and Espen Aarseth beckons attention. Turley graduated with a Master of Arts due to the study presented below, while Aarseth provides game studies with a variety of theoretically developed approaches from his experience as a professor at the IT University of Copenhagen.

Andrew C. Turley—Reading Games as Literature

In Turley’s master’s thesis, *Reading the Game: Exploring Narratives in Video Games as Literary Texts*, an analysis of lessons with literature students are conducted. Turley tasked these literature students to play and read *Undertale*, an RPG made by Toby Fox in 2015 (Turley 2018, 64, 62). Theorizing critical reading of popular games to be intellectually beneficial, Turley presents the viewpoint that readers of game narrative form a reciprocal process of reading and playing the game, decoding its meaning as they play. Turley explains that the actions taken by players in the RPG *Undertale* drastically changes the storyline. To test this outside of theory, literature students were assigned to read literary books that would challenge their critical views on character depth, ethical choice and agency. These traits were plenty in three works of literature according to Turley: *Delicate Edible Birds* (2009) by Lauren Groff, *God Help the Child* (2015) by Toni Morrison, and *Undertale* (Ibid., 64–65). However, this experiment, of implementing agency to the reading experience, met with difficulty as 58% of students found that *Undertale* was difficult to complete since it requires not only reading but also an ability to complete gameplay objectives. As such it was not entirely possible for all of the students to actually read to the end of the whole story, and

some complained that the puzzling gameplay felt rather like an obstacle (Ibid., 69). One of the more positively keen students on the *Undertale* assignment comments:

There are some things in this game, like literature, that are deeper than what is at face value. You have to go digging for details to get everything out of this game. In literature, you have to interpret and analyze ambiguous parts of the text to get the full picture (Ibid., 77).

Turley tells us that this student has found a common nominator for literary texts, and for game narratives: Because they both motivate analytical thinking (Ibid.). However, considering that some readers were unable to access the whole story's content due to difficulty with completing gameplay objectives, it can be worth to study the possibility that perhaps games offer narrative properties outside of the scripted and pre-rendered content. Gameplay, i.e. ludic narrative, is the focus of ludological study and addresses such perspectives further.

Espen Aarseth—Reading Games as Narrative

Espen Aarseth considers game narratives non-trivial and in need of player effort (Aarseth 1997, 17–18). In addition, every game is different. Some games (such as the above mentioned *Undertale*) change narrative drastically based on player actions, while some games merely provide side story content, which does not affect the main storyline (Aarseth 2012, 131–132). With the use of his ludonarrative variable model Aarseth makes it easier to differentiate between ludic (player-made) and scripted (author-made) narratives. He found that games with much freedom often contained less scripted cutscenes, while games which are linear and do not allow the player much freedom also contain more scripted cutscenes made by the game authors. This is, however, Aarseth's generalization; it is still possible to implement a large amount of cutscenes even if the game is one with an open world,² but it is easier for authors to make sure that the player experiences their cutscenes if the world is linear (Ibid., 133). He sees the acclaimed game *Minecraft* (2009), by Markus Persson, as a perfect example of a game that offers no author-made content. *Minecraft* is a game where the players build their own buildings and terrain with blocks, and so it is the player who playfully creates their own narratives and content, and since there is no author-made storyline, the player does not need to fulfill objectives. *Minecraft* is categorized in Aarseth's variable model as a game with an open world, that is, with inventable objects, characters without personalities, and with non-existing events (no cutscenes or dialogue) i.e. it is a “no kernel” game.³ *Half Life 2* by Valve Corporation, 2004, is another acclaimed title which he applies to his variable model, but this time as an example of a game with a “linear corridor” world, static but usable objects (health restoration kits etc. which cannot be carried away by the player but only used in certain set locations), deep, i.e., round characters with personalities that develop with the story and that have dialogue, and with a plotted story that relies on player efforts to proceed, i.e., a

² “world” = story world, presented either in a linear plot, or in an open way, which means, that the plot branches out according to the player's choice.

³ Aarseth's term “kernel” indicates the plot points that make a story recognizable, while he considers “satellites” insignificant events with little bearing on plotted events in stories (Aarseth 2012, 131).

“dynamic kernel” game (Ibid., 131–133). Aarseth concludes his study by encouraging future research to input new data/games to the variable model, to further understand what it is that produces narrative, and how games do so. Accordingly, Aarseth’s ludonarrative variable model has seen prior utilization in Japanese studies authored by Lorenzo (Hortelano 2018, 121). Aarseth’s variable model is also used in this thesis for the analysis of the game *Atelier Shallie* and summarized in a chart presented in chapter 3.

2.2 Material: *Atelier Shallie*

Game Specifications

Atelier Shallie DX is analyzed for this thesis. It was purchased on its Western release date January 14, 2020, for the Nintendo Switch gaming console. The DX edition was selected because it features new story and gameplay content. The language setting was set to display English text and Japanese voice. The difficulty setting was set to “Game Fan”.⁴

Reasons for the Selection

Among the many Japanese video games that are available in the world, this thesis selected *Atelier Shallie* for its case study. The reasons for this are: First, that it features a “Chapter” system, and second, that it has the LifeTasks system, and third, that it is a less famous Japanese game with more anime-aesthetic graphics than JRPGs generally have. The chapter system divides the story in selected portions and makes it easier to analyze. *Final Fantasy XII* (2006), as well as *Tales of Xillia* (2011) are JRPGs that had also been considered for this thesis. However, their systems for dividing the storyline are not as clear-cut. While *Tales of Xillia* also provides a chapter system, the chapters are longer and fewer. This is attested to on the internet forum Gamefaqs, where people are discussing the chapter indication system in *Tales of Xillia*, and find it quite difficult to discern (gamefaqs). *Atelier Shallie* has clear indications when a new chapter is entered, and it uses a larger quantity of chapters to divide the story in shorter portions which makes it easier to refer to and helps the transparency of research. It should also be noted that Rachael Hutchinson already has studied famous games such as the *Final Fantasy* and *Street Fighter* series to name only a few, and that other scholars in general seem to cater to famous Japanese games. Therefore, I argue that it is interesting to study less well-known games (which *Atelier Shallie* is currently), which from a suggestive view can be considered more exclusive to Japan.

Reception

The Metacritic score was 76, and the user rating was 7.7 on July 18, 2020 (Metacritic).⁵ Reviews are positive in general. The game review site Destructoid gave *Atelier Shallie* Plus⁶ a score of 8.5. The “Story Watcher” difficulty setting is mentioned as a good function for those who would rather enjoy the game as a story than as a challenging game (Veron 2017). It is also possible to assume that consumers who are interested in Japanese anime and manga would find the art style, graphics and form of storytelling appealing.

⁴ Difficulty settings available are, from easiest to hardest: “Story Watcher”, “Game Fan”, “Hardcore”, “Despair”, and “NO HOPE”.

⁵ metacritic.com is a website that aggregates the overall score of games, films, music etc. online.

⁶ *Atelier Shallie* Plus was released 2016/17 exclusively to PS Vita, it is identical to the DX release.

Story Setting

(a) Characters

The story in *Atelier Shallie* follows Princess Shallistera, who is the representative and next chief of Lugion Village, and a second protagonist who is named Shallotte. They both have an affinity for using alchemy, and they share the nickname Shallie. It is possible for the player to choose either one at the very start of the story, which changes the perspective throughout, – sometimes greatly and sometimes merely in perspective regarding the same events.

These two protagonists meet with a large cast of characters that are all involved in the plot somehow. The closest companions to Shallistera are the father and son Teokhuga and Kortes. As Shallistera spends time in Stellard City (the home area of the game) she gets to know Shallotte and her friends Miruca, Wilbell and Jurie. In addition, both Shallie's meet with Raoul, Solle, Escha, Logy, Homura, Katla, Linca and several more characters.

(b) World

A phenomenon known as the Dusk is plaguing the environment of the whole region surrounding Stellard City and its Archipelago, Lugion Village and other surrounding settlements. What was once a vast sea has turned into a “sand sea” instead, i.e. a desert. This however is initially unknown to the young protagonists as they have always lived like this, and the current society has adapted by creating floating ships—large boats with decorative sails and giant propellers made with the mysterious power of alchemy that keeps the boats afloat above the sand dunes. To navigate in this world the player interacts with dots on a world map. When the player presses the A button on a dot, that specified area is entered and the camera changes perspective so that the player can walk around in that environment.

(c) Plot

The storyline starts out with dramatic elements that focus on the lives of the many characters that inhabit or otherwise visit Stellard City. The protagonists develop as they work hard to practice their alchemy skills, trying to adapt to society by actively looking for jobs. As the story goes on they suddenly discover things about the Dusk that must be addressed as they fight to survive the drought and the steadily decreasing amount of water sources.

Gameplay

In *Atelier Shallie* it is possible to control the protagonist of the player's choosing. In the beginning of the storyline one chooses between Shallistera or Shallotte. After watching a series of cutscenes, the player is tasked with mixing ingredients in a cauldron to synthesize alchemic concoctions, from where the player is gradually introduced to several gameplay mechanics. Gameplay, such as playing with synthesis, is fully driven by input from the player (see figure 1f).

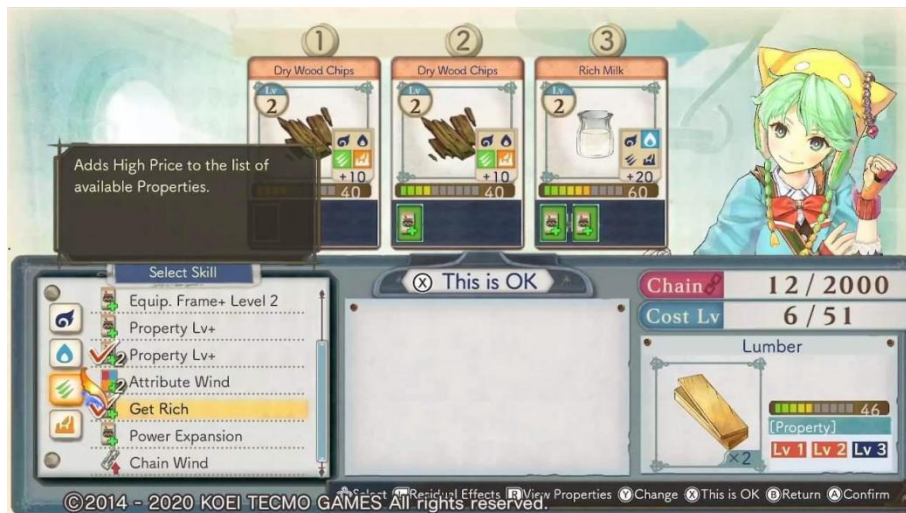


Figure 1f, “Gameplay: Synthesis with Shallotte”

When various tasks are completed, it is common for a cutscene to activate. These cutscenes present the player with dialogue windows, scripted delivery of phrases and camera angles of character encounters, and with impressive scenery when reaching new locations in the game world. The player is able to proceed the dialogue windows that are present during cutscenes by pressing the A button; however, further levels of interactivity are not part of viewing these scenes. It is also possible to fast forward a cutscene, as well as view a message log which lists all dialogue lines which have transpired in recent times. Figure 2f shows a line of dialogue.



Figure 2f, “Cutscene: Shallistera and Homura”

Because it is possible to separate gameplay (ludic content) and cutscenes/dialogue (scripted content) between different perspectives, some theoretical approaches would only pay attention to the player-made narratives created during gameplay, while others would prioritize the scripted cutscenes by the author as a subject worthy of study.

Narrative Factors

(a) Chapter system/Free Time

In *Atelier Shallie*, each chapter comes with a Plot and Free Time section. The beginning of each chapter presents the player with cutscenes; this is where problems for the protagonist occur, leading to a list of gameplay tasks that need to be completed in order to proceed the story. When these main story (i.e., plotted) tasks are completed the chapter enters the Free Time section. The Free Time portion focuses more on optional little stories that feature character relations and their quirks. However, even though the Free Time tasks present various optional quests, a number of these must be fulfilled in order to progress in the main story. The task system is governed by the LifeTasks menu.

(b) LifeTasks menu

The LifeTasks function is comprised of a menu that displays text telling the player what to do next. In addition, by pressing the Y button, the player can “Change page” and read the thoughts of the protagonist regarding past or upcoming events. This serves a dual function (a) to help the player proceed with the storyline and (b) to understand the thoughts of the protagonist in response to current storyline events. Figure 3f illustrates this.

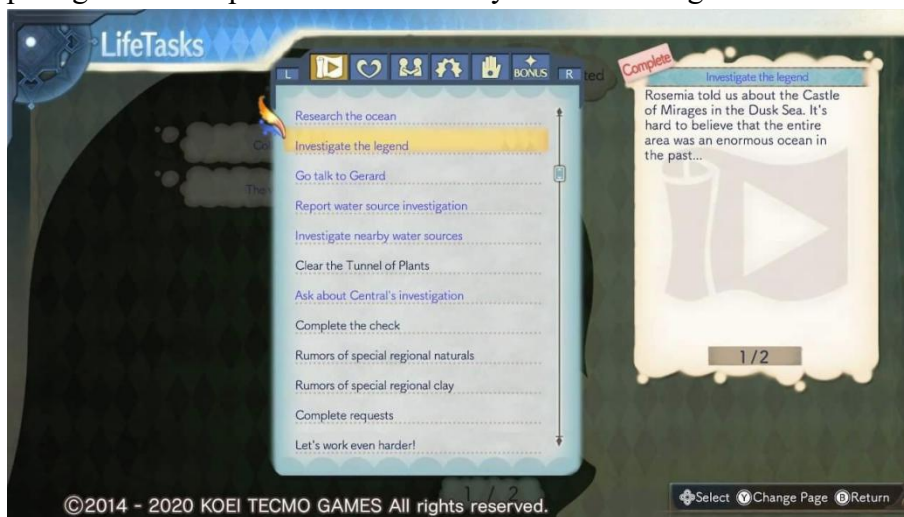


Figure 3f, “LifeTasks”

(c) Cutscenes/Character dialogue

Characters often speak to each other in the story. This is most often seen in cutscenes, i.e., pre-rendered scenes. In this game 3D animations, voice acting and dialogue windows with text are used to convey events (see figure 2f).

(d) Background music

The background music i.e. BGM, or soundtrack, can freely be changed in the same menu that is used for save/load and system settings. Players can enter the Change BGM menu in order to set music from other games, produced by Gust, to play. This provides the player with the possibility to change the mood during particular moments in the game. It is not a function that has been considered during this study; the original soundtrack/BGM was left as it is.

(e) Ludic objectives + Game mechanics

Exploration, fighting monsters, finding new locations, gathering ingredients and mixing ingredients with alchemy, i.e. synthesis, are all parts of the gameplay narrative, that is, by playing with these game mechanics, the player creates narrative. The use of synthesis is a process where the player mixes ingredients in an alchemy cauldron. Synthesis/Alchemy, is an important gimmick for *Atelier Shallie* both for the storyline, and for the gameplay, thus it is elaborated on below.

(f) Synthesis

As seen in figure 1f above: Synthesis is a game mechanic that requires the player to choose ingredients, which are then displayed in the form of cards. From there the player is able to move around the ingredients i.e. the cards, as well as to apply “synthesis skills” to them. But, before it is possible to create an item the player needs a recipe, and an alchemy level which meets the minimum requirement. Alchemy recipes are learned from reading books or notes, which can be purchased from various shops, and by completing certain objectives in the story. In addition, the synthesis skills are learned gradually as the player creates objects, and gains experience points; which in effect helps the protagonist level up the alchemy level. By applying synthesis skills creatively, and by using higher level ingredients, the player can create even more potent items. While the game offers a basic tutorial on synthesis, it is up to the player to experiment with a vast amount of ingredients, and the combinations of synthesis skills, if they want to concoct high level items. Below is a short recap of the terms that are used for synthesis in *Atelier Shallie*, for reader convenience.

1. Synthesis: The action of using the alchemy cauldron to synthesize items.
2. Synthesis skills: A set of skills that can be applied to the chosen ingredients by the player to improve the effects and traits of the items that are being synthesized.
3. Alchemy recipe: Provides the player with the possibility to create a new item.
4. Alchemy level: A statistic that when practiced unlocks new synthesis skills, and that enables the player to create higher level alchemy items.
5. Ingredients: Objects that are found in the world, hosting various qualities and traits, of which can be mixed together with alchemy to create something entirely different.

As mentioned, synthesis is part of the charm of the storyline, and it is also the main ludic game mechanic. Thus, it is included further below in the case study as to grasp how well that it can fulfill both the ludic, and the narratological purposes concurrently.

(g) Exploration + Battle mode

During exploration in the world of *Atelier Shallie* it is, as briefly mentioned above, possible to gather ingredients that are used in synthesis. Ingredients are gathered by walking up to sparkling spots found in an area, and by pressing the A button. But, it is also possible to walk into, or be chased by, monsters. On touch, the player enters battle mode. There, the three characters that the player has placed in the party formation will line up, and take turns with the monsters to exchange actions, such as using battle skills, or items made with synthesis. As with synthesis, combat level is leveled up as experience points are obtained from defeating stronger monsters, which means that the stats of the characters become higher/stronger.

In addition, monsters also drop ingredients and other loot—of which have a higher chance to drop when the player is playing the game on harder difficulty settings.

2.3 Method

In practical application both ludology and narratology can be used to read narrative in video games, but which approaches unearth what types of texts, or narratives? The analysis is focused on uncovering the differences as part of answering the research question.

Analysis and Discussion

Aarseth's variable model was applied as I played the game and concurrently observed the outcome of my choices, and my reactions to various narratives. In other words, I am the sole participant and take the role of subject and object in this study. The variable model also provided a toolset of perspectives that assisted the analysis with a distinct outlook on ludic and scripted narratives, i.e., it was possible to differentiate pre-narrated and player-made narratives. Notes to self were taken during observation, to assist with the writing of analysis. In addition, cutscenes from chapter 2 in *Atelier Shallie*, from Shallistera's perspective, were transcribed, and they are available in the separate appendix document.

Limitation

From a total of 10 chapters + prologue this study mainly analyzes chapter 2, 8 and 10. This is done mainly during the Plot, and somewhat during the Free Time periods. The LifeTasks feature is also observed, as well as other things in *Atelier Shallie*'s chapters.

2.3.1 Differentiation: Ludic/Scripted

For the sake of the following analysis, two terms are used in this study: Scripted, and Ludic. When viewing the game from a narratological perspective it is the scripted narrative content that beckons focus. In other words, cutscenes, dialogue and other predetermined narratives that are watched rather than played with. In contrast, when viewing the game from a ludological perspective it is the gameplay, i.e. ludic narrative, that beckons focus. In other words, narrative content that is created during moments when the player is in control of the protagonist, or something else, in the game. Below are examples of what is what.

(a) Ludic-only perspective

The following aspects are important to think about from the ludic perspective when playing *Atelier Shallie*:

- Exploring the game world/Interactivity
- Gathering ingredients (objects)
- Synthesis as a game mechanic
- Objectives in LifeTasks

(b) Scripted-only perspective

The following scripted, i.e. pre-narrated and pre-rendered, aspects are deemed as important for the storyline from a narratological perspective:

- Watching cutscenes
- Character dialogue
- Shallie's thoughts in LifeTasks

3. Case Study: *Atelier Shallie*

The following chapter aims to present analysis from ludological and narratological perspectives. The gameplay and pre-narrated events in *Atelier Shallie* are observed and analyzed to reach a conclusion for this thesis. First, the themes that are found to be most prominent in each of all ten chapters + prologue in *Atelier Shallie* are listed below (from Shallistera's, one of the two protagonist's, perspective).

Chapter Theme Overview (Shallistera's Story)

Prologue, A Sea of Sand

Chapter 1, Seeking Help

Chapter 2, Mutual Aid

Chapter 3, Fulfilling Responsibilities

Chapter 4, Making Friends/Earning Recognition

Chapter 5, Repaying Debts

Chapter 6, Progressing Investigation, Falling Out

Chapter 7, Making Up/Best Friends

Chapter 8, Arguing with the Lord of Water

Chapter 9, Forgotten/Underground Industrial Facilities

Chapter 10, Giving Nature the Time to Recover + Endgame

The prologue demonstrates a critical view on environmental issues through narration, music and imagery which consolidates the setting of the world. During this prologue the player meets Shallistera and her companions, Kortez and Teokhuga, who are aboard on a large boat that floats above the sand. This combination of imagery, sand dunes instead of ocean waves, and a large floating ship that mimics the appearance of any other ship may perhaps be interpreted as a wordless metaphor for the human will to traverse with boats, despite having no water to ride in. As the player is introduced to Stellard City the focus is more on scripted and ludic qualities intertwined—character development, getting to know other characters, integration and finding jobs, and also on introducing gameplay mechanics. It could be argued that the story in chapters 1 to 4 mainly is supportive of promoting tension and purpose in the gameplay. Meanwhile, the gameplay which encourages the player to explore the nearby areas, and to gather ingredients, likewise can be considered a ludic narrative which spurs curiosity for the storyline. If the areas explored during gameplay can be considered the setting of the world, the cutscenes that follow upon completion of investigations and surveys in these lands may be considered the much awaited stage on which the protagonist may react to the activities that the player recently has performed.

The story promotes certain ideologies through cutscenes that bring up the mentioned topics of help, aid, responsibility and of earning recognition. In a somewhat peculiar manner, however, it is possible to describe the gameplay as quite repetitive during these chapters as the player is tasked with exploring new lands, gathering ingredients, fighting monsters, reporting back to the city, leveling up the alchemy skill, and then repeating this ludic cycle in new lands. What changes is that new locations with unique scenery are found bit by bit. Also, it is through player, i.e. ludic, effort that these new locations are uncovered, and then it is up to

the player, if they want to explore these lands for longer times, or leave as soon as the main story objective is completed—in order to view the next plotted cutscene and receive a new task. While the LifeTasks menu tells the player what they need to do in order to proceed with the story, it is ultimately an objective, and not something that will be completed on its own. Player interaction with the ludic aspects of the game is therefore an instrumental part of the plot progression. If defeating a designated monster or gathering a certain ingredient is a must in order for the next event of the plot to be unlocked, it is up to the player to play it out—to play their role as the narrative driver. Metaphorically speaking it is like pushing the play button for a movie, but gameplay mechanics adds certain difficulty to it and requires precise, strategic clicking and management which results in having to click several buttons on a game controller in meticulous ways on the path to the cutscene. But, such ludic processes, – such paths so to speak, can also tell their own stories according to ludological perspectives.

In chapter 6, and in chapter 8 the Plot addresses environmentalist issues through means of dialogue between characters, and the discovery of new land during ludic gameplay. As the plot develops, player exploration leads the visuals to many different environments ranging from lush forests to marshes with plenty of water. While the ludic environments during early chapters only allow the player to traverse desert areas and dark, eerie waterless swamps, it is possible to explore areas with healthy and green scenery in later chapters. Discovery of new scenery provides a narrative all on its own, and it ties in to the dramatic dialogue that gradually takes place between the protagonists and their friends. As new lands are being discovered, several cutscenes also reveal chapter by chapter that their world once was plentiful with water, and that the Dusk sea, which is now a desert, once was a real sea.

This kind of narrative is not something that gameplay itself could express. However, gameplay may have the ability to reflect and mirror the narrative if we pay attention to the steadily rising difficulty level of gameplay. While the cutscenes tell the player of these problematic events and of the mindsets and reactions of the protagonist's, newer and stronger monsters appear in the newly discovered areas. If the monsters would have been as weak as in the beginning of the game storyline, a certain feeling of anti-climax may arise. In other words, as new problems are unearthed in the plot, the player too is challenged by an increasing resistance from monsters who evolve and grow stronger. If the player has been building on their strategies correctly, they too have grown more powerful. In *Atelier Shallie* it is the area itself that contains monsters of certain levels, and so a discovery of new locations is tied to narrative progression and elevating difficulty in conjunction.

Shallistera's Character Development in Chapter 2

Through the protagonist-perspective of Shallistera, Chapter 2 focuses on concepts such as social networking, working, and studying, all through the experience of emotional hurdles. But most importantly of all—the protagonist is an outsider, a foreigner and a visitor to Stellard City. So, how does she handle it that she finds herself in a new city far from home? To know this we only need to watch the cutscenes—gameplay is irrelevant. However, to connect on a deeper level, and to feel it, one should also consider the hurdles that she is going

through in between the cutscenes when the player is in control. Therefore the following section will retell what happens during cutscenes, and what is done during ludic segments.

During chapter 2 the cutscenes and dialogues between characters present the player with narratives that serve as the core of the storyline. In the second cutscene of this chapter, Shallistera and Kortés introduce themselves to an influential man named Mr. Perriend, or the Chairman. He is an older man clad in a green and badge-decorated jacket, who is in charge of Stellard City. However he is mostly grumpy which does not come as a surprise since they had crashed their ship violently in the harbor of Stellard City on their very first visit. Nonetheless his secretary known as Linca, a woman with a yellow and black outfit, silver hair and glasses, offers them a job. They are to investigate a desolate location known as the Land of the Dead. Shallistera takes the job, seemingly in the hopes that her efforts will lead to some social acceptance. After a relatively short journey through open landscapes and dark forests they arrive to the Land of the Dead, an eerie place that is always dark, with fungus growing everywhere and with monsters known as “slags” that roam around. When they—Shallistera, Kortés and Jurie, – an old friend, thought that they were alone, they were approached by yet another grumpy and mysterious man, this time accompanied by a robotic woman known as Odelia. This mysterious man suddenly greets them with an upsetting comment, telling them that their journey is pointless “because all you’re doing is focusing on one event”.

When the cutscene is over the player is presented with the requirement of completing one of three ludic objectives. Either the party needs to defeat a set amount of monsters, or find rare materials. It is however not an important part of the storyline, as nothing changes, no matter how you complete it. As the objective is completed quite swiftly, a window pops up on the screen and tells the player that the task is done. Now it is possible to return to Mr. Perriend. In the cutscene that activates upon entering Perriend’s office, Shallistera is alone, without the others in the party. This was sudden; no narrative indication hinted to the player that she wanted to go alone, but one may interpret that she decided to report to him alone in order to challenge herself and not to rely on Kortés too much. Or he just became busy. Either way, this cutscene quickly escalates to Shallistera being scorned for doing a lousy report, and she finds herself too nervous to speak back. This cutscene is not interactable, nor is it possible to change the outcome depending on how well the player actually performed the survey in the Land of the Dead. Thus, it is lacking interconnection. Later, when the player returns to Shallistera’s home aboard her ship, she is depressed. Shortly thereafter Linca knocks on the door to the ship. While she is the secretary for Mr. Perriend, she yet took the time to visit Shallistera at her home. This scene is a dire turning point for Shallistera’s personal development. Without the encouragement offered by Linca, perhaps she would have kept sulking all day long. When the cutscene ends, Shallistera has stopped sulking and gained the strength to focus on working hard to contribute to the Stellard society. This is the point where the player enters the Free Time section of Chapter 2 and is tasked with leveling up, exploring the nearby area and improving one’s, or in other words Shallistera’s skills—in direct conjunction with the statement that the protagonist wants to work hard for fitting in to society (see more below in section “Tasks in Life”).

A pattern can be found which is that the protagonist's personal development is scripted, plotted and not interactable. However, her combat level and skill in alchemy is governed by player effort in exploring areas, gathering ingredients and using alchemy to synthesize these items into usable tools meant to assist in exploring even more dangerous places. This does create a sense of symbiosis between the scripted narrative and the ludic narrative in the way that the player needs to improve their equipment and level up in order to brave more dangerous places, while the storyline reflects this effort by steadily introducing the player with new places, and dangerous monsters. However, one should not expect this to indicate that the player can change the scripted narrative—it is plotted and is not malleable by player input. It is merely a question of whether or not the player decides to explore the world at their own leisure, or to pursue the main storyline, or optional events, for a while. It is also possible to disregard this symbiosis and simply read the cutscenes as they are, since they tell a lot. As an example it is possible to interpret chapter 2 from a societal perspective as follows.

Near the end of chapter 2 Mr. Perriend's secretary Linca visits Shallistera to cheer her up in regards to the behavior by her boss. Linca's kind gesture could be read as a critical comment on societal ideology, showcasing how people could or should encourage each other in real life to boost productivity together with personal happiness. Some time later Shallistera asks herself the question "I wonder what I could do to get the people in this city to listen to me...". Kortes and Teokhuga consult her on the matter, whereas Teo says that "If you show an open heart and accept them, the people of this city will do the same in return". Teokhuga means that it is better not to wait for others to approach her, but for Shallistera to do her best in approaching others instead; and to network. If a combined comment on sociocultural matters is to be established from these narratological scenarios, it is visible that "aid and mutual relations" plays a cohesive role. Linca plays out this theme directly by leaving the office and going to Shallistera. Teokhuga does not show it through action but instead puts it to words. Together they convey the same message: That by focusing not only on a small area, but by networking and reaching out, good things happen. This is all perceivable from a narratological perspective which pays attention to the scripted cutscenes and dialogue texts.

However, this is not how chapter 2 is perceived from a ludological perspective. Because in between the cutscenes the player is in control of the character and has the ability merely to walk around within bounds of acceptable and predetermined locations where one can do predetermined things. During these ludic times the player has the ability to walk around Stellard City, or explore the lands outside, to accept requests from the Union Headquarters and complete them for a payment in "cole" (the in-game currency), purchase various items from various merchants, and so on. The player is thus free to create their own stories and narratives through their own actions. This would be interesting to read as well—to read the player and understand why they play as they do. Because the game is so free, these ludic narratives may be quite personal in nature. However, ludic narratives in *Atelier Shallie* are relatively repetitive and limited to a particular set of tenors (i.e. content, and meaning) and can hardly be considered to tell stories in the same way that the scripted events can. Thus, the question is perhaps not "what" it is that happens, but "how" the story is experienced. As the following section demonstrates, there are ways in which ludic activity can have its own

storytelling and conveyance of messages, and also ways in which scripted narratives/cutscenes can frame the gameplay with intentional perceptions.

“Tasks in Life”

The LifeTasks menu brings with it, through its *name*, its *text-assets*, and its *gameplay-inducing execution*, a message to the players that “it is important to complete tasks in life”. This is especially visible during the Free Time period, since it is up to the player to complete tasks in their own order and pace to proceed with the story—and Shallie’s life. This is contested by the fact that the tasks in LifeTasks are performed within a fictional world and not within the player’s actual life. However, this practicing repetition of performing small tasks to hone the protagonist’s skills (i.e. level up) and to fulfill jobs is always returned to, which in itself can be interpreted as a phenomenon that infers narrative implications and a meaning to the repetition of gameplay tasks that are being carried out. It is a sort of ludic/playful cycle that can mean different things: Motivation and hard work, or tedious gameplay and impatience. The factor of choice can symbolize player freedom or uncertainty. During the observation both were felt, depending on mood. Sometimes, playing the game and fulfilling tasks felt intriguing, and sometimes it felt like being ‘disconnected’ from the narrative immersion, as if repeating tedious tasks for no reason. Depending on the perspective/experience and interpretation of each player perhaps the LifeTasks menu and the process of completing tasks can mean a variety of different things and incur a variety of feelings. As a direct example, the cutscene where Teokhuga and Kortes give Shallistera advice on how to make friends triggers a task named “Spirit of freedom and mutual aid?”. In the menu it is possible to read Shallistera’s thoughts on the matter. Her thoughts read,

The connections between people in Stellard are different from those in Lugion Village. Everyone is a stranger, and it’s normal not to understand what others want... Maybe I should try talking to people, like Teo said.

Meanwhile, the objective required to complete this task is set to “Talk to 10 people”. The scripted dialogue thus goes hand in hand with ludic tasks. It can also be observed that meaning resides in the ludic process of LifeTasks. The cycle of tasks—given in the LifeTasks menu, is active during the whole game and demands player effort as part of the narrative. This phenomenon in itself can be interpreted as an ‘analogy of society’ where work, study and healthy routines and fulfillment of responsibility is a sought after cycle in human society as well. Therefore, practicing the fulfillment of this playful cycle in the game could be regarded practice for players to reinforce healthier routines, at least in the game world. If the player in addition relates to or identifies with the protagonist, and reads into the thoughts presented through the optionally readable textual assets—Shallie may motivate the player to apply this practice in their life. Assuming this to be a reasonable deduction, this would imply that the LifeTasks function provides philosophical meaning; in addition to its original purpose of providing a user-interface with ludic gameplay tasks. Dialogue by Shallistera

during chapter 3 and 4 further construes the meaning of the LifeTasks feature. In chapter 3, Teokhuga asks Shallistera to rest while he works on repairing the Lugion ship, she replies,

Oh Teo, thank you. But we have to work together here, for the sake of our village...

And also during chapter 4 she insists that,

I want to work hard and earn recognition.

In chapter 7 Kortés thinks that Shallistera is straining herself too hard, so he tells her that,

You'll get poor results with uninformed rushed work. Just do the things you can do right now, and stay positive. Thinking negatively produces negative results.

All the while phrases such as these fill the scripted narratives of the cutscenes, the writing within the LifeTasks menu serves as a permanent reminder of Shallistera's devotive working attitude which ultimately can be considered a reflection of the ludic efforts of the player.

The Sweets Fair

An optional event during chapter 8 depicts four characters (Odelia, Solle, Jurie and Escha) to be having a baking contest. This optional event is viewed through a cutscene that uses a still image, and dialogue text with voiceover. In order to activate this cutscene the player needs to walk around Stellard City and press the A button to invite certain characters to the sweets fair, which leads to the viewing of said cutscene. This execution is from a ludological perspective slightly imperfect and could be revised so that the player feels more part of the event narrative, rather than merely like a watcher. As an example, a mini-game could be introduced where the player had to control an oven, or whip cream—something to make the player feel like a part of the sweets fair. By designing it so that the player can partake in the depicted narrative, the ludic and the scripted narratives would blend together better.

Direct Narrative, Indirect Narrative

The protagonist Milla Maxwell in the JRPG *Tales of Xillia* asks all players a question (Herofandom) in the back of the physical game package of the European release,

Why do humans persist in seeking power that could destroy the world?

This method of *Tales of Xillia* to deliver theme and meaning can be regarded quite distinctive as it is put in writing, rather than a “the story as a Journey” formula, which according to Ernest Adams is an effective method of telling stories little by little (Adams 2014, 234). It can be seen that *Atelier Shallie* brings up the exact same theme; however, it is not until later in the storyline, near chapter 9, that this is done, when the two protagonists (Shallistera and Shallotte) discover that the Dusk is actually a man-made disaster caused by the technological greed of ancient civilizations, and not caused by climate change. By this point the player will have exerted themselves to complete an array of gameplay objectives, and have experienced

their world in decay through their own exploration efforts. It is, as Rachael Hutchinson finds, a ludic process; a journey if you will, which beckons player identification with the protagonist, which potentially leads to greater immersion into the story (Hutchinson 2019, 114). It is possible to think then, that ludic efforts have a considerably unique ability to heighten the immersive impact of scripted storylines and their meaning.

The Ludonarrative Variable Model Applied to: *Atelier Shallie*

As mentioned in the theory section, Aarseth's variable model is made so that a game can be analyzed and then entered in the model as data for the sake of understanding how it tells stories, and what freedom it provides to players in creating their own narratives. But, his variable model does not, in its current form, account for "content" in game narratives (Ibid., 133), and thus requires elaboration and motivation. *Atelier Shallie* is a game that allows the player to explore several 3-dimensional areas which the player can enter from a world map. For that the game uses a "Hub-shaped quest landscape" with "Multicursal labyrinth" influences. The alchemy ingredients that are used for synthesis may be regarded the objects in this game, and they are used to create new objects—a trait unique even among other JRPGs. Therefore, objects in *Atelier Shallie* are categorized as "Creatable" objects. The characters are "deep" as they react to various different situations and have likes/dislikes. The Japanese voice acting adds to character depth in *Atelier Shallie*, this is, arguably since much emotion is heard in their intonation at least in the Japanese voiceover. The writing of character personality itself may be considered in between "deep/round" and flat. Much is conveyed by the voice acting. The events are plentiful in *Atelier Shallie* and the game may very well be considered a half JRPG half Visual Novel⁷ in chapters 7 to 9, as there is much optional story content at that time. A great deal of time can be spent merely walking around Stellard City, talking to people and triggering cutscenes which leads to even more talking. However, partaking in these optional events does not directly affect the outcome of the main storyline event. In Aarseth's wording the optional events are satellites, whereas the main storyline is the kernel of the game's story—it is what makes the game recognizable (Aarseth 2012, 131). *Atelier Shallie* offers such a large amount of optional cutscenes, which also are fully voiced by voice actors, that they rival the amount of the main storyline. Thus, the sequence of events is categorized as "open", in other words the satellites (optional cutscenes) are dynamic and open for triggering if the player so chooses, whereas the kernels (plotted cutscenes) lie in wait until the player acts to proceed with the main storyline, choosing to turn the page to the next chapter. The categorization of the characters variable as deep for *Atelier Shallie* indicates that the characters, who are imperative for narrative content in cutscenes, are always deep, whether they are viewed in optional or main storyline cutscenes. The model does not account for specific cutscenes or other events, so the following application is based on an aggregation of the overall experience gained from observing the game's scripted storyline. It is considerable that the game author's story writing would need a quality of ambiguity to extract the emotional and individual depth of the characters. Below in figure 4f, categories that indicate *Atelier Shallie*'s variable setting are underlined in red.

⁷ Visual novels are a Japanese phenomenon described as "a medium using the narrative style of Literature, [...] that could technically be considered a Video Game" (Tvtropes). The genre uses still images, scripted texts, some animation and sounds to tell stories—with little to no gameplay.

Less player narrative		More author narrative	
WORLD	OBJECTS	CHARACTERS	EVENTS
Inaccessible	Noninteractable	<u>Deep/round</u>	Fully plotted
Single room	Static but usable		<u>Dynamic satellites/playable story</u>
Linear corridor	Modifiable	Shallow/flat	
Multicursal labyrinth	Destructible		
<u>Hubshaped landscape</u>	<u>Creatable</u>	Bots (without identity)	No kernels (pure game)
Open world	Inventable		
More player narrative		Less author narrative	

Figure 4f, “Variable Model: *Atelier Shallie*”

Figure 4f indicates that *Atelier Shallie* is a game that features the opportunity for players to create their own narratives, mainly by interacting with the story world, gathering ingredients and synthesizing new alchemic items. And it is also possible to watch cutscenes, to experience character development and dialogue, react to new discoveries and to experience many other theatrical performances and storytelling devices—pre-rendered by authors, as indicated by the characters and events variables.

The Narrative of Fight

As mentioned in the material section, the difficulty setting in *Atelier Shallie* changes mainly one thing: The strength of monsters. Therefore it is quite evident that the ludic narrative is focused on a significant theme: Fighting. In addition, alchemy, i.e. synthesis, is vital for gaining stronger gear and items (usable objects), which again interconnects with the purpose of fighting more efficiently. For players who enjoy the cutscenes, and who enjoy their slice-of-life nature which presents characters in several social situations, the recurring theme of fighting may be off-putting and non-consistent in a way. However, there seems to be meaning behind all the fighting, when paying attention to the cutscene in chapter 8 between the witch Wilbell and Shallotte. After failing once to form a contract with the lord of water spirits, Wilbell explains to Shallotte that the only way of forming a contract with a spirit lord is by showing superior strength. Shallotte replies that it seems violent. But, to Wilbell fighting has a purpose, which is, to show one’s true strength. To quote Wilbell’s reply,

Strength includes your mind, determination, magic... Not just your physical power. You could say it’s the capacity for your whole self.

In the Japanese edition Wilbell uses the word *utsuwa* (器, vessel, or: according to the official translation in *Atelier Shallie*, “capacity”) which she means is the outcome of strength—she considers fighting a means to test the strength of one’s self, that is, to prove the capacity of one’s being. Wilbell’s words have the potential to reframe the experience of ludic narrative, the concept of fighting, and of gameplay from several perspectives. Her dialogue can be interpreted as a philosophical statement, commenting on the concept of fighting, that humanity is arguably familiar with. When further tied to the events that occur after this cutscene, it offers an opportunity for analysis from cultural and literary perspectives. It can also be interpreted in a literal sense, meaning that hardcore players who aim to defeat boss monsters in the hardest difficulty setting take it upon themselves as a declaration of challenge to prove their capacity and determination. With the ludic perspective in mind, the analytical focus is shifted to chapter 10 below.

Playing with High-level Synthesis

Upon reaching chapter 10, the player has two choices: To rush towards the plot objective and complete the game, or to explore the world, and play around with high-level synthesis. By then, the player has access to all areas of the world, to all alchemy ingredients, and to battle and collect loot from all of the monsters in the game. This means that it is possible to utilize the full potential of the various game mechanics, especially that of synthesis. In other words, merely playing around with synthesis on its own provides the player with such amounts of freedom that it effectively could have made *Atelier Shallie* into a game—even if the story and the cutscenes were to be removed. Considering the game to be divided in two parts for a moment: It would be possible to describe the first half, from the prologue to chapter 9, as an introduction to the game mechanics, where the storytelling takes precedence. Whereas chapter 10 is the endgame, and is where the full potential of the synthesis game mechanic is actually unlocked, but also, where there is less scripted storytelling. This indicates that the game was designed in such a manner that by the time that the scripted story is over, the synthesis mechanic and the world exploration are intended to provide narrative experiences all on their own. Advertently, the process of playing with high-level synthesis can be considered a narrative making process, which over time reflects the player’s invested time, effort and strategical thinking as they use all of the tools available to them in chapter 10 to synthesize the best items that they can—thus creating a ludic story that tells the tale of the player’s hard work of mastering alchemy and other gameplay procedures. Yet, from a hardcore player’s perspective, one could pose the question: Why is not the complexity of the synthesis system, or the possibility to explore the world, available to players before the endgame, or at the very start of the game? From a narratological perspective the answer is fairly simple: The finding of new ingredients, the discovery of new areas of the world, and the leveling up of skills, are all part of the suspense of the scripted story. Therefore, the game mechanics and resources are restricted, and gradually unlocked, in order to allow for the scripted narratives to mingle with various ludic elements in the game (as partially examined in page 16), which very likely substantiates dramatic effect. Basically, this indicates that when a consumer purchases *Atelier Shallie*, they are purchasing a cinematic novel crossover

‘package’ with some gameplay elements sprinkled on top, that, by the end of the game story evolves into an actual game, with all of its gameplay and game mechanic nuances unlocked.

From the perspective of non-hardcore players it is allegedly quite appreciative that the synthesis does not become advanced until the endgame, and that it is possible to disregard ludic intricacies by completing the game in easy difficulties as to view the ending scenes of the scripted story. Assuming for a moment that the authors would have demanded the player to synthesize an advanced item, i.e. to get good, in order to proceed the plot of the story, it would be a predicament in the case that the player would be unable to do so. Thus, the troubled player would be unable to experience the entirety of the scripted story, just as over half of Turley’s students (see section 2.1) had issues with doing when they could not understand the game mechanics in the game that they played (Turley 2018, 69, 85–86). In consideration, players who play the game for gameplay, i.e. gamers, may perceive the storyline as an obstacle, as they might desire to record their own heroic story about how they cleared difficult ludic challenges, and about how they mastered advanced game mechanics. But, they may also perceive the storyline as a pleasant side activity, while gently learning the mechanics of the synthesis system. Story watchers, i.e. readers who prefer streamlined texts may instead perceive the gameplay as an obstacle, while merely fulfilling ludic requirements so that the next cutscene can be viewed. Or, they may rather appreciate the tension that gameplay between cutscenes provide, while longing to the next pre-narrated scene in excitement. Lastly, scholars of game studies can consider the scripted narratives and the ludic narratives to be two elements that spell the full text regarding what game stories could want to tell their “readers”.

4. Conclusion

This thesis has analyzed *Atelier Shallie* from ludological and narratological perspectives separately, and combined. The debate of whether or not a game tells a story is better studied when considering the effect that gameplay has on the player, and on the tension and immersion that it may provide to the viewing of pre-narrated story. This is especially visible when regarding the LifeTasks menu in *Atelier Shallie*—by reading gameplay objectives and the thoughts of the protagonist in the same menu, personal identification with the character's situation may imbue gameplay with a narrative value, thus creating tension during gameplay, excitement to reach the next cutscene, and plausible motivation for attending real life tasks.

More precisely, the case study found that the storyline brings up themes of work and study ethics at a regular basis. This may be intended by the game authors to function as a frame for the player as to imbue gameplay with purpose. It is particularly relevant when considering the analogy of LifeTasks which, by its name alone, can refer to the player's own tasks in life, if interpreted as so (see page 19). Assumably it works two ways and may inspire players to play less/take many breaks, and to work harder in real life, just as Shallistera (and to some extent Shallotte as well) works hard to adapt to society in the storyline.

The findings in this study overall suggests that reading a Japanese Role-playing Game is not about reading text or watching cutscenes only, but rather about allowing the player to be a part of the storyline. This is doable in theory through a wide array of methods. In *Atelier Shallie* it is particularly evident that the storyline and its cutscenes function in a way that motivates the player to keep honing skills and to complete tasks in the game. By working hard, working on one's/Shallie's skills and attempting to gain friends, the storyline presented in cutscenes and the gameplay narrative go hand in hand. In addition it was found that this very phenomenon can be read in relation to Japanese studies or other academic fields which would want to unearth the implications and ideologies, such as raising awareness for several environmental issues, or cultural ethics etc., that games express. In other words, the gameplay tasks, the presentation of game mechanics, the player's performance and effort, together with the reading of dialogue and the watching of cutscenes can presumably be seen as a mirror of contemporary society, and other worldly matters, from certain perspectives. This is why ludonarratological approaches beckon importance, why the unified perspectives of ludology and narratology seem to provide a fuller picture of narrative experience in this case study of *Atelier Shallie*, and why they ought be effective in other case studies.

Future Research

A good step for further research would be to analyze the effects that difficulty settings have for the experiences of a variety of players—is it more engaging and rewarding to experience scripted narratives after clearing gaming objectives on easy, or on hard difficulty settings, i.e., challenging ludic experiences? Also, how can scripted story narratives and ludic game mechanics be designed to flow into each other? Future research, to name some, may consider studying practical application of ludo + narratology in game design, and utilizing the theoretical knowledge that is available for conducting sociological studies.

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Endnotes

Disclaimers and Claims

Atelier Shallie, and characters within, is the intellectual property of Gust Co Ltd., and Koei Tecmo. All screenshots were taken by me for research purposes. The Shallistera fan-art image (topside) was generously provided by the talented David Magnusson for this thesis.

Olga Tokarczuk's Nobel Speech 2019: Original Translation

Officially pre-translated from Polish to Swedish subtitles, then scribed by me. Translation and subtitles in the online video is due to Jan Henrik Swahn, and Daria Lodygowska. These phrases are directly translated to English from the below Swedish text, and cited in this thesis.

24:28–25:27 Erfarenheten, inte händelserna, utgör vårt livs materia. Erfarenheten är fakta som har tolkats och getts utrymme i minnet. Den stöder sig på vårt sätt att tänka, på innebördernas djupa struktur. Vid den fäster vi vårt eget liv och granskar det noggrant. Myten är en sådan struktur. Myten har som bekant aldrig hänt men är ständigt verksam. I dag når den oss inte bara genom de antika hjältarnas äventyr - utan finns i de omåttligt populära berättelserna... i biosalongerna, tv-spelen och litteraturen. Olympens invånare har flyttat in i dynastin. Hjältarnas heroiska dåd ombesörjs numera av Lara Croft.

50:40–51:22 Litteraturen har den styrkan. Vi skulle tvingas förkasta kategorier som finlitteratur och låg litteratur—populärlitteratur och nischad litteratur och ta oss bortom gränserna. Vi skulle ge upp all nationallitteratur. Litteraturens kosmos är ju ett, enligt idén *unus mundus*. Det är en gemensam verklighet där våra erfarenheter förenas. Där författaren och läsaren har jämbördiga roller. Den förra genom att skapa, den andra genom sitt oavslåliga tolkningsarbete.

Separate Appendix Document

The separate appendix document that belongs to this thesis features a close reading of Shallistera's costume based on a conceptual model—it aims to test an assumption born from this study regarding reading the "shape language" of costume designs to see if that can allow for an even closer reading of the storyline. The appendix also, as previously mentioned, features a transcript from Chapter 2, suitable for peer reviews, or for everyone who wants to enjoy a part of *Atelier Shallie* as a novel-like text.