

LITERATURE



10.2478/abcsj-2025-0018

"It's Like It's from a Movie or Something": Narrative Instability, Remediation, and Cultural Prestige in the Indie Video Games *Hotline Miami* and *Katana Zero*

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Abstract

This article identifies a trend in contemporary indie video games to consciously obfuscate the process of narrative understanding, which it investigates as part of a transmedia embrace of 'narrative instability.' It argues that a number of indie video games have recently taken up narratively unstable elements in order to self-reflexively probe their own narrative capabilities. In addition, these narrative and discursive ambitions are used as a means of achieving cultural legitimacy and prestige, and they enmesh the games in US cultural politics that characterize other narratively unstable texts as well. To illuminate this particular trend, the article first introduces a general understanding of narrative instability. Afterward, it analyzes two exemplary indie games, *Hotline Miami* and *Katana Zero*, for their narrative instability, establishing how and with which discursive elements instability is created, what it is used for, and how it fits into a larger interpretation of these games' thematic interests. While this section forms the analytical core of the article, the article then contextualizes these findings in two different directions: regarding a discussion of cultural prestige in the context of media convergence and alongside the cultural politics of the two games.

Keywords: narrative instability, metatextuality, indie video games, remediation, adaptation, prestige, high/pop culture, pleasure, US cultural politics

Introduction

“I’m not here to give you any answers” – “All of this is not really happening” – “You will never see the whole picture”: the 2012 indie video game *Hotline Miami* is replete with statements that arguably refer not just to the protagonist but also, in moments of breaking the fourth wall, to the player, taunting them that there will never be a satisfying answer to the game’s narrative mysteries. Such narrative puzzles and self-reflexive or metareferential moments have become more prominent in contemporary video games, for instance in titles including the *Hotline Miami* series, *The Stanley Parable* (2013), *The Beginner’s Guide* (2015), *Undertale* (2015), *Pony Island* (2016), *Katana Zero* (2019), or *Inscryption* (2021). While there are also some mainstream/AAA games featuring metatextual moments, such as in the *BioShock* and *Alan Wake* series, they have been especially noteworthy in a number of indie games, developed only by one person or a very small studio without a major publisher behind them. In this article, I want to suggest that this development is part of a larger pop-cultural trend toward what I call narrative instability. More specifically, I will argue that a number of indie video games have taken up storytelling techniques that consciously obfuscate the process of narrative understanding – techniques that can be traced to literature but have gained popularity particularly in Hollywood film – in order to self-reflexively probe their own narrative capabilities. In addition, these narrative and discursive ambitions are used as a means of achieving cultural legitimacy and prestige, and they enmesh the games in US cultural politics (especially in relation to white masculinity) that characterize other narratively unstable texts as well.

Thus, this contribution wants to investigate a particular facet of a larger trend toward media convergence (Jenkins): video games adapt certain narrative traits and techniques from older, more established media that allow them to experiment with storytelling techniques, using these in order to acquire a sense of cultural prestige. Narrative instability is one such technique, and yet this dynamic of remediation (Bolter and Grusin) is notably multifaceted: in the process of adapting instability especially from film, video games fuse their narrative and ludic elements and thus invent

new ways of 'destabilizing' their audiences' narrative experience. In indie games in particular, such unstable moments are frequently used to metatextually refer to the game's process of narration or to its status as a cultural artifact, marking these games as probing the limits of their narrative and meaning-making capabilities. In order to illuminate this particular trend, I will first introduce my understanding of narrative instability. Afterward, I will analyze two exemplary indie games, *Hotline Miami* and *Katana Zero*, for their narrative instability, establishing how and with which discursive elements instability is created, what it is used for, and how it fits into a larger interpretation of these games' thematic interests. My argument in this article is split into two parts in order to interrogate the medium at the micro- and the macroscopic level – while this section will form the analytical core by tracing the games' instability, I will then take an argumentative step back to culturally and aesthetically contextualize these findings in two different directions: regarding the previously outlined discussion of cultural prestige in the context of media convergence and alongside the two games' cultural politics.

Video Games and Narrative Instability

Video games and US culture – and US cultural narratives – are, of course, connected in multifaceted ways, from seeing video games as building on specific narrative structures and cultural dynamics known from popular (film) genres like horror (Perron; Nae) or the Western (Wills and Wright) to more thoroughly understanding them as "reproduc[ing] American culture" and, in turn, "feeding back into" that culture (Schoppmeier 3; see also Wills). To such considerations, I want to add a slightly less visible dimension that first needs to be identified as such and then connected to a more specifically US American context. In fact, I contend that, in the past few years, an increasing number of video games has embraced narrative instability: they feature elements in the narrative discourse that consciously hinder or impede the process of understanding, making it more difficult for their audiences to reconstruct a stable version of the storyworld. I have previously developed this concept of narrative instability to analyze a trend in wider contemporary popular culture

(Schubert, *Narrative*), but I will recount a few core elements here and specify them in the context of video games in particular.

I identify as narratively unstable those texts that “obfuscate or impede the audience’s effort of reconstructing a text’s storyworld,” thus “impair[ing] and disrupt[ing] the process of narrative comprehension” (Schubert, *Narrative* 26). This disruption can be traced via the concept of the storyworld (Herman 9–14), which focuses on the role of audiences in recreating or reconstructing “who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion . . . as they work to comprehend a narrative” (9). Through discursive techniques, such as unreliable narrators, polyfocalization or multiperspectivity, internal focalizations that are not clearly communicated as such, or metalepsis, texts can complicate this reconstructive process and thus destabilize the storyworld that is being imagined – and, at the same time, they draw attention to this very process (Schubert, *Narrative* 26–31). Storyworlds can, for instance, become destabilized because crucial information is missing, because it is unclear where to correctly place specific details about characters or events, because there is conflicting or contradictory information about specific aspects, or because previous information is suddenly revealed to have been incorrect. For example, the 1999 films *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club* both feature climactic scenes in which the audience gains critical information about the identity of the protagonist: in *The Sixth Sense*, the protagonist is revealed to have been dead for the majority of the film’s story, whereas in *Fight Club*, what the audience believed to have been two separate characters is uncovered to be one and the same person suffering from a type of dissociative identity disorder. The protagonists in both films make these realizations toward the end of the story, and the audience does, too, with them. Other characters, however, were not confused about their identities in this way. This is because both films present their narrative events from the perspective of the compromised internal focalization of their protagonists (Anderson; see also Lavik; Schubert, *Narrative* 57–61). While every text’s storyworld is usually continuously updated and potentially revised, these revelations (or ‘twists’) constitute major moments of instability due to their severity, necessitating a complete reevaluation and reconsideration of most of the elements with

which the storyworlds had been reconstructed thus far. At the same time, these moments highlight the 'flawed' perspective from which the films have been narrated, making viewers aware of the constructedness and fictionality of these texts.¹

Narrative instability is a larger contemporary phenomenon in US pop culture that was initially popularized by films and has its roots in literary techniques. Around the turn of the millennium, a number of narratively unstable films – including *The Usual Suspects* (1995), *Twelve Monkeys* (1995), *The Game* (1997), *The Sixth Sense*, *Fight Club*, *eXistenZ* (1999), *American Psycho* (2000), *Memento* (2000), *Donnie Darko* (2001), and *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) – all either achieved immediate commercial success or later became 'cult hits' and subsequently found larger audiences this way. In turn, the narrative techniques that they use to destabilize their storyworlds can be traced to the postmodern novels (and experimental cinema) from the 1960s and 1970s, for instance by authors like John Barth or Thomas Pynchon (Schubert, *Narrative* 32–33). Whereas these works have often been decried as elitist or intended only for an academic audience (Rebein 6), US films around the millennium that remediated such narrative techniques have found widespread success and appeal. They thus evidence an embrace of originally 'avant-garde' or 'high-culture' techniques in contemporary US popular culture (and unlike, for instance, European experimental film, which uses similar techniques but often without this level of commercial popularity). Additionally, remediation and convergence generally characterize narratively unstable texts, which is why I conceptualize narrative instability as a transmedia trend that extends to contemporary films, TV series, novels, comics, and video games.²

One of the first mainstream video games to thoroughly embrace instability in its story was the 2007 *BioShock*, and since then, more games have woven instability into the way they narrate. *BioShock*, which has been a commercial hit widely praised by critics and discussed by scholars (Tavinor 91; Sicart 152), also focuses on one central moment of narrative instability in which the true identity of the protagonist (whom players control) is uncovered. In addition, this moment also reveals that this protagonist, Jack, has been mind-controlled through the use of the phrase

‘would you kindly’ by one of the game’s antagonists. The scene during which players learn this is stylized similarly to twist moments in films like *Fight Club* and *The Sixth Sense*: players are shown previous moments of the use of this phrase, but now, with the knowledge of its manipulatory function, it prompts them to significantly revise the storyworld constructed thus far. In addition, however, the game also adds an explicit metatextual element to this instability: the manipulation of the protagonist through the phrase ‘would you kindly’ extends to the players as well, who are taunted by the game’s antagonists as having falsely believed that they have had a say in the events of the game and in what they have Jack do.³ The narrative instability concerning the game’s protagonist is thus transferred to the question of choice and agency inherent in all video games, metatextually highlighting that players, so far, have only been under the illusion of such freedom – a self-reflexive nod that is typical of narratively unstable indie games as well.

Analyzing Instability in *Hotline Miami* and *Katana Zero*

The following analysis of narrative instability in *Hotline Miami* and *Katana Zero* will showcase how instability works, and how it has been embraced by indie games in particular. At first glance, the games’ most prominent features might seem quite different, the former a top-down shooter set in a fictionalized version of 1989 Miami, the latter an action platformer that takes place in the fictional dystopian city of New Mecca. While they differ in their settings, subject matters, and core gameplay, critics have also noted similarities in their overall aesthetics (including the use of pixel art) and atmosphere, the fast pace of their game mechanics, the focus on violence, and their use of music (Faierman; see also Wallace). In addition to these similarities, I contend that the games’ narrative instability constitutes another commonality, which sets them up well for a contrastive analysis. In the following, I will analyze each of the two games for the use and functions of narrative instability, arguing that both games use the instability of their narration to self-reflexively muse about the role of narrative, choice, and agency in video games.

"All of This Is Not Really Happening": Hotline Miami

Hotline Miami, developed by Dennaton Games and published by Devolver Digital for PC in 2012,⁴ puts players in control of an unnamed character that the game's community has come to refer to as Jacket. Jacket receives cryptic phone messages that task him with going to different places and murdering the people he finds there. The game is divided into several chapters, each of which consists of stages in which all enemies have to be killed. Players control Jacket from a top-down perspective and have to fight enemies with a variety of melee or ranged weapons. Usually, just one hit from an enemy will kill Jacket, upon which players can immediately restart the level. This fast-paced gameplay is complemented by electronic (synthwave) music and visual aesthetics that evoke an atmosphere associated with 1980s Miami (drug) culture. While this particular mood and the combination of visuals, music, and gameplay might make up the main – and immediate – appeal of *Hotline Miami*, its story complements this aesthetic as well. The missions themselves are mostly ludic acts, consisting almost entirely of gameplay. Yet before and after these missions, players control Jacket in his apartment or in establishments he visits afterward, which feature more explicitly narrative elements, especially dialogue (although Jacket is actually a 'silent protagonist,' so it is mostly other characters that propel the story forward and characterize Jacket). The game's overall world-building is quite sparse, never completely motivating or explaining why Jacket accepts this unusual lifestyle,⁵ which, in turn, fits with Jacket's (and, implicitly, the player's) eventual interest in uncovering this mystery, trying to find the masterminds behind this scheme of phone calls. In addition, the game features a number of surreal scenes that mostly work on a metaphorical level, and visual storytelling (such as objects in Jacket's apartment changing at the beginning of each mission) contribute to the storyworld of the game as well.

In the course of the story, Jacket saves a woman from one of his missions, who is implied to become his girlfriend, but after a few more phone calls, both she and Jacket are shot by another character, Richter, who has been receiving similar calls. Jacket survives but is put in a coma,

and after waking up from the hospital, he swears revenge and believes to have successfully traced the phone calls to members of the Russian mafia, whose leaders he kills. While this ends his story, additional chapters then put the player in control of a character who Jacket was thought to have killed in a previous mission, Biker. He finds the actual source of the phone-calls operation, an organization called 50 Blessings, whose apparent motivation has been to derail a rapprochement between the United States and Russia in the game's fictionalized version of world politics.

Narrative instability in *Hotline Miami* mainly hails from the way events in the game are told, which is, for most of them, from Jacket's specific perspective, internally focalizing the narrative through him. As a character – and a silent protagonist – he initially seems barely interested in finding out more about his peculiar circumstances, nor is there a need for him to provide more narrative information about himself, which does not present any opportunities for the game to illuminate his background. In addition, his perception, as is revealed later in the game, is also compromised, making him an unreliable narrator (or focalizer). The game hints at this unreliability early on, while also presenting one of the narrative privileges of internal focalization, gaining an insight into Jacket's mind. After a brief tutorial, the first set of chapters of the game, called "Phone Calls," begins with Jacket entering a dimly lit room in which three masked figures sit and speak to him: Don Juan, wearing a horse mask, Rasmus in an owl mask, and Richard in a rooster mask. All three talk to Jacket in ominous ways, Richard for instance saying that "[w]e've met before" and that Jacket "look[s] like [he] might be remembering something" ("Phone Calls"). Afterward, the first mission begins on April 3, 1989, a day that Richard just mentioned as their "first encounter," in Jacket's apartment. The lighting and music in the scene with the three masked figures, to which Jacket returns after the end of each set of missions, give it a surreal vibe, placing it in a space and time that seems disconnected from the rest of the events of the game, which are always assigned a clear date and year. For players, the way these scenes are presented raises the question of whether they belong to the diegetic reality of the game or whether they are entirely imagined by Jacket, for

instance as a dream or hallucination, which initially makes it difficult to correctly place them within a stable version of the storyworld. The same is true for other apparent hallucinations that Jacket suffers from in later missions, such as characters previously killed by him reappearing in semi-alive forms at other locations.

While the game's story remains relatively ambiguous regarding the nature of these events, there is one major moment of instability that – as is typical of such twists – first causes confusion in the storyworld but ultimately resolves this instability. In "Part Four: Connections," Jacket returns home after a mission, finds his girlfriend dead in the bathroom, and is himself shot by a masked man later revealed to be Richter. After being shot, the screen shows the familiar message "R to restart!" that is always displayed when Jacket dies during a mission. This time, however, pressing R resets Jacket to his apartment, but with his own dead body still lying on the floor. Now, Richard is sitting on the couch where Richter just was, and he again talks to Jacket in cryptic ways. The player can then walk outside the apartment and, curiously, toward a hospital bed. The next chapter, "Trauma," has players hear a doctor stating that Jacket has been "in a coma for weeks," and he then wakes up and escapes from the hospital. From then on, players go on a quest for revenge as described above, and they do not see any of the hallucinations, including the masked men, anymore. Hence, this scene marks a decisive turning point in how the narrative is portrayed: diegetically, it is correct that, after Richter shoots Jacket, he is in a coma for a number of weeks before waking up. Yet in terms of the narrative discourse, while players might initially think that the game, at this point, jumps forward in time to when Jacket wakes up, what the lack of hallucinations in these later chapters suggests instead is that everything that players have witnessed before "Trauma" has been a part of Jacket's coma. As such, the scenes and missions players have witnessed were a mixture of memories and hallucinatory or delirious events caused by the trauma of having been almost fatally shot. In this reading, all of the scenes with the masked men only take place inside Jacket's mind and can be understood as a manifestation of his inner thoughts.

This eventual reconstruction of a stable storyworld – one in which the surreal or supernatural events are explained via Jacket's unreliable memory or coma dream – through one major moment of instability is supported by other elements of the game, which players can take note of either by playing through previous levels again or by paying close attention initially and thinking back to previous scenes after this revelation. For instance, the surreal encounters with the character Beard, who stands behind the counters of various establishments that Jacket visits after missions and always hands him items for free, can be better explained as part of Jacket's own thoughts, Beard only being a projection of them.⁶ Secondly, there are visual clues toward some of the events depicted not being reliable, most notably a recurring disruption of the screen that is similar to the static of a TV (which, on a metatextual level, also constitutes a kind of aesthetic remediation). The events immediately before and after the static briefly flashes on screen are always slightly different, implying either that some time has passed in between or that Jacket's memory is struggling to recollect these events correctly (for instance before and during Richter shooting him and as he is about to wake up in the hospital).

Most significantly, however, this instability also explains the eerie reappearance of previously killed people and especially the scene I mentioned when summarizing the game's plot: in the chapter "Neighbors," Jacket kills the character Biker; yet later, when players control Biker in turn, the fight ends the opposite way, with Jacket being dead. With the knowledge of the twist, Jacket's version of the events can be explained as unreliable because it is part of his coma dream. After the subsequent mission, Biker's corpse appears again as Jacket is talking to Beard, who tells him that "What you saw just now, did not actually happen" ("Push It"). Then, the game again displays static, Biker's body disappears, and Richter suddenly appears in another room. This suggests both that the events surrounding Biker as Jacket's mind has just presented them to players were not quite reliable and that this is a point in time in which Jacket remembers the character of Richter, who from then on suddenly takes over the role of Beard at the establishments. These events lack the order and logic of a more straightforward, linear narrative, but

they can be reconstructed in a meaningful way when they are understood as manifestations of Jacket's fears and regrets as part of his coma dream.⁷

This confusing way of portraying the game's story is not only a potential source of pleasure for those who delight in piecing together individual hints and closely looking at narrative and visual details; the game also uses narrative instability to allude to its own mechanics. The aforementioned apparent death of Jacket by Richter links the game's narrative directly to the level of players controlling that character, since displaying "R to restart!" – by then something most players will have seen numerous times, given *Hotline Miami's* high difficulty – moves this gameplay element into the realm of narrative. The previous 'deaths' of Jacket as part of the gameplay were never supposed to be understood as what happens narratively in the game, so they should not become part of the storyworld; yet here, the same gameplay element is used to actually depict a near-death experience. Beyond such connections between narrative and ludic elements, especially the game's ending makes its interest in linking instability to larger (meta)textual concerns more apparent. Biker eventually traces the phone calls to two men who seem to have posed as janitors. In the usual ending of the game, their statements can all be read as highly self-reflexive, explaining their actions, for instance, by saying that they were "playing a game" and that the fact that Biker found them "means game over" ("Resolution").⁸ For the first time in the game, players have dialogue options in this sequence, and when they ask the janitors why they did all this, they mock Biker by stating: "Why would we need to justify our actions?" – and then note that Biker seems "disappointed" because he apparently was "expecting" more ("Resolution"). These sentences can be read as moments of breaking the fourth wall, taunting players as well, who – just like Biker – might have been looking not just for reasons for the janitors' actions but, at this point, also for an explanation of the game's instability.⁹ *Hotline Miami*, thus, is aware of its own unstable narrative, and it suggests that there is little to be gained in searching for a resolution to that instability, advocating either to embrace that instability and its epistemic uncertainty or to search for pleasure elsewhere in the game, in its ludic rather than its narrative elements.

“The Dreams Were My Past”: Katana Zero

Katana Zero’s narrative instability in many ways works similarly to *Hotline Miami*, which is why I briefly want to discuss the game to establish some commonalities of narrating instability in indie video games while also highlighting notable deviations. The game was released in 2019 by Devolver Digital and developed by Askiisoft.¹⁰ Players control the protagonist, Zero, on various assassination missions, fighting enemies with his sword. The missions are given to him by an unnamed psychiatrist (who, as is later revealed, works for the government). Similar to *Hotline Miami*, the game builds on fast-paced gameplay: one enemy hit will usually kill Zero and restart the level, and, because of the game’s difficulty, multiple attempts are often required. The game is also divided into several chapters and lays a similar focus on its atmosphere, with slick visuals and a synthwave soundtrack (that, diegetically, Zero listens to on his walkman) accompanying the action – and with an interest in narrative, especially before and after these gameplay missions. The story is set in an unspecified future, in a city called New Mecca, which is divided into class-segregated districts and which, at some point in its history, fought a war against the ‘Cromags,’ possibly inhabitants of a different nation. Many details about this world, and initially about Zero, are unclear, and it soon becomes apparent that Zero suffers from memory loss. While the game’s fantastic setting does not directly link it to the US, the themes it discusses – and, in fact, the ways in which it features instability – evoke specific US cultural contexts, making it a fitting comparison for *Hotline Miami*. During the course of the story, Zero remembers increasingly more details from his past, and players can eventually reconstruct that Zero fought in the ‘Cromag War’ as a ‘Gamma NULL,’ a group of elite soldiers who were given a supernatural drug called ‘Chronos.’ The drug provided them with the power to manipulate their perception of time and to repeatedly relive some events – powers that, next to Zero’s sword-fighting skills, players have access to via the gameplay. Now, years after the war, the various assassination missions actually task Zero with eliminating evidence of the NULL project and the Chronos drug. In the

later parts of the game, he encounters other former NULL soldiers who seek vengeance against those who abused them for the war.

Just like in *Hotline Miami*, efforts of reconstructing a stable version of *Katana Zero's* storyworld are frustrated by the events being presented mainly from Zero's internal focalization, which is a compromised and unreliable perspective. The drug that Zero is regularly injected with, as well as the comments by the psychiatrist about his "memory loss" ("Club Neon"), are early and clear signs of this unreliability. Partly, this has the effect of casting doubt on some of the information about Zero's background, since other characters allude to the history of Chronos and the NULL soldiers without Zero (and hence the player) initially realizing that this is what they are talking about. In addition, the game also uses a static effect similar to *Hotline Miami*, depicted as the screen 'glitching out,' distorting and fragmenting the graphics, for instance in the middle of a conversation with the character V in a limousine, when the glitch interrupts V talking, and the next scene shows Zero being thrown out of the car ("Studio 51"). This visualization suggests both a jump in time and Zero's general troubles surrounding perception and memory, approximating the state of his mind through this implementation of internal focalization. Moreover, a number of events and characters represented in the game may only be Zero's hallucinations, since the lack of a more objective perspective during these scenes makes it impossible for players to judge whether they are diegetically real or not. Curiously, this again especially concerns masked figures, 'Tragedy' and 'Comedy' (in accordance with the kind of masks they wear), who appear to Zero and talk cryptically about his current predicament and possible future. In addition, there is also a little girl, supposedly Zero's neighbor, who Zero befriends, but whose existence is later explicitly doubted by other characters, with one of them stating that there are "no children in this building" ("Bunker"). While elements of Zero's past are gradually revealed as the story progresses (and in much more detail and less subtlety than in *Hotline Miami*), the reality status of the masked men and the little girl remain more ambiguous than similar elements in *Hotline Miami*.¹¹ In this sense, *Katana Zero's* instability remains comparatively more unresolved.

In addition to the gradual unfolding of Zero's backstory, the game also ends on one major moment of instability, a kind of twist similar to *Hotline Miami*'s. Throughout the game, when Zero goes to sleep after every mission, players see a recurring nightmare in which a boy is playing in a house when, suddenly, a soldier enters and interrupts him. Each iteration of the nightmare adds more details (and turns silhouettes into characters), including the soldier shooting a scientist who tells the boy to hide. It is suggested that this is a memory of Zero as a child, with players later being offered the dialogue option of having Zero realize that "[t]he dreams were [his] past" ("Bunker"). Yet at the end of the game, players see the scene again, with the caption "7 Years Ago." This time, it is revealed that Zero was the soldier, not the boy, and that a character who serves as a secondary antagonist was his fellow soldier (another striking parallel to Beard's role in the *Hotline Miami* universe). Placed prominently at the end of the game, before the credits roll, this scene serves a similar function to those in twist films like *Fight Club* or *The Sixth Sense*. It prompts a significant revision of the storyworld constructed thus far, specifically regarding Zero's identity, his motivations, and his war trauma (another direct link to *Hotline Miami*, but specifically its sequel, which features several missions set during a US-Soviet war). Both *Hotline Miami* and *Katana Zero* thus centrally anchor their instability around the identities of their protagonists, while *Katana Zero* additionally depicts unstable realities by transferring Zero's distorted perception of time onto the player and their experience of the game's narrative.

This instability of time is used by *Katana Zero* to – more pervasively than in *Hotline Miami* – metatextually link the game's narrative concerns to its gameplay and, thus, to the act of playing the game. One particularly significant example concerns the side effects that the use of and withdrawal from Chronos have: at the beginning of the "Mansion" mission, Zero is suddenly transported from the psychiatrist's office to the actual mission. Whenever players try to begin that level by charging through a door and attacking the first two enemies, the screen glitches out again and Zero is reset to the beginning – in the same way as he usually would be when players restart after dying or when they want to redo a part of a level, but this time involuntarily. This is repeated a

number of times before leading to another dream sequence and eventually revealing that Zero is still in the psychiatrist's office. His distorted perception of time is here narratively presented to players by linking it directly to a gameplay mechanic (in a similar, but more pronounced, way to *Hotline Miami*'s one-time narrative use of the restart function). In the actual level of this chapter, then, Zero gets captured by V and needs to use these powers consciously in a manner also combining gameplay and narrative: V interrogates Zero before eventually shooting him, but afterwards, the scene starts again at the beginning. This time, players have new dialogue options to choose from, based on what they learned from Zero's previous experience of this interrogation, and they first manage to unnerve V (e.g., by impossibly knowing his name) and eventually get under his skin by taunting his ego, leading to Zero's survival. What, at the start of the game, is introduced primarily as a gameplay mechanic – Zero's time-dilating abilities allow him to slow time in order to reposition himself or shoot back projectiles – here has an explicitly narrative function, which draws attention to this very gameplay mechanic and, hence, to the extradiegetic act of playing itself. Fittingly, as V realizes that this can only be possible because Zero is "already on [Chronos]," he says, in another metatextual nod: "I know your game now" ("Mansion").

Both *Hotline Miami* and *Katana Zero* thus use their instability to ultimately point to their own fictional status as video games and to the intersection of ludic and narrative elements in them. Moreover, both games have a distinct awareness of their instability – similar to *Hotline Miami*, *Katana Zero* also includes a scene in which a character, one of the two masked men, mocks the protagonist for his interest in uncovering the mysteries implied in the story. If players choose to ask the masked figures why all of this is happening, one of them says: "'Cuz the stars say so! Or maybe it's 'cuz of that drug business you're tied up in. Or all those people you killed. Or maybe we just like fuckin' with ya" ("Chinatown"), alluding to the possibility that there might not be a sensible explanation behind all of these events, which mirrors *Hotline Miami*'s janitors' insistence that there is no 'master narrative' explaining their actions. The dialogue options – and the impossibility to change anything of significance in the largely linear stories of both games – also especially

connect these concerns to questions of agency, which loom large in the stories of the games' protagonists as well. While the games thus connect their instability to their own mechanics and status as video games, their use of instability is relevant in a larger cultural context as well.

Contextualizing Instability: Prestige, Pleasure, Politics

The focus so far on a formal and functional analysis of narratively unstable elements in *Hotline Miami* and *Katana Zero* might beg the question what we are to make of this trend among indie video games to increasingly embrace instability in their narration. Taking an argumentative step back, I want to suggest answers by way of a cultural contextualization of this phenomenon along two potential avenues, together asking for the cultural work that narratively unstable video games do: in terms of the prestige that instability affords in a cultural environment of convergence (and including the pleasures that the metatextual complexity of instability implies), and in terms of the cultural politics that are tied to narrative instability.

Prestige: Cultural Legitimacy and Media Convergence

One way to contextualize indie video games' recent move toward narrative instability is to see it as a way of gaining cultural prestige and legitimacy for the medium by exploring its narrative capabilities. On the one hand, both *Hotline Miami* and *Katana Zero* are examples of games that foreground a distinct aesthetic, style, and atmosphere, as discussed before. Narrative elements can be added to this appeal as well, as the games have noteworthy settings and embrace confusing storylines narrated in unstable ways. Similar to how investigations of narrative in video games sometimes emphasize that narrative not only enhances the act of play but can also be a crucial element in marketing (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 172–73), narrative instability seems to have a similar function in potentially attracting audiences and generating discussions among fans, on wikis or community websites like *Reddit*, collaborating in trying to uncover the games' narrative mysteries. The

commercial success that the games found thus speaks to the significance of their unstable elements (even though it is not necessarily related to questions of prestige).

On the other hand, video games' embrace of instability can be contextualized within a larger convergence culture, in which practices of remediation may be understood as ways for games to 'siphon off' the cultural legitimacy and status of more established media (Bolter and Grusin 69–70), most notably films and novels. As James F. English notes, such developments are part of a global "economy of cultural prestige" (250), in which different media do not only influence each other symbiotically but are also in competition with each other. In addition to general intertextual references to movies,¹² the way these games feature instability is inspired by its popularization in the medium of film, which itself referred back to techniques from postmodern novels. In recent years, video games have slowly gained more cultural traction and 'acceptance,' both as mainstream culture and as art. As Pierre Bourdieu theorizes questions of distinction and prestige, taste is not to be considered a "gift of nature" but "the product of upbringing and education" (1), i.e., something discursively constructed and distinctly related to notions of social class. This constructedness also implies change and fluidity in terms of what is and is not considered prestigious or "legitimate . . . works of art" (Bourdieu 2). It is exactly games like *BioShock* that are sometimes hailed as art by critics and scholars, as "the definitive step of mainstream games toward the artistic and expressive capacities of media like cinema" (Sicart 152), which is in no small part due to their narrative instability and how they use these complex narrative elements to test the limits of narrativity and storytelling in video games. This particular metatextual interest also connects remediation and prestige: the probing of games' narrative capabilities that instability affords highlights the specific mediality of video games – especially their interactive potential and focus on agency – in ways that establish them as an intricate storytelling medium in the first place. Narrative instability evidences the games' interest in exploring what the medium is capable of – similar to metafiction, these games "self-consciously and systematically draw attention to [their] status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction

and reality” (Waugh 2). Embracing narrative instability can thus be seen as an attempt to gain cultural prestige for the medium, establishing it as a site not only of potentially interesting stories but also of innovative ways of telling these stories.¹³

In turn, that this might be a successful strategy productively complicates assumptions about the contemporary pop-cultural landscape. After all, the narrative strategies some indie video games use have been decried as elitist or avant-garde when they were found in postmodern novels (Rebein 6). In films around the turn of the millennium, however, they gained mainstream popularity. Video games have been a highly (commercially) popular medium already, so the use of narrative instability here seems to rather evoke the ‘origin’ of these narrative techniques: instability in video games can be a tactic to gain sophistication and distinction, one that is not in danger of making the games inaccessible. This dynamic seems especially true for indie video games, which in the last few years have become a notable source of innovation within the medium (Juul; see also Clarke and Wang). Moreover, narrative instability encourages its audiences to take a particular kind of pleasure in these games, one that I suggest aligns with what Jason Mittell has theorized, via Neil Harris, as the ‘operational aesthetics’ of complex television: pleasure derived primarily from the form, the “gears at work,” and not just the content of a text (35). That elements of ‘high-culture’ metatextuality can function as a source of enjoyment in mainstream entertainment speaks to the complexities of pleasures that video games exude. Perhaps certain self-reflexive or metatextual moments gradually lose their spectacularity, their “narrative pyrotechnics” (Mittell 35), in media that have existed for a while, but the way in which video games can combine their ludic and narrative elements to self-reflexively point to their own constructedness seems to still be sufficiently innovative. That this focus on experimenting with storytelling techniques is able to serve as a means toward cultural prestige also characterizes contemporary culture and its audiences as one that craves such complex and metatextual stories, speaking to the pleasures that narratively unstable games offer.

Overall, the way in which indie video games use narratively unstable techniques forms part of a cultural ecosystem that thoroughly

works transmedially, with audiences being aware of and consuming multiple different forms of media. This allows these games to tap into the cultural prestige associated with postmodern literary devices while at the same time maintaining a certain level of (mainstream-adjacent) popularity. In that sense, the notion of *indie* in indie video games partly also takes on the label of experimenting with form, as a way of achieving a sense of "[l]iterariness," as Pascale Casanova calls this in a discussion of different genres and traditions of literature and their "literary capital" or prestige (17).¹⁴ Similarly to the narratively unstable films I discussed earlier, though, the games still connect these formal and narrative experiments with broader cultural appeal, seeking commercial success and emphasizing popular pleasures in fear of otherwise being decried as elitist. The popular and critical reception of both *Hotline Miami* and *Katana Zero* stands as evidence of this kind of dialectic between prestige and popularity having found a distinct appeal. Narratively unstable films from around the turn of the millennium thus seem to have acted as a kind of model for this balancing act of eyeing the status of a cult hit more so than, necessarily, mainstream success. In turn, the films seem to have become instruments of validation that can be effectively emulated. At the same time, of course, the way these unstable indie games work narratively and are discussed culturally is still majorly influenced by patterns known from (non-indie) video games more generally, but I see a distinct lineage to previous unstable films being at work as well. In essence, through their specific use of remediation and formal experimentation, narratively unstable indie video games thus straddle the line between cultural legitimacy and mainstream popularity, blurring binary oppositions between high and pop culture.

Politics: Whiteness and Masculinity

Finally, that narrative instability has become more prominent in indie video games can also be understood to relate to the cultural politics of both many US video games and contemporary US culture more generally, a dimension I omitted from the previous analysis of the two games. As I have argued elsewhere, the politics of most narratively unstable texts

“speak particularly to white male middle-class Americans” and “become complicated as many narratively unstable texts pursue ostensibly progressive projects but, beneath their textual surface, often end up reaffirming the normative power of white masculinity and sidelining minority voices” (Schubert, *Narrative* 12). Even though I have mainly focused on the formal aspects of the games I discussed in this article, the poetics and the politics of narratively unstable video games are certainly tightly interwoven. More specifically, the unstable identities that *Hotline Miami* and *Katana Zero* focus on also fit this pattern, featuring white (or, in the case of *Zero*, at least unmarked) male protagonists. The ‘sources’ for the protagonists’ mental instability that the games present are all distinctly coded as stereotypically masculine, focusing on war trauma and excessive violence. ‘Difference’ in these games is mostly used as a trope: especially female characters serve as damsels in distress (Jacket’s girlfriend in *Hotline Miami* and the little girl in *Katana Zero*), who are afforded little to no agency and, in *Hotline Miami*, are marginalized “to the role of sexualized victims,” which fits the game’s nostalgia for a time “when such hypermasculine representations were rarely critiqued in popular discourse” (Vanderhoef 30).

Taken together, these games represent issues of unstable identities and epistemic uncertainty as concerns of *only* white men, and they express little awareness of these reductive representational politics. This pattern fits the predominance of narratively unstable Hollywood films around (and after) the millennium as well, which – with few exceptions – not only center around the same kind of protagonists but also specifically frame their concerns with instability as moments of masculinity and whiteness ‘in crisis’ (Messner 9; see also Robinson 10). While indie video games might thus experiment with narratively unstable techniques primarily to probe into their own storytelling capabilities and to vie for cultural prestige, as they do so, they also invariably adopt and get tangled up in US cultural narratives that tend to express more reactionary politics. Compared to their formal self-reflexivity and their many meta- and intertextual references, *Hotline Miami* and *Katana Zero* appear less aware of these political dynamics. That is, while they self-consciously use postmodern narrative techniques, they seem comparatively less interested

in the ideological concerns that these techniques have frequently been culturally tied to, instead conceiving of them as politically 'neutral.' In fact, though, form and content in these games certainly intersect, and it is important to note that their remediation of narrative instability in the pursuit of cultural prestige also comes with a distinctly ideological and political dimension.¹⁵ In a nutshell, a number of narratively unstable indie video games thus pairs their formal innovations and 'radical' experiments with comparatively unimaginative and regressive representational politics.

Conclusion

In this article, I have identified a trend among indie video games of the last fifteen years to emphasize instability in their narration, analyzing two exemplary games for how and why they utilize narratively unstable elements. My argument was that these games use unstable moments to self-reflexively refer to the process of narration and to thus reflect on their own status as narrative and ludic artifacts. Taking a step back to consider the cultural work that instability does in video games, I suggested that this embrace can be contextualized as a way toward accruing cultural status and prestige for video games, and I briefly framed instability along discussions of cultural politics.

Overall, I hope to have illustrated both how narratively unstable elements allow indie video games to metafictionally muse about their own narrativity and how this formal element also envelops them in political and cultural discourses that are typical of narratively unstable US pop-cultural texts (especially films). While *Katana Zero*'s fantastic setting might not immediately align it with the US, the comparison to *Hotline Miami* has also uncovered a number of prominent narrative and cultural themes that they share and that evoke a more explicitly American context, among them war trauma, excessive violence, and an embrace of white individualist masculinity. In the end, the way in which narratively unstable indie video games (re)mix narrative elements from Hollywood film and combine them with their ludic potentials also productively complicates existing notions of high and pop culture and the pleasures that are commonly associated with them. Consequently, when these games

point to the players' lack of agency, it seems reductive to think that "the only real choice, the only real level of control that a player truly has is the choice to play or not to play" (Wysocki and Schandler 206) – instead, they can also choose to recognize these moments as reflections on the possibilities of narrativity in video games, and to enjoy "watch[ing] the gears at work" and "marveling at the craft" (Mittell 35). While this might be particularly applicable to the two case studies I have discussed here, the findings derived from their analysis and contextualization point to cultural dynamics and aesthetic discussions that characterize (indie) video games more generally.

Notes:

¹ The diegetic 'sources' of narrative instability in these texts vary, but, especially if compromised internal focalizations are involved, they often revolve around trauma or memory loss, which are themes that the indie games I will analyze later pick up as well. In a discussion of mindgame films, Thomas Elsaesser understands these character traits as "[p]roductive [p]athologies" (24), focusing in particular on what he calls paranoia, schizophrenia, and amnesia.

² This is also part of why I contend that this conception of instability more thoroughly grasps this phenomenon than a focus only on specific narratological concepts, like unreliability or metalepsis, would, and than a number of other concepts and terms that tend to discuss single media, such as mindgame (Elsaesser) or puzzle films (Buckland) or a focus on narrative complexity in television (Mittell) or film (Kiss and Willemsen; see also Schubert, *Narrative* 19–26).

³ These elements in *BioShock* have been prominently discussed by a range of scholars (cf., among many others, Tulloch; Wysocki and Schandler; Schubert, *Narrative* 68–101).

⁴ *Hotline Miami*'s developer, Dennaton Games, consists of two people, Jonatan Söderström and Dennis Wedin, and is based in Sweden. While it is thus not American concerning its authorship, its setting and themes make it a relevant object for American studies. The game also spawned a sequel, *Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number* (2015), which greatly expands the narrative and the world-building of the first title. However, I will restrict my focus to the first game, only occasionally referring to the sequel when it adds a sense of certainty to some of the narrative events of the original.

⁵ See Caracciolo for a reading of the 'unknowability' of Jacket as a protagonist. Notably, Caracciolo uses this element of the game to argue that "the video game medium has reached a level of interpretive complexity comparable to that of literary fiction" (191), similar to my suggestion regarding narrative instability and cultural prestige.

⁶ *Hotline Miami 2*, in fact, reveals that Beard died three years before the events of the first game, in a nuclear explosion in San Francisco, and that Jacket and Beard had been comrades in a war between the United States and the Soviet Union waged on Hawaii.

⁷ As players will learn later in the story, it is also imperative for Biker to survive this encounter because Jacket failing to kill him is what prompts the masterminds behind 50 Blessings to send Richter to dispose of Jacket. This fact thus further supports the reading that Jacket’s depiction of his encounter with Biker is untrustworthy. Biker’s later point of view of the events, however, is equally unreliable, a notion that *Hotline Miami 2* confirms, since Jacket is depicted as alive and on trial in the aftermath of his killing spree. In the game’s diegetic reality, both characters seem to have survived their encounter (and without the knowledge from the sequel, these two narrations of the same event could also be understood as alternative timelines).

⁸ In another nod to the game itself, the two characters—who are modeled after the two developers of the game—in this ending also allege that “[w]e’re independent, we did it all ourselves” (“Resolution”), a line that also metatextually points to the indie status of *Hotline Miami*.

⁹ Interestingly, there is an alternate ending to this chapter: if players find a number of hidden so-called puzzle pieces throughout the levels, they can access the janitors’ computer and learn more about their organization, uncovering that there is, after all, a motivation behind their actions. This element of the game also works metatextually, since the puzzle pieces needed for the password are found while players control Jacket, not Biker, a fact that Biker alludes to when he explains to the janitors that he “used a little magic” to crack their password (“Resolution”). In fact, this ‘magical’ possibility contradicts Richard’s assertion that “[y]ou will never see the whole picture” (“Part Four: Connections”) of what is happening to Jacket, again on a metatextual level: while it is true concerning Jacket’s own knowledge, for the player, it is in fact possible to understand at least a bit more of the events behind the game’s story, thanks to their narrative access to both Jacket and Biker.

¹⁰ Askiisoft is essentially one developer, the US-based Justin Stander.

¹¹ Notably, though, some of *Hotline Miami*’s more ambiguous elements have become clearer only due to the expanded focus on the (back)story in its sequel. At the time of this writing, additional content for *Katana Zero* in the form of DLC is still in development, and the credits of the game explicitly display the message “To be continued,” so it is likely that further parts of the *Katana Zero* universe will both resolve some unstable elements and potentially add new ones.

¹² For instance, *Hotline Miami*’s focus on Jacket driving to missions with his car, and the visuals of roaming around the city between chapters, evokes a similar sense of urban restlessness as films like *Taxi Driver* (1976) or *Drive* (2011). When Beard describes the recent killings happening around the city to Jacket, he also makes this borrowing of narrative ideas from film explicit: “A group of people wearing masks and killing Russians! It’s like it’s from a movie or something, right?” (“Clean Hit”).

¹³ One could also understand this as a development similar to what John Barth captured with the notion of literature—or more specifically literary realism—having been formally ‘exhausted,’ ushering in a postmodern embrace of metatextual experimentation. Here, unstable indie games try to simultaneously transcend more established narrative conventions in video games and known patterns of disorienting audiences of narratively unstable novels and films.

¹⁴ I want to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing me to this context in particular, and I generally want to thank both reviewers for their helpful remarks for improving this article.

¹⁵ For reasons of space, I cannot analyze this dimension in detail here, but I have previously discussed similar political dynamics, e.g. in video games that focus on ‘forgotten man’ protagonists (Schubert, “Working-Class”). For a larger discussion of the politics of race and gender in video games, see Murray.

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