Ethical Temporality: Refiguring Time as Political Speech in *Bury Me, My Love*

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Introduction

I'm worried about Nour – the last I heard she was marching with other refugees in Belgrade to protest her treatment in Hungary; she messaged that her phone battery was about to die and I have heard nothing for hours.

It feels strange being concerned about someone who doesn't exist.

Nour is the fictional deuteragonist of *Bury Me, My Love*, a mobile-based game by French creators The Pixel Hunt. The conceit of the game – if we can really call it a game – is that you take the role of Majd, Nour's husband. Majd is looking after ailing family members in the war-torn city of Homs and is unable to accompany his wife Nour as she leaves to seek refuge in Europe. The pair have invested in smartphones in order to keep in touch, and the PC follows his wife's journey through instant messages in the style of WhatsApp.

Along with the subject matter, which presents ethical quandaries and issues not typically dealt with in gaming, *Bury me, My Love* incorporates itself into the everyday rhythms of smartphone use: in its 'real-time' mode, the game consists of replying to Nour's instant messages which pop up with notifications like any other app on your phone. As Majd, you must remotely interact with Nour much as you would with any other interlocutor, sending texts, emojis and selfies to advise, cajole and reassure. Nour is presented as a free-spirited person, however, and part of the game's effectiveness arises from her portrayal: players can never be quite sure if she will follow their advice. This generates a powerful effect of what we may call, modifying Costikyan's notion of 'narrative anticipation' (Costikyan 2015: 94) in games as 'character-based anticipation'.

The game's leading creator at developer "The Pixel Hunt", Florent Maurin, has been careful to distinguish their work from the concept of the 'newsgame' which much like journalism may be held to in some sense report on an event that has occurred in the real world. Instead, when thinking about a possible generic classification for his game, he prefers the term 'reality-inspired'. As McMillan writes, 'Reality-inspired Games (RIG's)incorporate genuine stories from the perspective of a few or encompasses the values of a larger section of those affected by a specific issue' (2018).

For Maurin, 'reality-inspired' games involve listening to people, and in this case the game draws on a real report by Lucie Soullier in *Le Monde* that utilized an interactive presentation to convey

the online component of a young Syrian girl, Dana, in her attempt to find refuge in Germany. Neither Majd nor Nour are real people so much as amalgamations of many tales told be those who have made the crossing being depicted:

> Our two main characters, Nour and Majd, are fictional. They do not exist, or rather, they exist collectively. They are a multitude of men, women and children: Dana, her mother, her brother-in-law… as well as thousands of others who flee their country – or watch their relatives flee – all in hopes of finding a better life in Europe. (Bury Me, My Love Website)

Chronotypological Analysis

Bury me, My Love thus has a unique temporal form within the gaming space – its integration into the microrhythms of smartphone usage – that sits alongside its challenging subject matter. This temporal structure subverts the concept of the 'magic circle' that separates playful from non-playful behavior because the mode in which players' attention is captured resembles those of everyday life rather than the privileged occurrences of in-game space and time. I argue that this temporal structure allows the game to convey its subject matter in a new way for games – helping us to *value* this story in a new way – and will use the concept of 'chronotypology' (Jayemanne 2017) to explore this.

This method for describing temporal experience draws on the work of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben and in particular his essay 'In Playland' (1993). Agamben, drawing on arguments by Levi-Strauss and Benveniste, outlines two temporal movements: diachrony and synchrony. Synchrony is associated by Levi-Strauss with ritual and draws temporal schemes together. His key example is the *churinga* in the Aranda culture of Australia. A familiar occidental example would be holidays such as Christmas, where nativity scenes re-create or *synchronise* the past within the lived experience of the present.

Agamben supplements this work by noting an opposite temporal movement: diachrony. If synchrony brings timeframes together, diachrony splits them apart. The key example is play, as in *Pinnocchio* where 'Playland' represents an eternal holiday without the structuring principles of the calendar: time seems to whirl past.

However, it is critical to note that neither diachronic play nor synchronic ritual can fully complete their own operations: there is always a material remainder, as can be seen in the sacred *churinga* and the playful toy. Levi-Strauss notes that the sacred object must be carefully hidden away once the ritual ends. The toy presents an analogous — but opposite — transformation when it leaves its own space:

> …the toy, as a representation of a pure temporal level, is undoubtedly a signifier of absolute diachrony, of the prior transformation of a structure into an event. But here too this signifier, once freed, becomes unstable, and is invested with a contrary meaning; here too, *at the end of the game*, the toy turns around into its opposite and is presented as the synchronic residue which the game can no longer eliminate. For if the transformation were really complete, it would leave no traces, and the miniature would have to correspond with its model, just as, *at the ritual's termination*, the *churinga* would have to

vanish, corresponding to the body of the individual in whom the ancestor has been reincarnated. (Agamben 1993: 79-80)

The toy is like the ritual object insofar as it too is an unstable signifier liable to transform its modality at the limit of a certain procedure. These two 'embarrassing residues' (80) attest as disturbing remainders to the contingency of their own operation, surviving as they do the very spatio-temporal *topoi* that they serve to open. Agamben calls these 'unstable signifiers'.

The failure of both limit cases — the *churinga* and the toy, ritual and play — to complete their respective gestures shows that neither diachrony nor synchrony can ultimately eliminate the other pole: 'the pure event (absolute diachrony) and the pure structure (absolute synchrony) do not exist' (70). Instead, the continuity of the system requires the production of a differential margin between diachrony and synchrony. This is not to say that pure play or pure structure cannot be represented or evoked — the former has been depicted in the form of infernal punishments that involve permanent movement and interminable duration (Playland, Ixion's wheel, Sisyphus' stone) whereas the latter is imagined through imagery of perfect, unchanging and blissful heavens (Agamben 1993). Similarly, because play and ritual both act on unstable signifiers, there are certain proximities, affinities and crossing-points between the two poles (such as funereal and initiatory games or the appearance of miniatures and toys in tombs).

Unstable Signifiers and Game Time

These speculations about ritual and toys can be recruited for the analysis of videogame temporality by connecting playable game elements with Agamben's 'unstable signifiers' — points of transformation between the production of synchrony and diachrony. Videogame performances act on these signifiers to change their temporal signification. A videogame is another apparatus for producing 'differential margins' between diachrony and synchrony. Where such margins once produced initiatory relations between entire generations or helped explain seasonal and cosmic phenomena, computers facilitate the production of increasingly compressed performative feedback loops and intensive fluxes of experience.

Some precise comparative definitions are possible at this point. *Diachrony* is produced by apparatuses that separate, disperse or distinguish performative multiplicities, making them more distal. *Synchrony* is produced by apparatuses that bring together, converge or concenter performances, making them proximal. Analysis of a videogame performance (or indeed any other element) in these terms will be termed 'chronotypology'. The key unstable signifiers in gaming are those framing devices that have ludic significance: that sort between felicitous and infelicitous play. However, all signifiers in a videogame have the potential to produce diachronic or synchronic experience.

Players approach the weft and warp of temporal experience in gaming by attempting to discern what signifiers are unstable and will, as the game proceeds, change their temporal signification. Play proceeds from the *will-be-played* (highly diachronic of the neophyte) to the *can-be-played-with* (a balance of diachrony and synchrony in the mature play experience) and finally the *will-always-be-played* (the endgame, where the most signifiers have become highly synchronic).

For example, any non-reversible event or performance will exercise a strong diachronic influence over a particular playthrough, dividing it into two distinct segments. A very simple example would be the beginning of *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*. Player character Naked Snake conducts a parachute drop and finds himself on a slightly elevated plateau above a forested area. All of his basic actions are available to him and players can run about on the plateau for as long as they please, but once he slides down from the plateau there is no way to return. The perludic act of exiting the plateau thus diachronizes two distinct performative ensembles. This can be distinguished from *Firewatch*, in which the player character can find themselves at a 'Long Drop Down'. This segments the space as players cannot directly return to the higher area. However, it does not *diachronize* the two areas as distinct performative spaces (although it does seem to at the time because the level design allows players to access the previous space in other ways later in the game.

Smartphone Time in Exile

Chronotypology allows some useful approaches to digital games, although it should always be remembered that Agamben is describing tendencies and not states. Narrative, for example, can be defined as a *highly synchronising element* in those games with strong storylines: in spite of various differences in how players conduct themselves in the ludic portions of the game, narrative draws the various individual performances together through certain events that will occur in every playthrough. However, this is only the case for a player perspective at the end of the game. In the course of play, narrative is experienced in highly diachronic terms: Costikyan's narrative anticipation, the question of 'what happens next'? On replay, narrative elements generate strong synchronic experience (I've played this before!). Chronotypology is a *comparative* mode of analysis: it remains agnostic about ontological claims (this *is* a game, that *is* a story), but may be useful in the course of those discussions.

One of the most significant synchronies that arise in digital games is the feel of 'gaming' itself – what Eskelinen terms 'the gaming situation' (2001) or Boluk and le Mieux term 'the standard metagame' (2017). This is the set of tropes, customs and other shared understandings through which digital games are coded primarily as part of consumerist 'geek culture'. Games are often evaluated with this set of values tacitly or overtly in the background: those which fail to provide sufficient diachronic excitement and thrills are maligned as 'not-games' or 'walking simulators' (Keogh 2018). On the other hand, games dealing with serious subject matter can suffer from the expectations that accompany playful activity and experience: the 'magic circle' is a synchronic effect in which players know that it is 'just a game', potentially leavening how they value the in-game representations and simulations. This high-level gaming synchrony can act as an inertial drag on the value of inventive digital games that depart from the norms of 'the games industry'.

Using this terminology, we can now approach the 'reality-inspired' temporal framework created by *Bury me, My Love* in a new light. Nour's journey synchronises not with the gaming situation or standard metagame, but with the everyday rhythms of the smartphone. The game does not take place within a magic circle, seated before the typical paraphernalia (mouse-keyboard-monitor or controller-TV set) of 'gaming'. Even as a smartphone app, *Bury me, My Love* in its pseudo real-

time mode emulates the piecemeal on-again-off again experience of chat rather than an immersive game.

This real-time aspect to the experience allows the game to diachronically progress in a way that we are now very familiar with: the notification. Nour's attempts to contact Majd weave into the tasks, communications and updates of daily life, appearing alongside them rather than as a departure therefrom and becoming part of the harried consciousness of the smartphone user. The competing stimuli of the smartphone become part of the game, helping to convey the anxiety that Majd (as representative of those left behind with a slender internet connection to a journeying loved one) must be feeling.

This temporal de-synchronisation from the standard metagame affords *Bury me, My Love* a powerful sense of diachrony that is reflected in Nour's determined personality. I one playthrough, Nour refused to don a veil even though it may have been safer for her to do so. Sometimes she will message saying that she is about to do something dangerous, or that she lied to Majd because she knew how he would react (her behavior is governed by four variables: her morale, relationship level with Majd, budget and objects in her inventory – although these are never displayed in-game, but only manifested in various ways through Nour's behaviour).

This powerful diachronic effect – utilizing gaming technology and modes of interactivity but refusing their culturally bounded form – is the most effective way that *Bury me, My Love* conveys the plight of refugee experience in its 'reality-inspired' design. The pseudo-real time is more than a conceit. The game design is already quite capacious with 19 endings, multiple locales and choice points, and to exhaust the possibility space in the real-time mode would take a very long time indeed, giving a different value to the events and characters than would be possible in many conventional game designs. Now, if you will excuse me, I have to find my smartphone and see how Nour is getting on with that protest.

Games

BURY ME, MY LOVE. The Pixel Hunt, mobile, 2017.
FIREWATCH. Campo Santo, PC, 2016.
METAL GEAR SOLID 3: SNAKE EATER. Konami, PS3, 2004.

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