

SERTIFIKAT

Kementerian Riset dan Teknologi/
Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional



Petikan dari Keputusan Menteri Riset dan Teknologi/
Kepala Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional
Nomor: 230/E/KPT/2022

Peringkat Akreditasi Jurnal Ilmiah Periode I Tahun 2022

Nama Jurnal Ilmiah

Kata Kita: Journal of Language, Literature, and Teaching

E-ISSN: 25987801

Penerbit: Program Studi Sastra Inggris Universitas Kristen Petra

Ditetapkan sebagai Jurnal Ilmiah

TERAKREDITASI



TERAKREDITASI PERINGKAT 5

Akreditasi Berlaku selama 5 (lima) Tahun, yaitu
Volume 10 Nomor 2 Tahun 2022 sampai Volume 15 Nomor 1 Tahun 2027

Jakarta, 30 December 2022

Menteri Riset dan Teknologi/
Kepala Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional
Republik Indonesia,

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NIP 196107061987101001



Current Issue

Vol. 12 No. 3 (2024)

Published: 2024-12-09

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Contact

English Department
Petra Christian University
Siwalankerto 121-131
Surabaya 60236
Indonesia

Principal Contact

Drs. Theophilus Joko Riyanto, M.Si
katakita@petra.ac.id

Support Contact

Drs. Theophilus Joko Riyanto, M.Si
katakita@petra.ac.id

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Exploring Narrative Structure and Immersion in the Game *OMORI*: Unpredictability and Trauma as Guiding Principles

Deanya Parahita Nauraputri Dewanto¹, Setefanus Suprajitno²

English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University,
Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, INDONESIA
E-mail: a11200024@john.petra.ac.id¹, steph@petra.ac.id²

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the narrative structure of *OMORI*, a 2020 psychological horror RPG by Omocat, focusing on its portrayal of trauma through the protagonist Sunny. Incorporating Bal's (2017) narratology and Wei's (2011) narrative framework, this study examines techniques that contribute to unpredictability and trauma-driven narrative. Using Bermejo-Berros et al.'s (2022) narrative tension theory and Green and Brock's (2000) transportation theory, the study reveals how each technique, respectively, incites immersive horror and emotional connection in players. Unpredictability can create immersive horror through narrative tension, whereas trauma-driven narrative may create an emotional connection by making the players sympathize with the character. Through its placement and presentation of sequences, the game evokes cognitive and emotional responses in players. The narrative structure in *OMORI* highlights the impact of unpredictability and trauma-driven narratives in game storytelling. Analyzing the game's sequences and mechanics reveals their role in creating profound emotional experiences for players.

Keywords: game, immersion, narrative structure, trauma, unpredictability

INTRODUCTION

Role-playing Games (RPGs) have attracted millions of players. Lortz (1979) defines RPGs as games where players assume the roles of imaginary characters and operate with varying degrees of freedom (as cited in Zagal & Deterding, 2018, p. 22). *OMORI*, an indie RPG released in 2020 by Omocat, exemplifies this genre, with its narrative set in Faraway Town and Headspace. The game follows Sunny and his imaginary self, Omori, as they uncover Sunny's mysterious past. *OMORI*'s melancholic narrative and critical acclaim make it a compelling subject for analysis. This study aims to reveal the narrative and gameplay techniques that contribute to unpredictability and trauma-driven narratives, and explain how each technique, respectively, incites immersive horror and emotional connection. Addressing a research gap on *OMORI*'s narrative structure, this study integrates game and literature studies to offer insights into video games as storytelling mediums.

Bal's (2017) narratology provides a foundation by distinguishing between *text* (structured signs), *story* (content that colors a fabula), and *fabula* (chronologically related events). Bal's model is well-suited for game narratives because it addresses the *story* layer in games (Wei, 2011, p. 31). Additionally, Wei's (2011) framework is used to analyze game narrative structure. It defines four aspects in a game narrative: time, space, game text, and game plot. Temporal and presentational structures are examined. Temporal structure pertains to the sequence of events, and presentational structure focuses on how the game world is presented visually, auditorily, and textually. Narrative space is another critical aspect, as Wei (2011) explains that when reading a narrative text, the audience works on the mental construction of the *storyworld* to comprehend the narrative space (p. 54). Additionally, games often use embedded narrative to convey stories through environmental storytelling with non-textual artifacts like

audio tapes and pictures. Furthermore, the concept of epistemic plot, as explained by Wei (2011) and Ryan (2008), revolves around uncovering information and balancing between revealing and withholding details to create narrative tension and have players solve the story's mysteries.

Unpredictability is crucial in horror and trauma narratives, creating uncertainty and surprise through techniques like jump scares and unreliable narrators. Jump scares, defined as "scripted moments intended to startle the audience" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), rely on precise timing to create fear and tension, while unreliable narrators provide inaccurate or insufficient information, causing players to question the narrative (Phelan & Booth, 2010). Game characters can give players inaccurate or insufficient information, causing them to second-guess the recounting. To help identify and analyze elements that manifest a trauma-driven narrative, I will explain trauma narratives. Trauma narratives, characterized by fragmented and non-linear storytelling, reflect the disordered nature of traumatic memories. Key concepts include agency, non-chronological order, and repetition (Kuznetsova, 2017). Vickroy (2002) states that trauma narratives allow readers to reflect on themes of loss, death, and suffering, raising awareness about trauma's impact (as cited in Kuznetsova, 2017, pp. 17-18). In digital games, these narratives provoke empathy and critical thought, enhancing emotional engagement (Kuznetsova, 2017, p. 15).

To understand how unpredictability incites immersive horror in players, it is essential to clarify the concepts of horror in games and immersion. Horror games evoke fear, tension, and revulsion (Prohászková, 2012). Some techniques pertain to the visual elements of the game environment, such as darkness, strangeness, and blurriness; others pertain to the narrative itself, such as nightmares, isolation, and paranoia; and others pertain to the game's audio, such as suspenseful music and eerie and terrifying sound effects (Demarque & Lima, 2013). Horror has its significance, as Carroll (2003) states, "horror attracts because anomalies command attention and elicit curiosity" (p. 195). The setting of tension, fluctuations in the story structure, and abrupt scares may fulfill the psychological needs of the viewers (Zhang, 2022, pp. 11-12). Schaeffer and Vultur (2010) describe immersion, in a general sense, as a state of absorption in some action, condition, or interest (p. 238). In digital games, immersion is a fundamental aspect of human consciousness, not limited to gameplay, taking many forms and encompassing a variety of experiences with distinct cognitive and emotional processes (Bowman, 2018, p. 379).

I will apply the theory of narrative tension to explain how unpredictability can incite immersive horror in players. Bermejo-Berros et al.'s (2022) theory of multidimensional narrative tension explains how unpredictability incites immersive horror by combining curiosity, interest, and enjoyment to enhance emotional and cognitive engagement. This tension involves a gap between the provided information and the outcome, creating suspense and surprise that increase enjoyment. In games, cognitive and emotional elements cause players to analyze and emotionally react to unsettling narratives, adding to horror experiences. Unpredictable events and narrative twists maintain suspense and surprise, keeping players emotionally invested in the story. The resolution of narrative tension provides cathartic enjoyment as players navigate through fear and uncertainty to reach a satisfying conclusion. To explain how trauma-driven narratives develop emotional connections, I will apply Green and Brock's (2000) transportation theory. This theory posits that narrative absorption leads to emotional attachment, influencing real-world beliefs and attitudes. Moreover, Bopp et al. (2019) argue that character attachment is important for emotional player experiences. As players become active participants in the story, they are more likely to form attachments to game characters.

ANALYSIS

Implementation of Unpredictability

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OMORI employs jump scares to create unpredictability. These jump scares contribute to unpredictability through their ordering and presentation. To clarify, the player assumes the role of Sunny's alter ego, Omori, in Headspace, whereas Sunny exists in Faraway Town.

In the prologue of *OMORI*, the first notable jump scare occurs when the player encounters the distorted photo. Playing as Omori, the player explores the vibrant Neighbor's Room and the Vast Forest alongside Omori's friends: Aubrey, Kel, Hero, and Basil. At Basil's house, a cutscene shows Basil inspecting a dropped photo. After a build-up, the jump scare occurs for a split-second, displaying the dropped photo in a distorted form. This jump scare's placement contributes to unpredictability by contrasting the peaceful exploration of Neighbor's Room and the Vast Forest with sudden horror. Bal (2017) argues that sequential ordering can create suspense and highlight differences between expectation and realization (p. 69). The jump scare's order creates suspense by disrupting the player's expectations, creating unpredictability. The build-up to the jump scare also contributes to unpredictability by exhibiting anxiety through visual, audio, and textual means.

BASIL: "Hm? That's strange. A photo must have been loose. Huh? What is this? Did I take this photo? Something about it seems so familiar. (ringing sound) N-no... That can't be... (warped) MARI... She's...."

As Basil inspects a photo, his dialogue transitions from confusion to apprehension, accompanied by a shift from pleasant music to ringing and silence. Music often depicts and metaphorizes characters' circumstances and psychology, influencing the viewer's perception (Gao, 2021, p. 139). The absence of music metaphorizes anxiety, helping the player understand Basil's condition. Basil's worried expression and the branching shadow surrounding him visually support this tension. The presentational structure makes the jump scare unexpected and thus deepens player curiosity about the characters Basil, Mari, and Omori, as well as the story.

Another notable jump scare occurs in the prologue, when Sunny, in Faraway Town, opens the door to find Hellmari. After consuming expired steak and vomiting, Sunny hears loud knockings and finds Mari, his sister, asking to be let in. If players choose to open the door, the Hellmari jump scare happens. This scare's timing is significant because it follows a pleasant interaction with Mari in Headspace, where she is associated with safety and a safe feature. This conditions players to trust Mari, making the jump scare more unexpected when they encounter her in Faraway Town. Additionally, the Hellmari jump scare contributes to unpredictability through its build-up, using visual, auditory, and textual cues. Before the jump scare, the scene shifts: the camera faces the living room, showing Mari outside. After interacting with her, the scene fades to black, and Sunny turns to face the door, creating a sense of importance and uncertainty. The game uses color and light to deceive players. According to Sun (2016), light and shadow can evoke horror and mystery, while colors have symbolic meanings and emotional impacts (p. 901). Players, accustomed to Headspace's vibrant presentation, may see nothing amiss with Mari's sprite in Faraway Town. Furthermore, Mari's normal greeting lowers suspicion. Together, these cues can mislead players into opening the door, resulting in the Hellmari jump scare. This jump scare contrasts sharply with Mari's sprite, thus emphasizing her importance and establishing her as a recurring motif in the narrative.

Unreliable narrators contribute to unpredictability in *OMORI*. Sunny and Omori demonstrate unreliability through under-reporting. Under-reporting, from its implication, occurs when the narrator withholds information or fails to disclose crucial details. Sunny and Omori both hide the jarring secret of being responsible for Mari's death, indicating under-reporting. NPCs also misreport Mari's death as suicide, misleading players into a false narrative early on. Misreporting could occur when the narrator or characters provide information that is factually

incorrect or misleading. Additionally, Sunny's disregarding of Basil's concerns further complicates the narrative. Disregarding refers to the narrator or characters dismissing or ignoring certain events, facts, or interpretations. Sunny ignores Basil specifically in almost every encounter with him, which causes Basil to grow anxious. Omori, as an alter ego character, adds a layer of psychological complexity, where his trauma influences his narration. This aligns with Booth's (2010) concept of a "factual" unreliable narrator due to distorted perceptions or omissions (p. 496). This unreliable narration from Sunny, Omori, and NPCs creates uncertainty for players, contributing to unpredictability.

Application of Trauma-Driven Narrative

OMORI employs elements of trauma-driven narrative, such as metaphors inside its gameplay mechanic and fragmented storytelling. The hangman mechanic on Omori's laptop is one example. It uses gameplay to convey Sunny's trauma through embedded narratives. Keypads scattered across Headspace metaphorically represent the repression of traumatic memories, their hidden placement suggesting deliberate concealment. The non-chronological order of cutscenes and revelations about Sunny's trauma mirrors the disordered temporality found in trauma narratives. Luckhurst (2008) defines a new "post-classical genre" of film in which storytelling and suspense rely heavily on the non-chronological order of revealing events and draw a connection with trauma narratives, where temporality is distorted and broken, mirroring the psyche of its traumatized characters (as cited in Kuznetsova, 2017, p. 12). Additionally, the repetition of keypads and their secrets symbolizes the recurring nature of traumatic memories. Gibbs (2014) argues that rather than very literal representations of a belated, temporarily forgotten memory, trauma is more authentically portrayed through constant synecdochal returns, where a small detail associated with trauma reappears over and over again to represent traumatic memory (as cited in Kuznetsova, 2017, p. 16). Each keypad encounter subtly reminds players of Sunny's trauma through these repetitive, symbolic elements.

Basil's photo album mechanic is another example of an embedded narrative. The player encounters three types of photo albums: the purple album, depicting Omori's friends in Headspace; the green album, showing Sunny and his friends in Faraway Town; and the black album, revealing Sunny's trauma in Black Space. This progression leads to an epistemic plot. Basil's photo album mechanic in *OMORI* integrates an interactive narrative approach where players sort photos chronologically. This interactivity prompts players to actively piece together clues about Omori's past before the traumatic event. Ultimately, this use of embedded narrative creates narrative tension through its epistemic plot.

OMORI employs fragmented storytelling to depict the fractured nature of traumatic memories and experiences. This narrative technique deliberately breaks up the narrative structure to reflect the psychological complexity of its characters and themes. Critics and narrative theorists acknowledge that features of narrative space are highly relevant, with many critical terms being spatial metaphors (Buchholz & Jahn, 2010, p. 551). *OMORI* employs the concept of liminality as a spatial metaphor through the segmented storyworlds. One example is the use of liminal space, where segmented storyworlds conceal clues related to Sunny's traumatic event. In Black Space, Omori's forced transition back to Faraway Town through self-directed injury emphasizes this disordered narrative approach. The disorganization of order present through the sudden transition in space is essential to Caruth's (1991) understanding of non-linear traumatic memory, in which "the future is no longer continuous with the past but is united with it through a profound discontinuity" (p. 184). Thus, *OMORI* conveys the fragmented nature of traumatic memories and experiences through liminal space.

Inciting Immersive Horror

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The jump scares in *OMORI* can incite immersive horror through a sense of uncertainty. With their unique temporal and presentational structure, the jump scares create narrative tension. Baroni (2007) defines narrative tension as a phenomenon where the interpreter of a story is enticed to wait for an outcome, characterized by an anticipation tinged with uncertainty (as cited in Bermejo-Berros et al., 2022). Investigating the structure of the jump scare reveals that narrative tension may lead the player to experience a false sense of certainty.

The distorted photo jump scare can trigger curiosity. Bermejo-Berros et al. (2022) assert that curiosity serves as a tool for organizing the information presented in the story as it unfolds. Considering the jump scare's presentational structure, the player has become accustomed to the vibrancy of Headspace, thus providing a sense of certainty through familiarity. However, with such a brief appearance, the jump scare abruptly shatters that sense of certainty. The split-second occurrence of the jump scare may cause the player to experience thought processes of interrogation, uncertainty, and incomprehension. These cognitions may be marked by the player questioning the significance of the jump scare, pondering its unpredictable nature, and ultimately reaching thoughts of confusion. Given the stark contrast with the vibrant Headspace, one might assume that this creates enjoyment for players. Bermejo-Berros et al. (2022) argue that while curiosity alone is insufficient for narrative entertainment, suspense and surprise are crucial. These emotions, when effectively engaged and resolved, increase enjoyment. Curiosity drives engagement by creating cognitive and emotional tension, contributing to states like suspense and surprise as the audience anticipates story developments. The distorted photo jump scare triggers curiosity, leading to suspense and surprise, which may captivate players into the narrative.

Similarly, the Hellmari jump scare in *OMORI*, with its unique temporal and presentational structure, has a significant impact on players. This sequence resembles Kel's in terms of its visual, audio, and textual presentation. First, Mari's sprite in the jump scare sequence mimics the quality of Kel's sprite. Second, the same loud knocking sounds from the Hellmari jump scare reverberate throughout the house as soon as players exit Sunny's room. Third, the framing of the camera shifts the same way as in the Hellmari jump scare. Finally, the dialogue prompts the player to open the door. Kel states that he wishes to see Sunny before he moves out of town. The similarity in presentation suggests that the Hellmari jump scare could lead players to be more cautious and a potential deviation from the True route to the Hikikomori path, which focuses on Sunny's isolation. While it influences player behavior, it does not dictate it, allowing players the choice to proceed despite the jump scare. In this instance, the horror may only become apparent upon reflection while examining the parallels between the two sequences.

Both the distorted photo and Hellmari jump scares may induce immersive horror by creating uncertainty through an affective-cognitive gap. Bermejo-Berros et al. (2022) define the affective-cognitive gap as the interconnected relationship between thought and emotion in narrative tension. These elements drive enjoyment by motivating players to uncover what happens next. Stress triggers can be cognitive, tied to the story's events, or emotional, provoked by startling stimuli. Throughout the story, viewers experience cognitive and emotional responses that anticipate, diagnose, or reflect on events, with one function prevailing. Players may engage in diagnosis to discern the unfolding events and the reasons behind them. Afterwards, players engage in retrospection to contemplate the events in the story. Because jump scares are inherently sudden and unpredictable, this unpredictability likely enabled the diagnosis process, leading to the subsequent retrospection function after the jump scare. Ultimately, narrative tension persists, potentially captivating players in the horror narrative and thereby possibly inducing immersive horror.

The use of unreliable narrators may incite immersive horror by causing players to doubt their understanding of the narrative. Discrepancies between Mari's portrayal in Faraway Town and Headspace, characterized by under-reporting, misreporting, and disregarding, create narrative tension. Players are prompted to question which narrator—Sunny in Faraway Town or Omori in Headspace—is telling the truth, leading to cognitive and affective responses such as anticipation and uncertainty about the truth of Mari's death involving both Sunny and Basil. Additionally, it is a point of concern that Omori may be considered a "factual" unreliable narrator as his perspective of the narrative takes place in a dream sequence. As such, Omori's recounting of the story has reasons for the readers to question the accuracy of the narrative. The existence of the above makes the plot twist—that Sunny and Basil played a role in Mari's passing—all the more horrifically shocking. Therefore, the incongruent telling of events by the unreliable narrators leaves players feeling uncertain about the truth, potentially inciting immersive horror.

Developing a Sense of Emotional Connection

The trauma-driven narrative in *OMORI* may develop an emotional connection in the players by forming a sense of attachment to the characters. Examining the gameplay mechanics that create a trauma narrative reveals information about the events surrounding the characters. Green and Brock (2000) state that because characters are the driving force in fiction, attachment to them may play a significant role in narrative-based belief change. Video games that explore trauma narratives use game mechanics to immerse players in the characters' experiences and events. This immersion is achieved through interactive storytelling, emotional difficulties, and decision-making processes based on the characters' traumatic experiences. As players go through these aspects, they gain a better understanding of and empathy for the characters' hardships and emotions. Based on the investigation of the gameplay mechanics' structure, the player may develop an emotional connection to the character as a result of developing an attachment to them.

The hangman and photo album mechanics create a sense of attachment to characters by evoking sympathy from players. Bopp et al. (2019) used the term "sympathetic alter ego" to describe situations in which their study's respondents felt sympathetic towards characters, believing they had similar personal experiences. These mechanics serve as metaphors for trauma repression, allowing players to directly experience the lingering effects of traumatic memories. In the study done by Bopp et al. (2019), players expressed how, after identifying similarities, they felt understood by characters. The hangman mechanic's combination of limited agency, non-chronological presentation, and repeated symbolic elements may resonate with players who struggle with lingering traumatic memories.

The photo album mechanic deepens players' understanding of the characters by allowing them to explore the player character's past interactively. The photo album mechanic employs an epistemic plot. As a result, the mechanic withholds information until it is revealed through player interaction. In the final album located in Black Space, which presents the narrative solely through visuals, players must infer the story themselves. Sorting through these albums, players gradually uncover Sunny's traumatic past, fostering empathy and understanding for his struggles with guilt and grief. From the presentations of Sunny struggling with guilt, grief, and trauma, players may identify with Sunny. Certainly, not every player will fully resonate with Sunny's story. As stated by Bopp et al. (2019), the extent to which players feel related to the sympathetic alter ego is strongly dependent on how much the character's experiences resonate with the players' own personal experiences. Nevertheless, due to the universality of grief and trauma, to an extent, players can sympathize with Sunny's experience.

The segmented storyworld might affect players' beliefs and attitudes by limiting their agency. Repeated occurrence of self-directed injury, such as stabbing the player character,

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become normalized through gameplay. This behavior, crucial for navigating dilemmas in Black Space, initially offers relief as players use it to avoid certain outcomes. However, this relief can turn into distress as players realize they are choosing harm for the character they control rather than others. This unsettling experience may prompt a potential shift in beliefs, especially regarding those with suicidal thoughts. This indicates that, despite recognizing that the event is imaginary, players still have strong feelings about it. Transported readers may experience strong emotions and motivations, even when they know the events in the story are not real (Green & Brock, 2000). Players' beliefs may be influenced by their identification with characters like Sunny and Omori. This identification, known as the transportation effect, can strongly persuade audiences by making narrative-based messages more compelling than those lacking stories (Green & Brock, 2000). Ultimately, players' attitudes may shift due to the preconditioning of self-injury to escape liminal spaces or cope with trauma-induced helplessness.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the narrative design of the role-playing game *OMORI*, focusing on its use of unpredictability and trauma to convey meaningful narratives. The study analyzes notable gameplay and narrative techniques, and their potential to incite immersive horror and emotional connection in players. The findings reveal that *OMORI* employs techniques that create unpredictability and a trauma-driven narrative. The use of jump scares and unreliable narrators contribute to the unpredictability of the game, evoking a sense of uncertainty and surprise in the player. The order and presentation of jump scares, such as the distorted photo and Hellmari sequences, play a crucial role in diverting the player's expectations and creating suspense. Unreliable narrators, including Sunny, Omori, and NPCs, under-report, misreport, and disregard information, adding to the sense of uncertainty. The game also employs metaphors and fragmented storytelling to convey a trauma-driven narrative. Metaphors in gameplay mechanics, like the Hangman mechanic, represent trauma repression, while the photo album mechanic presents an epistemic plot that challenges the player's understanding of events. Fragmented storytelling reflects the complexity of trauma and the non-linear nature of traumatic memories. These techniques incite immersive horror and emotional connection by engaging the player's curiosity, influencing their decisions, and creating attachment to the characters.

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