

Connecting Narrative Video games and Electronic literature

Filip J. Falk

University of Bergen

27.11.2017

Contents

Introduction 2
Background 2
Video games and electronic literature 2
Graph analysis 4
Similarities and differences 8
Comparison of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* and *The Hunt for the Gay Planet* 9
Conclusion 10
Bibliography 12

Introduction

The research question for this project is to find out which connections exist between video games and electronic literature games with a story or narrative. Story and narrative are essential parts of many games, whether it be an open-world video game on a console or a flash-game in a web browser. I will be researching selected works documented in the ELMCIP Knowledge Base with the tag 'game', their platforms and also compare a video game and electronic literature game. My hypothesis for the research question is that there can be found several connections between these two types of games. Visualization have been done in Gephi by extracting information from the Knowledge Base, as well as tag clouds made in WordItOut. Game titles that are frequently used have been shortened. Tags are marked with ‘’.

Background

The reason for choosing this research question is to show which research possibilities that exist in digital humanities for video games and electronic literature games. I chose games that feature narrative and story because these aspects are common for both video games and electronic literature games. Fifty-five games are being used in this project and have been taken from the ELMCIP research collection Narrative Games, a research collection I created in collaboration with two other students. I used the software Gephi to visualize the graphs and data from the research collection. The spreadsheets I used for Gephi were also created in collaboration with the same students. To decide which of the games from the Knowledge base to include in the collection we filtered the search to show creative works with the tags 'game', 'narrative' and 'story'. We then played every game that was available to us, looked up videos of the games or made a decision based on the game's tags and description. We also had to add a number of video games to the Knowledge Base because the majority of games that were documented there was electronic literature games. The games are split into twenty-five video games and thirty electronic literature games. We set the amount to fifty-five in order to have a balance between the two game types.

Video games and electronic literature

Scott Rettberg defines electronic literature, also known as e-lit, as «works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer» (Rettberg 2014, 169). E-lit can be described as works of literature that are presented or developed with digital methods. One of the most important

differences between printed literature and e-lit is that many works of e-lit would not have been possible to present in a printed book. Examples of e-lit can be interactive literature shown on a website or an interactive poetry collection that can be explored. Anne Eilertsen defines video games as «programs that are run on a computer or a dedicated game console» (Eilertsen 2014 translated).¹ In the context of video games, a program means a piece of electronic or digital work that a player can interact with and that has game qualities. Selected works of e-lit can be defined as games if they use game qualities such as progression and goals, or if the author specify that the creative work is a game. E-lit games can also be downloaded and played on a computer in a similar way to video games, but it does not have to be downloadable to be defined as such. Many types of e-lit games can be played in a web browser instead of having to be downloaded like a program.

A way to connect video games and e-lit games is to look at the literary elements that exists in video games. David Ciccoricco argues that: «The related notion of video games as literature, or as possessing literary qualities, is by and large predicated on the extent to which the game draws on or projects a narrative» (Ciccoricco 2014, 223). All the games included in the research collection presents a connected storyline or sequences that tell a story. Patrick Jagoda argues that some games allow the player to play through text (Jagoda 2013). Some examples of games with these elements are Telltale Games' *Game of Thrones* (2014), *Tales from the Borderlands* (2014) and *The Walking Dead* (2012). In these games the player uses dialogue choices to shape the story and point-and-click mechanics to interact with items. Almost all of the information in these games are read through text and the gameplay choices are largely dictated by text.

¹ «programmer som kjøres på en datamaskin eller på en dedikert spillmaskin».

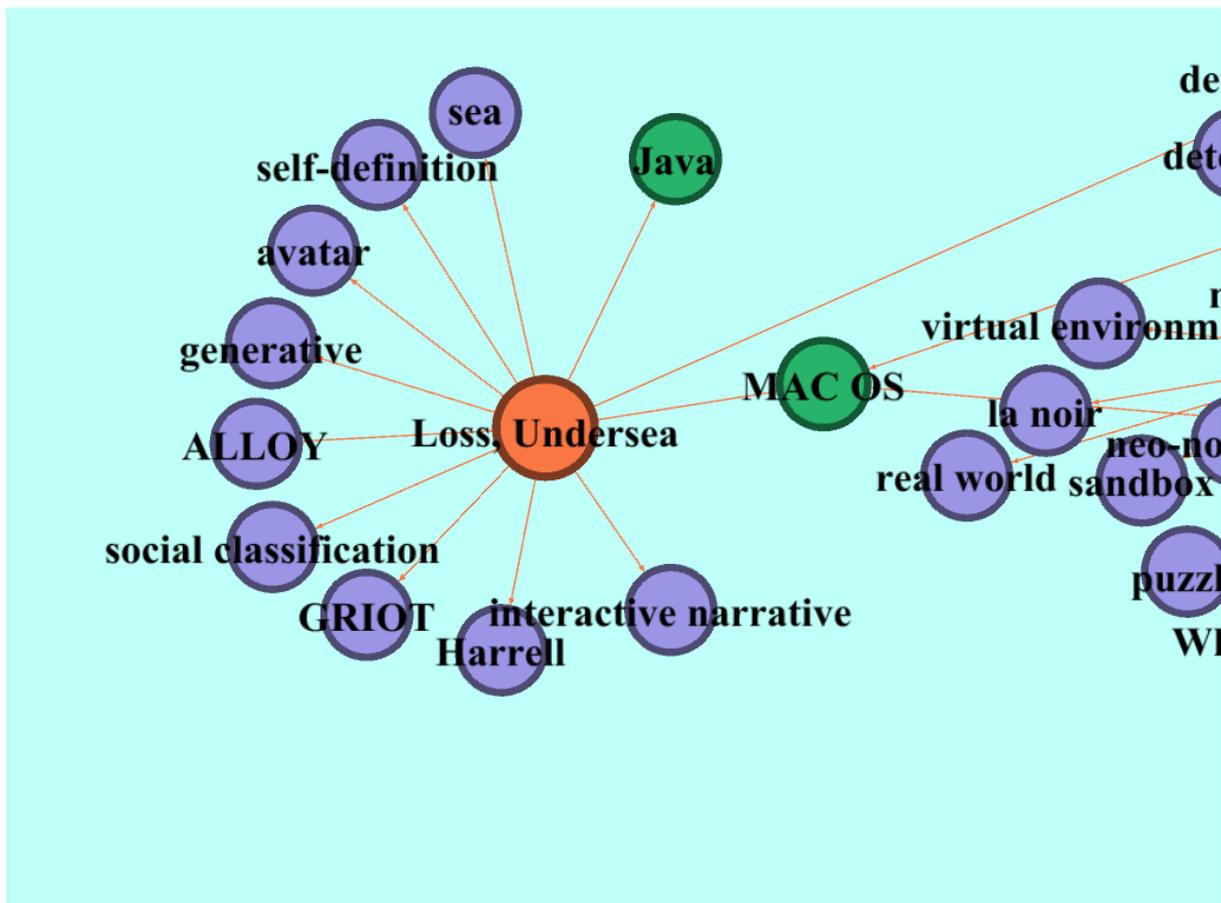


Figure 2. *Loss, Undersea* in the Gephi graph.

Loss, Undersea (2006) is the only game that drifted far away from the rest of the games. As shown in figure 2, the tags that are connected to the game is only used in connection to *Loss, Undersea*. Additionally, it's the only game in the collection that was developed in Java. The only tag that connects the game to the rest of the collection, other than 'game', is the Mac OS platform. 'Game' and Mac OS acts as a broker between *Loss, Undersea* and the rest of the collection. However, there are two tags that stands out; 'avatar', a playable character, and 'interactive narrative', a story that the player can interact with. Many of the video games in the collection uses the same game mechanics as an avatar and a story that the player can shape through choices. The reason that we see tags that should be applied to more than one game but isn't is folksonomy. Folksonomy can be described as tags written by users to identify things. In ELMCIP the users decide which tags should represent a creative work or critical writing. Folksonomy is an essential part in how other users and readers find the different types of work.

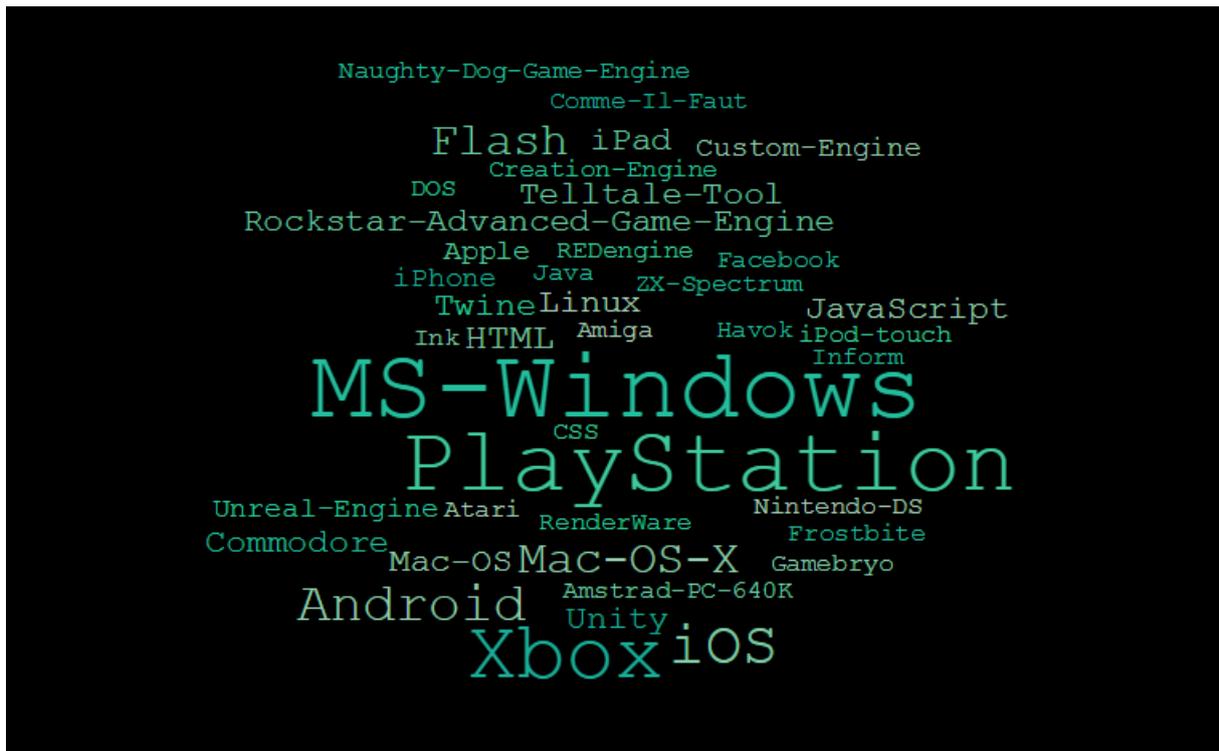


Figure 3. A tag cloud created in WordItOut that shows which platforms and game engines that is most frequently used in the collection. Hyphen is used to avoid titles consisting of more than one word from spreading.

The tag cloud in figure 3 shows that Microsoft Windows, Playstation and Xbox are the platforms that is used the most. Almost every video game is available on these three platforms, while the e-lit games are spread across many different platforms. Many of the video games are primarily developed for either a console or MS Windows. The developers use game engines like Unity and the Unreal Engine to create lengthy games with a lot of content. E-lit games can be created using different programming languages like JavaScript and HTML. These methods are free to use and requires in many ways less practice than game engines to use.

Another key difference between the game types is the commercial and financial aspects. E-lit games are easily available and free, unlike a lot of video games. Developers behind video games often consist of companies with many employees and have a lengthy development process. Video games need to sell copies to cover the developments costs, as well as pay employees and investors. E-lit games, however, are often created by a single author or a small group of people. This allows the authors much more artistic freedom because they do not need

to cater to an audience, sell copies or generate a profit. Nick Montfort argues that computer literature's real popularity is not its marketability or promotion, but «making works in the form available to those outside a narrow academic or newsgroup-based community» (Montfort 2003, 2950-2951). E-lit is available to most people if they have a computer, tablet, or smartphone with a browser, while video games require a computer with additional software installed or a console to be played.



Figure 4. A second WordItOut tag cloud. This cloud shows the most frequently used tags in the collection. Hyphen is again used to avoid words from spreading.

As mentioned earlier, all the games have in common that they use the tag ‘game’ and that is why that tag is the most frequently used, as shown in figure 4. Since the collection focuses on story and narrative games, the tags ‘narrative’ and ‘role-playing game’ are also frequently used, but they are not used as frequently as ‘creative language’ and ‘interactive fiction’. As shown in the tag cloud, the video games share many of the same tags. ‘Dialogue’, ‘multiple endings’, ‘choices’ and ‘interactive’ are common for video games and especially role-playing games. We can also identify different games based on theme tags. Tags like ‘violence’, ‘apocalypse’, ‘crime’ and ‘murder’ belong to video games like *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004), *Fallout 3* (2008), *Heavy Rain* (2010) and *L.A. Noire* (2011). Other tags like

'creative language', 'interactive fiction' and 'narrative' belong to e-lit games like *Living Will* (2012), *Analogue: A Hate Story* (2012) and *Calypsis: A Hypertext Fiction* (2013).

Based on the tag cloud, we can see that both video games and e-lit games have a good variety of tags that can be used to describe the games.

Similarities and differences

I have mentioned earlier some of the similarities and differences between video games and e-lit games. They can both be defined as games, there is a commercial value of video games as opposed to the artistic freedom of e-lit, video games are developed with a game engine for platforms, while e-lit games use programming languages that are easy to access and use. It can then be argued that both the game types have a story that can be studied as both a game element and a literary aspect. In the e-lit game *Don't Panic* (2014) you have to get through a morning without having a panic attack. It contains a literary aspect in the form of a story structure. The game uses basic game elements where you interact with and progress through a story. The ending of the game's story is the reader or player's main goal.

Despite some key similarities, there are also some large differences between the two game types. Video games contain much more content than e-lit games because they are run on a console platform or a computer. This content varies from an open game world, the game and story length, or the game mechanics. Almost every video game from the collection features a playable character or avatar, while the e-lit games mostly feature point-and-click mechanics where you don't control a character in the same way as a video game. E-lit games can often be completed in minutes or under an hour, while most video games can take several hours to finish. The length of a game works as a coherent narrative and is in many ways a player's journey. On the player's role in a game's narrative, Ciccoricco argues:

«Many games employ representational elements and cast the player in the role of a character in a fictional world. These games engage players in a process of producing narrative events or at least dramatically enacting predetermined ones» (Ciccoricco 2014, 225).

Most of the story in a lot of e-lit games is predetermined and cannot be altered by the player. Many of the video games in the collection, however, features multiple endings where the

player can shape the story with different choices. In some of these cases it can be said that the player lives within the story. In an open-world video game like *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) the player has not only the option of how fast they want to play through the story, but also the option to choose if the story should end. Towards the end of *Red Dead Redemption* the protagonist is killed and the player takes control of another character for the rest of the game. If a player did not like this change in gameplay, they would simply not finish the story in order to continue playing as the original protagonist. In a type of game where you can move freely within the game world the time either stands still or the story stays in the game's present time. Similar to how you can stop reading a book before completing it, a player can choose not to complete a game's story before its ending. This is technically possible to do in some e-lit games, but those games often do not use saving mechanics and their game worlds are not alive in the same way as the ones in a video game where you can roam freely.

Comparison of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* and *The Hunt for the Gay Planet*

I chose to compare the video game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) and the e-lit game *The Hunt for the Gay Planet* (2013) because they both present a story and narrative that the player interacts with. *The Witcher 3* is an open-world, role-playing game developed by CD Projekt RED. The player controls the warrior Geralt of Rivia while exploring different locations in a medieval world and completing quests. *Gay Planet* is a text-based game created by Anna Anthropy. The player explores different planets in the search of a lesbian romance. The two games are very different visually. *The Witcher 3* is a role-playing game with an open world, a playable character and different game mechanics. The player can explore a large game world and use fighting mechanics to defeat non-player characters (NPCs). *Gay Planet* consists only of text and very little visualizations. While *The Witcher 3* can present a whole world, *Gay Planet* must use text to create imagery. There is a selection of planets to explore and the player progresses the story by choosing different text options. *The Witcher 3* gives you similar options in actions and dialogue. The player chooses dialogue responses and ethical choices that affect the game world and NPCs. *Gay Planet* features dialogue options that determines how you are presented, but your choices do not affect the narrative on the same scale as in *The Witcher 3*. *The Witcher 3* has three different endings that can be achieved based on the player's choices, whereas *Gay Planet* only has one ending. On one hand, the two games have similar themes like adventure and exploring, but on the other hand, they are also placed in two different genres. One is a medieval fantasy role-playing game, while the other is a science

fiction game that explores gender and sexuality.

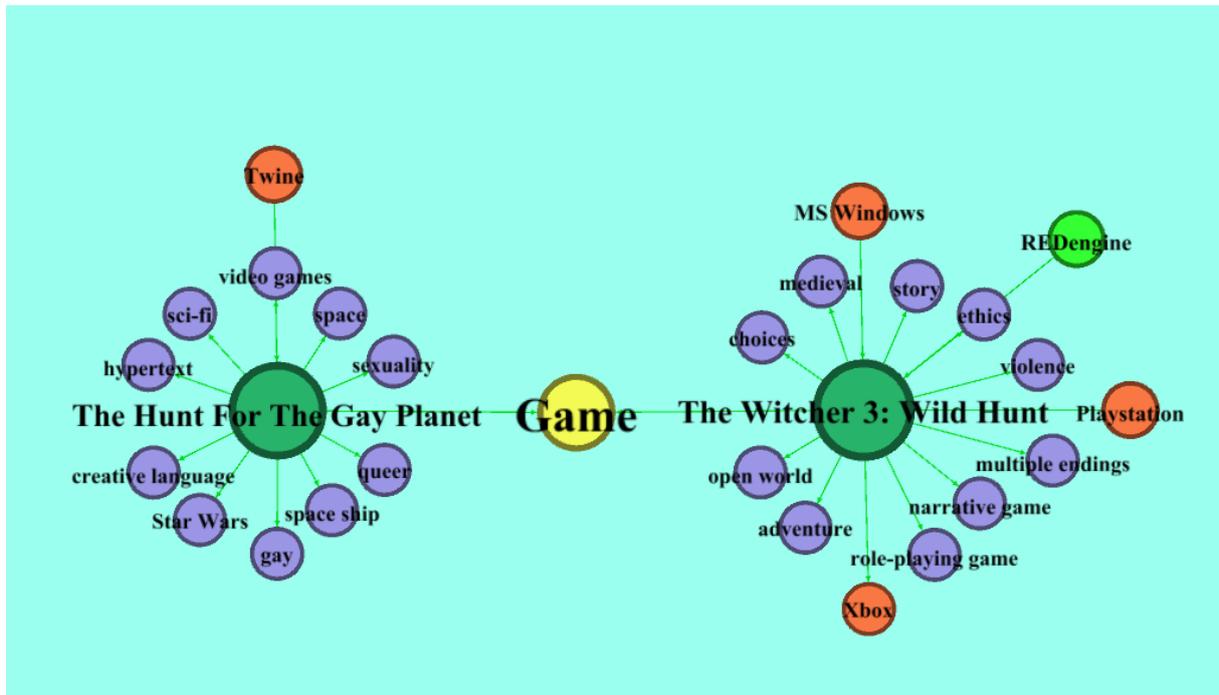


Figure 5. By using ForceAtlas in Gephi I created an overview of the two games, their platforms, *The Witcher 3*'s game engine and tags.

Shown in figure 5 is a new graph where I only use data from *The Witcher 3* and *Gay Planet*. Some differences are the games' platforms, the game engine used to develop *The Witcher 3* and the tags that define each game and its content. *Gay Planet*'s story takes place in space and therefore it uses tags like 'sci-fi' and 'space', but it is also a game about 'sexuality' and it takes inspiration from '*Star Wars*'. Other tags like 'hypertext' and 'creative language' makes it clear that this is an e-lit game. *The Witcher 3*'s tags focus more on the different game aspects like 'choices', 'multiple endings', 'role-playing game' and 'open world'.

Conclusion

My findings show multiple connections between narrative video games and electronic literature games. By using the figures visualized in Gephi I have shown that there are a few tags that can be connected to both types of games. The only tag that can be connected to all the games is 'game'. One of the reasons for why there are not more tags that can be connected to multiple games is folksonomy. Many different users have added the tags they think define the games and therefore many of the tags will be different. However, by researching selected works, I have found out that the two game types share many similarities such as literary

aspects, game qualities, and story I have also discussed some important differences. Video games are mainly developed for console platforms with game engines, unlike electronic literature that can be created with simple programming language. Video games have a commercial aspect tied to the development process, while electronic literature games allow for more artistic freedom. Electronic literature is also more accessible than video games.

I have also compared two games, the video game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* and the electronic literature game *The Hunt for the Gay Planet*. The comparison showed that both games use literary aspects and feature a story that the player progresses through. Other findings show that the platforms the games use are different and in relation to the analysis earlier in the paper, this means that the contents presented in the games are also different. The two games are visualized in different ways where *The Witcher 3* lets you control a character in a visualized world, while *Gay Planet* mostly consists of text. My conclusion is that there are the two games can be connected by similar aspects, but they are also very different in other aspects.

This project opens up for further research of video games and electronic literature with a bigger dataset. An alternative is to decide on a set of common tags to use for games in the Knowledge Base instead of multiple different ones. This way even more connections can be when visualizing graphs, as the games will share more of the same tags. The research collection can also be used as a starting point for other students and researchers.

Bibliography

1. Books

- David, Ciccoricco. 2014. "Games as Art/Literature". In *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Digital Media*, edited by Marie-Laure Ryan, Lori Emerson and Benjamin J. Robertson, 220-224. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- David, Ciccoricco. 2014. "Games as Stories". In *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Digital Media*, edited by Marie-Laure Ryan, Lori Emerson and Benjamin J. Robertson, 224-228. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Montfort, Nick. 2003. *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction*. Kindle Edition. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Rettberg, Scott. 2014. "Electronic Literature". In *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Digital Media*, edited by Marie-Laure Ryan, Lori Emerson and Benjamin J. Robertson, 169-174. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press.

2. Web resources

- Eilertsen, Anne. 2014. «Dataspill». *Store Norske Leksikon*. <https://snl.no/dataspill> Accessed 7. Nov. 2017.
- Jagoda, Patrick. 2013. "Digital Games and Electronic Literature: Toward an Intersectional Analysis". *ELO Conference*. <https://conference.eliterature.org//critical-writing/digital-games-and-electronic-literature-toward-intersectional-analysis> Accessed 7. Nov. 2017.

3. Electronic literature and video games

- Anthropy, Anna. *The Hunt for the Gay Planet*. Game. 2013.
<http://www.auntiepixelante.com/gayplanet/>
- Bethesda Game Studios. *Fallout 3*. 2008. Game. Bethesda Softworks.
- CD Projekt RED. *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. Game. 2015. CD Projekt.
- Giles, Dominique. *Don't Panic*. Game. 2014.
<http://tiredmimi.com/DGSTFINAL/DontPanicTheGame.html>
- Harrell, D. Fox. *Loss, Undersea*. Game. 2006.
<http://groups.csail.mit.edu/icelab/content/loss-undersea>
- Hergander, William Trent. *Calypsis: A Hypertext Fiction*. 2013. Game.
<http://trenthergenrader.com/calypsis/>

Love, Christine. *Analogue: A Hate Story*. 2012. Game.

<http://ahatestory.com/>

Marino, Mark C. *Living Will*. Game. 2012. SpringGun Press.

<http://markcmarino.com/tales/livingwill.html>

Quantic Dream. *Heavy Rain*. 2010. Game. Quantic Dream.

Rockstar North. *Grand Theft Auto V*. 2013. Game. Rockstar Games.

———. *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. 2004. Game. Rockstar Games.

Rockstar San Diego. *Red Dead Redemption*. Game. 2010. Rockstar Games.

Team Bondi. *L.A. Noire*. 2011. Game. Rockstar Games.

Telltale Games. *Game of Thrones*. 2014. Game. Telltale Games.

———. *Tales from the Borderlands*. 2014. Game. Telltale Games.

———. *The Walking Dead*. 2012. Game. Telltale Games.

4. Figures

Narrative games: https://figshare.com/articles/Narrative_games_gephi/5583700

Comparison file: https://figshare.com/articles/Witcher_3_vs_Gay_Planet_gephi/5582107