Narrativization Processes of Video Game Tutorials
- From EarthBound to Undertale -

Fanny Barnabé – FNRS Postdoctoral Researcher
Liège Game Lab – University of Liège – fanny.barnabe@uliege.be
1. Introduction: The Sub-Genre of “Mothertale” Games

*EarthBound*  
(Shigesato Itoi, 1994)  

*Undertale*  
(Toby Fox, 2015)
1. Introduction: The Sub-Genre of “Mothertale” Games
2. A Narratological Study of Video Game Tutorials

• From a **narratological** point of view, video game **tutorials** are **ontologically ambiguous**: they create a **metadiscourse** that no longer addresses only the fictional characters, but also the player (Therrien and Julien, 2015)

• They produce many **metalepses** (Genette, 2004) and **mises en abyme**
2. A Narratological Study of Video Game Tutorials

- **Unnatural narratives** “conspicuously violate [...] conventions of standard narrative forms” (Richardson, 2011: 34)

- “Videogames are unnatural narratives *par excellence*” (Ensslin, 2015: 43)
2. A Narratological Study of Video Game Tutorials

• In the field of video games, metalepses are **not transgressions**, but **conventions** (Allain, 2018)

• Tutorial metalepses are moments when **the game signals how it is articulating fiction and gameplay**
• Inclusive **definition** of the tutorial:

= **Metalanguage** intended to transmit **utilitarian information** about the **commands** (“press X for X”), the **rules** (“the sword can break the blocks”), the **behaviors** expected by the player (“you can do X”) and the **main goals** of the game (“you have to save the princess”)
How do tutorials articulate the empirical content and the game’s fictional universe?

- **Non-fictionalization** of the tutorial
- **Incrustation** of the tutorial in the diegetic environment
- **Avatarization** of the tutorial
  - Tutorial metaphors
  - Fictionalized metalepsis
  - Raw metalepsis
3. Three Degrees of Fictionalization

3.1. Non-fictionalization of the tutorial

--- Instruction ---

[C or ENTER] - Confirm
[X or SHIFT] - Cancel
[C or CTRL] - Menu (In-game)
[F4] - Fullscreen
[Hold ESC] - Quit
When HP is 0, you lose.

Begin Game
Settings

* You took a piece of candy.
* (Press [C] to open the menu.)
3. Three Degrees of Fictionalization

3.2. Incrustation of the tutorial in the diegetic environment

* If you can read this, press the blue switch.
3. Three Degrees of Fictionalization

3.2. Incrustation of the tutorial in the diegetic environment

⇒ “Semi-fictionalization”

* Please don’t step on the leaves.

* Didn’t you read the sign downstairs?
3. Three Degrees of Fictionalization

3.3. Avatarization of the tutorial

⇒ Personification of the explanation
4. The Avatarization

- Non-fictionalization of the tutorial
- Incrustation of the tutorial in the diegetic environment
- Avatarization of the tutorial
  - does the character **dissimulate** the metalepsis? ("tutorial metaphors")
  - does he **highlight** it? ("fictionalized metalepsis")
  - does it **retain** the metaleptic rupture without signaling it? ("raw metalepsis")
= When characters *conceal* the metaleptic nature of the information they reveal by expressing it in *terms that belong to the fictional world*

⇒ Most NPCs are thus the *incarnation of some information*, which they explain in *metaphorical terms*

*Ex. in EarthBound*
I almost told you about my... Uh, by the way Ness, did you check my billboard?

I wrote the message myself.

That’s my real job, you know... I’m a billboard guy.

Why don’t you check out my work?

(Treasure Hunter! This is Lier X. Agerate’s house!)
The **functionalist nature** of these characters is often **emphasized ironically**

4. The Avatarization

4.1. Tutorial Metaphors
4. The Avatarization

4.1. Tutorial Metaphors

Ex. in *Undertale*

* (If you **ACT** a certain way or **FIGHT** until you almost defeat them...)

* (Use some **MERCY**, human.)
  * Ribbit.
4. The Avatarization

4.1. Tutorial Metaphors

• Tutorial NPCs // avatars:

⇒ The avatar = a “metalepsis operator” (Genette, 2004: 110): it introduces an empirical element in the game diegesis (Barnabé and Delbouille, 2018)

⇒ // Tutorial NPCs represent empirical content (the rules, the controls...) through a fictional prosthesis (the character); they operate as so many avatars of the system
4. The Avatarization

4.1. Tutorial Metaphors

• In *Earthbound*, the avatarization process can go so far as to make characters incarnate gameplay mechanisms

Ex.: the “exit mouse”
In *Undertale*, the binarity of the game is represented through two antagonistic tutorial characters.
4. The Avatarization

4.1. Tutorial Metaphors

Flowey = tutorial metaphors + antiphrasis
4. The Avatarization

4.1. Tutorial Metaphors

Toriel = simulacrum of tutorial
4. The Avatarization

4.1. Tutorial Metaphors

⇒ While *Earthbound’s* characters remain rather prescriptive, *Undertale’s* tutorial phase does not stop reverting its own message, which invites the player to adopt a reflexive attitude, a critical distance (Seraphine, 2018)
4. The Avatarization

4.2. Fictionalized Metalepsis

= When characters **emphasize the existence of a metalepsis** and show that they are **aware** of the narrative transgression they operate

Ex. in *EarthBound*
Talk to Goods
PSI Equip
Check Status

• When they approach you this way, your TV screen, no... no...

Talk to Goods
PSI Equip
Check Status

• I mean the world in front of you will show a red swirl for a second.

Talk to Goods
PSI Equip
Check Status

• opening attack.
• In that case, your TV... Oops again!

Talk to Goods
PSI Equip
Check Status

• This is because of the rolling action of your HP meter. Oops! I mean your life.
4. The Avatarization

4.2. Fictionalized Metalepsis

- These figures are part of the diegesis as metalepses
- The tutorial NPCs distance themselves from their universe and from its rules by commenting on them ironically + they seem to make “as if” they were not aware that their world is a game fiction.
4. The Avatarization

4.2. Fictionalized Metalepsis

• Their attitude // playful attitude:

Play = a “metaphorical process” (Henriot, 1989: 300) through which the player acts “as if” what he was doing was different (Schaeffer, 1999: 234)

⇒ EarthBound’s tutorial = also a model of the attitude that is expected of the player
4. The Avatarization

4.2. Fictionalized Metalepsis

Ex. in *Undertale*

* Ribbit ribbit.
* (I heard using "F4" can make you have a "full screen.")

* (But what does "F4" stand for?)
* ("Four frogs"?)
4. The Avatarization

4.2. Fictionalized Metalepsis

- In *Undertale*, fictionalized metalepses are mostly used *outside* the tutorial

Oh, and forget about escaping to your old SAVE FILE.
4. The Avatarization

4.2. Fictionalized Metalepsis

⇒ In *EarthBound*, the player is built as an *accomplice* (the characters and the player are playing *with* the game)

⇒ In *Undertale*, the player and the system are built as *antagonists* (the tutorial drives the player into mistrust and uncertainty)
4. The Avatarization

4.3. Raw Metalepsis

= When metalepses are neither fictionalized nor emphasized

Ex. in *Undertale*
* relax papyrus, this is
* an adventure.
Works Cited

- Genette G. (2004), Métalepse : de la figure à la fiction, Paris, Seuil
- Henriot J. (1989), Sous couleur de jouer : La métaphore ludique, Paris, José Corti