




<https://doi.org/10.16926/trs.2024.09.19>

Received: 20.09.2024

Accepted: 25.11.2024

Maciej NAWROCKI

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2017-9784>

Uniwersytet SWPS (SWPS University in Warszawa, Faculty of Interdisciplinary Studies in Kraków, Poland)

Digital Narrator as a Game Master. The Case of *Baldur's Gate III*

Abstract: This article is a preliminary exploratory analysis of the narrator in *Baldur's Gate III* seen as a digital simulation of an analogue game master (GM). As the reception of *Baldur's Gate* series has always been closely linked to its analogue predecessor, *Dungeons & Dragons*, the main context of the analysis is theoretical reflections concerning tabletop role-playing games (TRPG), especially in relation to digital ones. The analysis covers not only a close reading of some of the in-game utterances, but also the commentary of Amelia Tyler, the actress lending her voice to the narrator. The author argues that while all installments of the series attempted to re-create certain experiences characteristic of TRPG sessions through the digital medium, one of key differences between *Baldur's Gate III* and its predecessors is that it features a complex, voiced narration, designed according to real-life GMs.

Keywords: role-playing games, *Baldur's Gate*, narrator.

Baldur's Gate III (Larian Studios, 2023) is, without doubt, one of the most successful productions of its time.¹ And although it is a third installment of a very recognisable series that has garnered a cult following over the years

¹ On *Metacritic* (the most popular review aggregator for video games) it holds a "Universal Acclaim" rating with the score of 96 % from aggregated user and critic reviews. It also earned five "Game of the Year" awards from the most important events: the Golden Joystick Awards, The Game Awards, the D.I.C.E. Awards, the GDC Awards and the British Academy Games Awards.

– if there was a canon of computer role-playing games *Baldur's Gate* (BioWare, 1998) and *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn* (BioWare, 2000) would have to be included – its success should probably be considered somewhat independently of its predecessors. This does not mean that the most recent part of the series has nothing in common with the first two games; conversely, all three titles share many features, both on the narrative and mechanical planes. However, the sheer quarter-of-a-century time gap between them has to be taken into account, as *Baldur's Gate III* is neither a direct continuation nor a simple reboot that serves as a vehicle for nostalgia; it is rather a complex remodelling of a traditional ludic convention within the computer role-playing games (CRPG) genre that has resonated with at least two generations of players.

Baldur's Gate games developed by BioWare were set in the fantasy world of *Forgotten Realms*, one of the most popular and prolific campaign settings for the *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) tabletop role-playing game (TRPG), which in turn became the main inspiration for the games' mechanics. This was not the first time that Gary Gygax's groundbreaking system had been translated into the digital medium, but it is because of *Baldur's Gate* that the year 1998 could arguably be named as "the second renaissance of *Dungeons & Dragons* games".² Contemporary reviewers, most of whom were rather enthusiastic, often noted the similarities between the gameplay experience and the real life tabletop sessions as well as the close adaptation of the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons 2nd Edition* (1989) rules. For example, in 1999, Cindy Yans of *Computer Games Magazine* wrote:

[W]e were not prepared for the ultimate payoff that is *Baldur's Gate*. While not perfect in every way, this game captures the spirit of *AD&D*; better than any of its predecessors and is as good as it gets in the RPG genre. Welcome to the next generation of role-playing. [...] Probably the ultimate highlight of *Baldur's Gate* is its stalwart adherence to the *AD&D*; ruleset. Although the truest of true Pen and Paper enthusiasts will find places in which the game strays from the Gygax Codex, it is still the most faithful rendition we've seen that does not sport a human GM and dice. From character creation rolls to spellcasting restrictions, it's all there.³

I find this quote representative of the general sentiment expressed towards the *Baldur's Gate* series regardless of any given installment – one of its con-

² Michael J. Tresca, *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2011), 144.

³ Cindy Yans, "Baldur's Gate. *AD&D*; as good as it gets without pencils", *Computer Games Magazine*, January 26, 1999, original address: http://cdmag.com/articles/017/046/baldurs_gate_review.html, accessed through Wayback Machine: https://web.archive.org/web/20050204225850/http://cdmag.com/articles/017/046/baldurs_gate_review.html.

stitutive qualities is that it transfers select elements of the analogue TRPG genre onto the digital CRPG one.

It is, of course, a matter of scale; TRPGs (and *D&D* in particular) have had a visible, lasting and formative influence on narrative video games that can be traced back as early as the 1970s,⁴ but only some of the digital productions (including all of the *Baldur's Gate* titles) deliberately underline this influence in order to simulate various aspects of tabletop gaming. One might add that in such a context the *Forgotten Realms'* storyworld⁵ seems – at least at this point in the history of the fantasy genre – to be of secondary importance as it is a capacious yet very conventional vehicle for narratives. What imbues the series with its appeal or its crucial characteristics is the mechanical and tonal affinity to a more general experience of TRPG play. That said, although *Baldur's Gate* games could be considered to some extent as simulations of analogue role-playing, they should not be perceived as some creative attempts to seamlessly merge the TRPG and CRPG ludic genres.⁶ Jennifer Grouling Cover provided a rather clear and convincing distinction between the two which comes down to an important difference between interactivity and agency.⁷ To put it simply: the most common question coming from the Game Master (GM) in any TRPG is an open “what do you do?”, which provides players with a strong sense of agency, whereas in CRPGs players are inevitably offered a limited number of preset courses of action, so the (implied) question there would rather be a determined “what do you choose?”.

The series *Baldur's Gate* is not in any way exempt from said distinction, but if we do agree that CRPG and TRPG are in fact different genres, then these games can be tentatively analyzed as exhibiting traits of ludic syncretism while remaining entirely within the CRPG genre. Having established this hypothesis, it becomes significantly easier to grasp the key differences between

⁴ Cf. Douglas Schules, Jon Peterson, and Martin Picard, “Single-Player Computer Role-Playing Games,” in *Role-Playing Game Studies. Transmedia Foundations*, eds. José P. Zagal, and Sebastian Deterding (New York: Routledge, 2017), 107–129.

⁵ I understand storyworld as defined by Marie-Laure Ryan: “a dynamic model of evolving situations, and its representation in the recipient’s mind is a simulation of the changes that are caused by the events of the plot”. Marie-Laure Ryan, “Story/worlds/media. Tuning the instruments of a media-conscious narratology,” in *Storyworlds across media. Toward a media-conscious narratology*, eds. Marie-Laure Ryan, and Jan-Noël Thon (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 33.

⁶ A ludic genre is a genre of game dependent on the rules and the type of gameplay (i. e. identified regardless of its theme or functional aspect), cf. Maria B. Garda, *Interaktywne fantasy. Gatunek w grach cyfrowych* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2016), 26.

⁷ Cf. Jennifer Grouling Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson and London: McFarland & Company, 2010), 46.

the earlier BioWare titles and the most recent one from Larian Studios. And so, I would argue that the quality of the syncretic experience of play in the first two games depended on creative solutions quite different from those employed in *Baldur's Gate III*. The first installments focused chiefly on an innovative and ultimately successful application of AD&D mechanics to the language of digital games, as highlighted in contemporary reviews, but in the process of their development many other aspects of analogue role-playing included later in *Baldur's Gate III* were omitted, either because of the technical limitations or a different creative vision. One of these aspects is the complex and voiced second-person narration, the focal point of this article.

The presence of the narrator in *Baldur's Gate III* is noticeable from the very beginning of gameplay and it provides a constant interpretative frame for the player's actions. Every player's story in the game starts the same: after two short cutscenes, the playable character (PC) is shown exiting some kind of hibernation pod on a burning and malfunctioning flying vessel controlled (now less so) by the nefarious race of mind flayers. This is when the narrator speaks for the first time; her opening lines can serve as a good example of the mode in which she communicates with the player:

The blood in your head thrums and pounds. The pounding blood obscures who you are. An overwhelming loss of memory. How you ended up amidst these hellish flames is just as hidden. You have nothing in your skull, besides your name and a headache. But you are in danger.

Probably the first thing that needs to be addressed is that it instantly becomes clear that because of the use of second person this is not a traditional, seemingly transparent epic narration. It is, however, a well-established storytelling device in interactive fiction and various ludic genres, including TRPGs. Because of its wide use, the practice has been a point of interest for many scholars,⁸ so the catalogue of functions it may theoretically have does not need to be elaborated on in the context of this analysis. But what has to be pointed out is that in this case the second-person narration is one of the strategies enabling the developers to closely mimic certain types of GM utterances during TRPG sessions.

⁸ These relationships were examined quite early into the history of digital game studies, e. g. by Espen Aarseth (cf. Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext. Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 97–129), and quite often the interpretations include the interactive fiction genre; cf. Alice Bell and Astrid Ensslin, "«I know what it was. You know what it was»: Second-Person Narrative in Hypertext Fiction," *Narrative* 3, vol. 19 (October 2011): 311–329; a multitude of academic and non-academic perspectives on the subject was presented in a collective work edited by Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin. Cf. *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*, eds. Pat Harrigan, and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

A session of analogue role-playing is a mostly unscripted social event featuring at least two actors, where a lot of communication takes place. Things are said in-game and off-game; conversations can refer to real-world situations, the game system, fictional events that are either parts of the plot or pieces of the lore, and many other things. Perhaps most utterances come from the GM who is responsible, among other things, for narrating the adventure, explaining the fictional world to the other players, informing them of their successes and failures and, generally speaking, reacting to the situation at hand. The narrator in *Baldur's Gate III*, on the other hand, is a limited artistic creation, so naturally she cannot perform all of these activities. Instead, her utterances are exclusively contained within the frame of what Grouling Cover calls the “narrative speech” – a mode of communication serving to establish the actual textual world, located close to the high end of narrativity spectrum (as opposed to, for example, off-game remarks exhibiting a low level of narrativity).⁹

When performed by the GM, the narrative speech in TRPGs primarily utilises the second person and present tense in order to “give the players a sense of temporal immersion”,¹⁰ and it is safe to assume that in the case of *Baldur's Gate III* the developers’ motives were the same. The “you” spoken to by the narrator is the “you” currently in the gameworld – the critically endangered, terrified “you” with a throbbing headache and severe amnesia, not the “you” sitting more or less comfortably in front of the screen. The abundant use of such a method of communication with the players encourages them – to use Daniel Vella’s terminology – to embrace the “internal perspective of the ludic-subject, which [...] leads, when inhabited by the player, to the enactment of a ludic subject as a first-personal, lived experience of being-in-the gameworld”.¹¹ Clearly, the language used in the narrator’s lines supports this function – even in this passage one can see that she speaks in dynamic, mostly simple sentences, containing many epithets and non-neutral verbs, aimed at efficiently conveying the desired emotional states. In short, the narrator helps the player conceptualise and specify their PC’s point of view. This alone is a significant difference between *Baldur's Gate III* and its predecessors – although they had a voiced narrator speaking from the second-person perspective, he could be heard much less often, to the point of being practically absent through most of the gameplay. This does not mean,

⁹ Cf. Grouling Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*, 94.

¹⁰ Grouling Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*, 103.

¹¹ Daniel Vella, *The Ludic Subject and the Ludic Self: Analyzing the I-in-the-Gameworld* (PhD thesis), (Copenhagen: IT University, 2015), 309, https://pure.itu.dk/ws/portalfiles/portal/83014954/Dissertation_Daniel_Vella.pdf.

of course, that he was unnoticeable or even forgettable, although he played a quite different role, either providing somewhat static introductions to the consecutive chapters¹² or automatically addressing the mechanical side of the game in a thinly veiled manner (e. g. “You must gather your party before venturing forth”). Although the introductions mentioned above could vary to a certain degree in regard to the individual players’ choices, they can hardly be compared to the improvised in-game utterances of a typical GM, who speaks much more often, acknowledging practically every action of a PC almost simultaneously to it being performed.

I find the last difference particularly important in the context of this analysis, as it highlights a crucial strategy undertaken in *Baldur’s Gate III* and at the same deeply rooted in the TRPG experience – the simultaneous adaptation of language and content of the narrative to the current style of play. Perhaps a good illustration of this creative solution is the encounter with Timber, one of the squirrels in the Druid’s Grove from the first act. If the PC does not possess the ability to talk to animals and Timber cannot speak for herself, the scene is almost entirely narrated without dialogue (there might be some inserts coming from the PC’s companions). Once the party enters the encounter area, the squirrel throws herself onto the PC’s feet, biting furiously. “The squirrel lunges at your foot and bites it,” says the narrator, while the game gives the player three courses of action. Apart from leaving, they can either try to kick the animal right away – which, if successful, always ends in her death – or to study its behavior in order to establish the root of the apparent conflict. Should the player kill Timber instantly, the narrator quips dryly: “You claim victory over the squirrel, though you’re not sure why you were fighting to begin with”. However, if the player chooses to take a closer look at the squirrel, the narrator explains: “You follow the squirrel’s gaze to a pair of clumsy, ugly feet. Your own, on *her* territory. Looking around, «her territory» extends from one end of the grove to another”. Afterwards, the player must make another choice regarding the encounter – the PC can kick the squirrel anyway or, for example, warn the creature with a click of the tongue, to which the narrator remarks: “She studies you for a moment before twitching her ears. Compromise. After a final squeak of warning – break the rules and there will be trouble – she scurries away”. There are some more variants of this short sequence in which the narrator will react in a different way. Just to exemplify one more – if at the beginning

¹² A good example of these would be the so called “Dream sequences” from the original *Baldur’s Gate* or different endings in *Baldur’s Gate II*. They resemble quite closely the pre-written introductions or epilogues to an adventure or a whole campaign included in a textbook, prepared to be read aloud by the GM.

of the game the player chooses the Dark Urge origin (which, in short, gives the PC sometimes uncontrollable impulses to cause murderous violence), the encounter will start with a distinct narrative: "This squirrel might be the single most adorable creature you can recall in all your stunted memory! It would be ever so twee if it were climbing a tree!" Unfortunately for Timber, if a Dark Urge character cannot speak with animals, they will punt her automatically, and while the whole party gazes at the creature's bloody remains, the narrator states mysteriously: "You stare at the body before you. You have no idea what just happened".

This short, marginal encounter shows how the concept of the narrator works in *Baldur's Gate III*. First of all, most narrated CRPGs, the earlier *Baldur's Gate* games included, would not have the narrator comment on such a minute episode, whereas during a TRPG session it would have to be somehow acknowledged. Secondly, depending on the player's choices, this narrator will change accordingly – different players will be provided with different information, their narratives' foci will concern different aspects of virtual reality and their narrators will use different tones and styles. A player interested in understanding the squirrel will hear a narrator providing significantly more information and using free indirect speech that for a brief moment puts the spotlight on Timber; a player prone to cause absurd violence and gleeful carnage will be rewarded by their narrator with a short, sarcastic acknowledgement of their style of play; a player following the complex, eerie and horror-like path of Dark Urge will instead get a short insight into their PC's torrentuous and twisted psyche. Therefore, just like the player's actions shape the fictional world, the narrator's utterances complete the way in which said fictional world is perceived by the player. To use an example from the encounter described above: a casual killing of Timber will not prompt the narrator to elaborate on the squirrel's perspective, as the choice itself implies the player's or the PC's will to disregard that aspect of the story during this particular gameplay. Such dynamics between the player's actions and the narrative is quite similar to that which characterises TRPG sessions, during which the GM has to take into account the decisions made by the party not only on the eventual level (the *fabula*), but also on the presentational one.

As was said before, *Baldur's Gate III* is a digital game and therefore it does not bestow upon the players the same sense of agency as TRPGs do. A good GM is supposed to constantly negotiate the course of a scenario, even in the most drastic cases; in her study *Agency and Authority In Role-Playing "Texts"*, Jennifer Hammer describes various instances of GMs' behaviour in situations where players actively dismantled their planned courses of action, which

sometimes required an impromptu reconceptualisation of entire adventures¹³. Technological and generic qualities of a finite playable artifact – a term coined by Olli Tapio-Leino¹⁴ – like CRPG obviously cannot allow for the same degree of improvisation and player freedom. A digital game will always put considerable restraints on the player and, to some extent, “resist her project of playing”.¹⁵ Interestingly enough, tabletop GMs also possess significant capacity of resistance to their players’ ideas and actions, being ultimately able to decide the fate of PCs or even to end a session. Therefore, such construction of the digital narrator as described can be viewed as a simulation of a real-life GM or, in Hammer’s terms, a “secondary author” who provides the player with both agency and authoritative rules or resolutions.

It seems that the crucial creative decision that made this process of simulation successful was endowing the narrator with a distinct human voice, that of Amelia Tyler. Her taking a part in the project became the reason for a considerable increase in her popularity,¹⁶ as the game’s narrator was met with a particularly warm reception by many fans. Consequently, she gave some interviews about the process of bringing the *Baldur’s Gate III* narrator to life – one of those could be particularly insightful in regard to this analysis, because in it Tyler states:

[t]here are very distinct styles of narration depending on the choices you make. And it’s all my voice, [...] but in different moods because we wanted it to feel like this is your narrator. [...] I wanted it to be non-judgmental, and the kind of DM¹⁷ who would be perfect around a table no matter what kind of player you are. [...] We had 16 different read styles by the end depending on your choices and your character. [...] You play however you want to play. That’s why it’s so cool we’ve got the versatility in the narrator because not everyone is going to sit around a *D&D* table and get along. You’re not always going to have a DM that you gel with or gets your style of play. So I get to be that no matter what.¹⁸

The impressive number of styles in which the narrative can be presented and the emphasis Tyler places on the player’s freedom can serve as a rein-

¹³ Cf. Jennifer Hammer, “Agency and Authority In Role-Playing “Texts”,” in *A New Literacies Sampler*, eds. Michele Knobel, and Colin Lankshear (New York et al.: Peter Lang, 2007), 67–94.

¹⁴ Cf. Olli Tapio-Leino, “Death Loop as a Feature,” *Game Studies* 12, vol. 2 (December 2012), https://gamestudies.org/1202/articles/death_loop_as_a_feature.

¹⁵ Olli Tapio-Leino, “Death Loop as a Feature.”

¹⁶ It is worth noting that her most famous role from before *Baldur’s Gate III* was Malady, a character from the previous big production of Larian Studios, *Divinity: Original Sin II* (2017) – also a narrated CRPG.

¹⁷ DM is an abbreviation of “Dungeon Master”, the *D&D*’s equivalent of the game master.

¹⁸ Amelia Tyler, “Amelia Tyler On Being A Dungeon Master For Millions In *Baldur’s Gate III*,” interview by Jade King, *The Gamer*, September 5, 2023, <https://www.thegamer.com/baldurs-gate-3-amelia-tyler-narrator-interview/>.

forcement of points made here earlier. It becomes clear that the narrator is not a creation inspired primarily by the conventions of literature or digital games; it is, principally, a digital rendering of an analogue game master. Furthermore, through versatility and a plenitude of acknowledgeable choices the developers wanted to give the player an impression of having a GM tailored to their needs.

There is, however, something more in the interview quoted above that needs to be addressed. This is the way in which Tyler describes her own position within the process of production and within countless gameplay. The actress speaks of herself as both a part of the developing team (she uses “we” when talking about creative solutions) and a perfect GM for each and every player (“I get to be that no matter what”). Throughout the entire interview Tyler accentuates that she is a TRPG player herself and as such, she invites the *Baldur’s Gate III* players to metaphorically sit at her table for a unique experience, personalised to a degree where it feels like a session with an imaginary friend:

[W]e want it to feel like it’s not another person challenging the player, it’s their voice. I’ve been a voice in their heads their entire life, and I know how they think and am totally on board with whatever choices they make. Apart from when they roll ones, in which case I’ll rip the piss out of them mercilessly.

Obviously, there is a lot of jocular exaggeration in these words, but they inevitably raise important questions about the design of narration in CRPGs. It seems that giving the narrator a voice belonging to a real person helps the players to interpret the game within a different frame – not only as a “temporally immersive” adventure in a fictional world, but also as an equally immersive simulation of another ludic form. As a result, *Baldur’s Gate III* can be seen as a fulfillment of a dream of living through a great fantasy-themed escapade as well as a dream of experiencing the perfect TRPG session (that is, one that does not involve any risks of social incompatibility). To this end, Amelia Tyler plays a double role in the game, as she is simultaneously a disembodied omniscient narrator of the story and an alternate version of herself who becomes the player’s GM.

In the context of acting, it is worth noting that TRPG is a genre that relies heavily on theatricality,¹⁹ albeit with a limited spectrum of the means of expression, as players sitting at a table mostly modulate their voices, gesticu-

¹⁹ For example, an interesting interpretation of *D&D* as a ludic genre inspired by tragedy was written by Brian McKenzie, cf. Brian McKenzie, “Murders on the Stage, Tortures, Woundings, and the Like: *Dungeons & Dragons* Adventures as Tragedy,” *Analog Game Studies* 2, vol. 11 (December 2023), <https://analoggamestudies.org/2023/12/murders-on-the-stage-tortures-woundings-and-the-like-dungeons-dragons-adventures-as-tragedy/>.

late with their upper body or change their facial expressions, with only the voice modulation being basically indispensable. Therefore, the decision to voice the narration fully meant introducing to *Baldur's Gate III* one of the key sensual experiences of analogue role-playing and, as a consequence, bringing the CRPG production one step closer to its tabletop counterpart. The fact that the narration is acted (not only written) can be considered meaningful as it links the real-world Amelia Tyler to the narrator – as a GM – just as the real-life player is linked to their PC, which further highlights the game's TRPG roots. I think it interesting that the exposition of voice actors after *Baldur's Gate III* release seems to be a conscious and methodic marketing strategy: Amelia Tyler's interviews and compilations of her outtakes²⁰ are just a modest part of officially available media content related to the game and involving various members of the cast. One of the most popular segments of this content is the footage of the voice actors engaged in actual tabletop sessions of *Dungeons & Dragons* while playing the characters they lend their voice to in the game,²¹ providing the fans with an impression that their digital companions are indeed real TRPG PCs, played – in the dual sense of the verb “to play” – by real people.

One should also take into account the more primary and sensual function of voiced dialogue, since, as Karen Collins observes, sounds in digital games “help to represent and reinforce a sense of location in terms of cultural, physical, social or historical environments,” which becomes particularly important during long gameplays when the “audio plays a crucial role in helping the player [...] to situate him- or herself in such a massive setting, reducing confusion and frustration”.²² This anchor-like function of sound matches described role of the narrator very well, because the player is more likely to identify her as their friendly guide through the fictional world and as a constant part of the otherwise rapidly changing experience. On the other hand, the player is perpetually reminded of the ludic convention on which the game is based and thus is encouraged to broaden their interpretative framework to include the reality outside of the storyworld of *Forgotten Realms*.

²⁰ Cf. Amelia Tyler, “Baldur's Gate III – Narrator outtakes #1,” June 13, 2023, YouTube, 2:19, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0YG0Fd63_70 (and following).

²¹ Cf. High Rollers DnD, “Baldur's Gate 3 Cast play D&D #1 | High Rollers Presents: Shadows of Athkatla,” September 22, 2023, YouTube, 2:46:07, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jeJKnofNBNS> (and following); Dungeons & Dragons, “An Astarion and Karlach Adventure: Love is a Legendary Action | D&D Baldur's Gate,” August 6, 2024, 2:00:45, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cn7XLBykzEU>.

²² Karen Collins, *Game Sound. An Introduction to the History, Theory and Practice of Video Game Music and Sound Design* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2008), 132.

Through associating the narrator with the figure of GM, the player can view their engagement with the game from an external perspective. Just as being addressed as the PC through the narration in the second person promotes a subjective stance in conceptualising the player's engagement, localising the ludic conventions according to which the narration was devised simultaneously inspires an objective view of the "in-game «I»".²³ In other words, at the same time the player can see him- or herself as engaged both in a TRPG simulation and in a fantasy adventure. It needs to be acknowledged that this article should be seen as an invitation to an academic discussion about *Baldur's Gate III* which hopefully will take place soon, as the source material is very complex and ripe for research.²⁴ Perhaps another theoretical lens that could be fruitfully applied to this game is Tomasz Z. Majkowski's concept of game-novels, employing the technique of *heteroglossia* as described by Mikhail Bakhtin.²⁵ According to Majkowski, the game-novel genre's constitutive characteristic is that it tries to picture the world in its complexity and totality through including various perspectives within the same language. Taking a closer look at the narrator of *Baldur's Gate III* could serve as a starting point for an interpretation of the game as a metapoetic (metaludic?) game-novel, exploring themes typical of fantasy worlds and at the same time providing the player with an interesting commentary on ludic conventions, fictionality and conditions of gameplay. Furthermore, if *Baldur's Gate III* can be seen as a departure from literary conventions in favour of the TRPG storytelling mode (especially in the context of previous installments of the series), such an approach could shed some light on the complicated relationship between interactive fiction and traditional literary narrative.

On a more specific note, I found it interesting that even though BioWare's *Baldur's Gate* installments share a lot with the recent production of Larian Studios, these games seem to cater to players with fairly different expectations or at least seem to emphasise different aspects of role-playing. The two earlier titles present themselves primarily as digital platforms facilitating role-playing with friends (in the case of the multiplayer mode), automatising the intricate mechanics or simply allowing for a *D&D* adventure to be played by a single player. *Baldur's Gate III*, on the other hand, focuses on simulating and/or facilitating more than the TRPG's mechanics, as it aims to reproduce

²³ Cf. D. Vella, *The Ludic Subject and the Ludic Self: Analyzing the I-in-the-Gameworld*, 309. See also Vella's interpretation of the narrator from the game *Bastion* (351–355).

²⁴ I would like to thank my fellow game scholars and dear friends, Magdalena Bednorz, Marta Błaszowska-Nawrocka, Magdalena Cielecka, Mateusz Felczak and Justyna Janik, who consulted me on this paper and provided me with many possible paths for further investigation.

²⁵ Cf. Tomasz Z. Majkowski, *Języki gropowieści. Studia o różnojęzyczności gier cyfrowych* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2019).

the feeling of an analogue session. It virtually substitutes other potentially autonomous players – GM included – with their idealised digital counterparts, who are seemingly (but not really, given the limitations of the medium) ready to accept whatever style of play the game’s owner prefers. The developers are aware that for many people playful engagement with artificial beings is a safer (and preferred) alternative to a real sit-down with someone that they might “not gel with”, to put it in Tyler’s terms. This interpretation could probably be supported by further investigation not only into the design of other characters, but also into the game’s interface, which often brings forward some aspects of the TRPG genre that were deliberately hidden from the player’s sight or graphically marginalised in the earlier installments; probably the most evident example of this would be rolling the animated dice during the encounters in *Baldur’s Gate III*. And although there is much more to consider in regard to this comparison, the narrator’s design may possibly prove to be a crucial shift in the future of the CRPG genre.

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Cyfrowy narrator jako mistrz gry. Przypadek *Baldur's Gate III*

Abstrakt: Artykuł stanowi wstępną, rozpoznawczą analizę narratorki w *Baldur's Gate III* jako cyfrowej symulacji analogowej mistrzyni gry (MG). Ze względu na to, że recepcja całej serii *Baldur's Gate* od zawsze była silnie powiązana z jej analogową poprzedniczką, *Dungeon's & Dragons*, istotnym tłem analizy są refleksje teoretyczne dotyczące analogowych gier *role-playing* (TRPG), zwłaszcza w kontekście gier cyfrowych. Analiza odnosi się nie tylko do wypowiedzi zawartych w samej grze, ale także do komentarzy Amelii Tyler – aktorki, która użyła swego głosu narratorce. Autor zauważa, że choć wszystkie części serii starały się odtworzyć pewne doświadczenia charakterystyczne dla sesji TRPG, główną różnicą pomiędzy *Baldur's Gate III* a jej poprzedniczkami jest to, że występuje w niej złożona, udźwiękowiona narracja, stworzona na wzór wypowiedzi prawdziwych MG.

Słowa kluczowe: gry *role-playing*, *Baldur's Gate*, narrator.

Der digitale Erzähler als Spielleiter. Der Fall von *Baldur's Gate III*

Abstract: Der Beitrag ist eine erste, explorative Analyse der Erzählerin in *Baldur's Gate III* als digitale Simulation des analogen Spielleiters (MG). Da die Rezeption der *Baldur's Gate*-Reihe insgesamt immer stark mit dem analogen Vorgänger *Dungeon's & Dragons* verbunden war, bilden theoretische Überlegungen zu analogen Rollenspielen (TRPGs), insbesondere im Kontext digitaler Spiele, einen wichtigen Hintergrund für die Analyse. Die Diskussion bezieht sich nicht nur auf die Aussagen im Spiel selbst, sondern auch auf die Kommentare von Amelia Tyler, der Schauspielerin, die dem Erzähler ihre Stimme lieh. Der Autor stellt fest, dass zwar alle Teile der Serie versucht haben, einige der für eine TRPG-Sitzung charakteristischen Erfahrungen nachzubilden, der Hauptunterschied zwischen *Baldur's Gate III* und seinen Vorgängern jedoch darin besteht, dass es eine komplexe, audio-visualisierte Erzählung bietet, die die Sprache echter MGs nachahmt.

Schlüsselwörter: Rollenspiele, *Baldur's Gate*, Erzähler.