Follow the Purple Bunny: A Brief Analysis of Five Nights at Freddy's Narrative

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to briefly examine narratives of the indie horror game franchise: *Five Nights at Freddy's*, created by indie-game developer Scott Cawthon. Despite the franchise's creative gameplay mechanism, what truly captivates its huge fan base is its cryptic story and how creatively these clues are presented to players. I will especially focus on how the story and setting of the latest release on the franchise, *Five Nights at Freddy's: Security Breach*, has been revealed to fans even before its release by examining secret conversations its VR collection of the previous 5 PC entries titled *Five Nights at Freddy's: Help Wanted* (including *The Curse of Dreabbear* DLC). This paper will also provide a thorough analysis on how the two future villains of the franchise, Glitchtrap and Vanny, are introduced to players through the game in such unconventional means, such as through hidden dialogues in the source code of Scott Cawthon's website, and fans' favorite: 8-bit mini-game fused with symbolic lore.

Keywords: Five Nights at Freddy's*, video game narrative, video game study, horror game*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Five Nights at Freddy's franchise (abbreviated as FNAF) is created by Scott Cawthon, an American indie-horror game developer. The first entry, titled *Five Nights at Freddy's*, was released on July 24th, 2014 [1]. It was an instant success and was praised for his creativity on the horror video game genre. Unlike other horror games, *Five Nights at Freddy's* gives little player autonomy. In other words, players are not allowed to roam the Pizzeria freely. Instead, they play as a security guard working during the night shift at Freddy Fazbear's Pizzeria. All they can do is sitting in the security office, checking camera footages, and closing the two doors of the office when animatronics approach to them him. Despite its creative gameplay mechanism, what truly captivates its huge fan base is its cryptic story and its elusive clues that are scattered through all sources of the franchise. This paper will examine how the franchise's universe and meta-universe is built through sprinkling so many hidden clues across the media yet still a coherent and open-ended story. I will especially focus on how the story and setting of the latest release on the franchise, *Five Nights at Freddy's: Security Breach*, has been revealed to fans even before its release by examining secret conversation

on its VR collection of the previous 5 PC entries titled *Five Nights at Freddy's: Help Wanted*.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

On the topic of video game narrative and writing, I primarily referred to Moriconi's thesis, *Nice, But Not Necessary: An Examination of Narrative in Horror Games*. Her research focuses on an approach that analyzes narrative and gameplay equally, termed "ludonarrative." (Ludology is the subject of studying video games and ludonarrative refers to the study of narrative in video games) and examines the function of narrative in videogames, particularly those in the horror genre. She profusely discusses and explores ways in which the player creates and interacts with narrative through choice, consequence, and rewards, while observing the way in which the developers create the narrative in a way that allows it to be manipulated by the players.

Kocurek's paper reviews Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay, "The Storyteller" [2]. She claims that Benjamin defines storytelling as a mode of communication that is defined in part by its ability to offer listeners "counsel", or meaningful wisdom or advice. This article considers the earmarks of storytelling as defined by Benjamin and

by contemporary writer Larry McMurtry and argues this type of narrative experience can be offered via interactive media and, in particular, video games. Kocurek's paper is very helpful for my paper because she proposes and advocates for a set of key characteristics of video game storytelling. Some of these are crucial to FNAF's narrative, such as avoiding over explanation of the stories told or their lessons and carefully and effectively using multimedia.

Haahr's book, *Playing with Vision: Sight and Seeing as Narrative and Game Mechanics in Survival Horror* provides a thorough analysis on how visuals affect the narratives of horror games. He argues that a considerable number of survival horror titles use the modification of sight and seeing, in particular the disruption and enhancement of the same, as important elements in relation to story and game mechanics. Examples of such modification range from simple obscuration of the game world by mist and darkness to highly sophisticated approaches that direct break the fourth wall with visual effects that belong not to the game world but to the player's reality. The latter is highly relevant to the FNAF franchise as I will elaborate later in this paper.

Suckling's book, *Video Game Writing: From Macro to Micro*, gives a thorough discussion on history of games writing, narrative design, storytelling, plot, contracts, and packed with practical samples, case studies, and exercises. Last but not the least, Suckling's work Goetz's paper, *Trellis and Vine: Weaving Function and Fiction in Videogame Play*, applies the analogy "trellis and vine" to elaborate the notion of video gameplay as simultaneously "rule-bound" and "make-believe." Both works do not examine any game from the FNAF franchise but it is good source for general knowledge on video games' narratives.

3. FROM HELP WANTED TO SECURITY BREACH

3.1. 16 Cassette Tapes, Five Nights at Freddy's: Help Wanted

On May 28th, 2019 Scott Cawthon partnered with an indie-game studio named Steel Wool to release a VR game titled *Five Nights at Freddy's: Help Wanted* [3]. It is a pivotal moment of the franchise since *Help Wanted* is not a simple collection of previous entries of the FNAF franchise, but a way for the franchise creator Scott Cawthon to set up for future story, to a metafiction level. The setting of *Help Wanted* is completely different than any previous entries of the FNAF franchise, for it acknowledges the previous entries as games rather than self-enclosed stories. By self-enclosed stories, I mean the previous games only interact with characters within their universe (the world they are inhabiting)- they are not aware that they are in fact characters in a video game.

Hence, previous FNAF games do not break the fourth wall, but *Help Wanted* does. When starting the game, a cutscene narrates that due to several casualty and death that had taken place over various pizzerias owned by Fazbear Entertainment (which pretty much summarizes events occurred in previous FNAF games) the company has become unpopular. The narrator further comments that "to make matters worse, an indie-game developer had created a horror game series based on these incidents, which had already become urban legends in the game universe, to further damage Fazbear Entertainment's reputation." This introductory cutscene of *Help Wanted* is already fourth wall breaking: when mentioning the indie-game developer, a photo of the franchise's creator, Scott Cawthon, is shown on screen, indicating that the franchise creator has inserted himself into the game. This is an unusual way of fourth wall breaking. Normally, content creators let their characters address the audience directly. For example, in the video game *Doki Doki Literature Club*. In it, the fourth wall breaking is achieved through Monika, one of the characters in game. Monika is aware that she is in a video game and addresses the player directly to delete other characters' game files in order to progress the story [4]. Even though *Doki Doki Literature Club* is a fourth wall breaking game, its developer, Team Salvato, distance themselves from the game they are creating, making their work a separate universe (involving the in-game universe which is able to interact directly with its player) than the "real world" they are currently living.

Furthermore, breaking the fourth wall is a fantastic way of expanding FNAF's story. William Afton, the main antagonist of the franchise, is killed at the end of *Freddy Fazbear's Pizzeria Simulator* (the last entry of FNAF games in chronological order). Normally in a video game franchise, when a villain is killed, the game developer will create a new, more evil and powerful villain to keep its story going. For instance, in the popular MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, when The Burning Legion (the main villain of the series) has been defeated by players, Blizzard Entertainment (developer of *World of Warcraft*) introduced The Old Gods to fill up its role, rinse and repeat in further expansions (like chapters for the game) till the point that the story becomes repetitive to players. Scott Cawthon does a way better job than Blizzard Entertainment for expanding the franchise's story. True, the story arc in the game universe is finished, but it this is not the case if the game universe is incorporated with players and the "real world." It opens up more potentials that can include characters, like players, who are actively engaging FNAF games as video games. Help Wanted is exactly doing it since players assume the identity of a beta tester for *Freddy Fazbear Virtual Experience*, a video game developed by Fazbear Entertainment to amend its damaged reputation.

Help Wanted also has a unique way of introducing its new antagonist Glitchtrap to its players. Often times the main antagonist is introduced in boss battles, and by defeating the boss battle players finish it. If players apply this "common logic" in *Help Wanted*, they will be disappointed that all mini-games (like levels in mainstream video games) feature no boss battle. So where is the big baddie of *Help Wanted*? Player can only encounter Glitchtrap if they collect the 16 cassette tapes littered around the game. All tapes are narrated by a female character, referred to as Tape Girl by fans. She claims to be a beta tester for *Freddy Fazbear Virtual Experience*, and stumbles upon a malicious virus. She tracks the source of this virus: uploaded to *Freddy Fazbear Virtual Experience* from a circuit board of an old animatronic, and describes the manifestation of this virus in *Freddy Fazbear Virtual Experience* as a creepy humanoid in a yellow bunny costume. The humanoid monster is ultimately revealed to be Glitchtrap, the digital ghost of William Afton, who is attempting to escape from *Freddy Fazbear Virtual Experience* by body swapping with the player.

Normally in video games, after encountering the antagonist, players will engage in a boss battle with him. Depending how players defeat the boss and various interactions throughout the game, players can achieve several endings. "Good" actions such as helping various character, sparing the antagonist will commonly lead to a "good ending" (summarized as the world is saved and everybody lives happily ever after); "bad" actions, like ignoring a crying child, will typically lead to a "bad ending" (the world lies in ruin and everybody lives a miserable life). In some games, completing certain challenges such as finishing all side quests will lead to a "secret ending," sometimes referred as the "true ending." Only the "true ending" is considered canon, meaning this is the ending the developers hope players would achieve. *Help Wanted* breaks this convention by making its three endings all "bad endings": no matter what players do, they will always end up being attacked by Glitchtrap, imprisoned, and forced to watch helplessly as Glitchtrap dancing gleefully and escaping to the "real world" (players cannot defend themselves because it occurs in a cutscene). No matter what the player does, he inadvertently unleashes Glitchtrap. Essentially, *Help Wanted* falls to the category of "False or Forced Choice" genre of games. According to Moriconi, a "False or Forced Choice" is:

less a game type, and more of a game tool. The player is presented with a choice, only for the outcome of that choice to be the same either way. Evans claims this tool is "usually ineffective" but can work well with plots that can justify the removing player agency. In rare circumstances, false choices might work, but generally they should be avoided altogether. In *Life is Strange*, players were outraged by the ending, which essentially took every choice the player made in the game and made it meaningless (Moriconi 33). [5]

In the case of *Help wanted*, Scott Cawthon does a superb job at justifying this pessimistic ending. It does not come without warnings, if players have listened to all 16 cassette tapes. Tape Girl has already warned players that Glitchtrap has attached himself to the tapes and she is unable to destroy neither him nor the tapes, so she divides the tape into 16 and disperses them throughout the game, as seen in Tape #15: "Hide all traces of these logs [cassette tapes] I've created. I fear that finding them and reassembling them will also reassemble the very thing I've tried so desperately to destroy." This line is puzzling. If Tape Girl is really trying to stop players from collecting all 16 tapes, she should give the warning at the very first tape, not the second last one. Our suspicion is further supported by the fact that in Tape #16, she contradicts herself by claiming that Glitchtrap can be destroyed and players have to collect all in order to do so. Why does Tape Girl suddenly switch her attitude and even encourage the player to collect all 16 tapes? YouTuber MatPat notices that:

Upon closer inspection, you start noticing some strange anomalies. For instance, we have two tapes [Tape #1 and Tape #15] that both start with her [Tape Girl] introducing who she is. A "Hi" or "Hello" followed by "You don't know me" or "Can you hear me?", which is our first hint that things are a bit off. The same person is making these tapes the whole time for the same audience… Why would one [of the cassette tapes] end with her saying "Now I fear that those logs are being used as a Trojan horse. If you're unable to abandon development [of *Freddy Fazbear Virtual Experience*], hide all traces of these logs that I've created." Basically telling us to hide the logs, but then also say this: "There are more. They may not be in order." Basically inviting us to put them all together (Game Theory: FNAF, You Were Meat To Lose (*FNAF VR Help Wanted*), 00:16:58-00:18:28). [6]

It all points to one conclusion: she is making the cassette tapes under the influence of Glitchtrap and is trying to do the same to the player for one purpose: release Glitchtrap to the real world. The story arc of Tape Girl is a bit disappointing. Her purpose is solely restricted to introduce Glitchtrap. Players never meet Tape Girl in *Help Wanted*, nor do they know what fate waits for her since she is clearly brainwashed by Glitchtrap when making the 16 cassette tapes. Even though Scott Cawthon applies a complicated and intriguing way to introduce players to Glitchtrap, his treatment of Tape Girl needs more refinement. Fortunately, in an update of Help Wanted I am going to discuss later in this essay, Tape Girl is scrapped by Scott Cawthon and replaced with another set of more elaborately crafted clues to introduce Vanny, a reluctant follower of Glitchtrap and the main antagonist

for the next main installment of FNAF franchise: *Security Breach*.

3.2. "Stay the course." "I will."

On October 2019, Scott Cawthon partnered with the indie-game developer Steel Wool Studio to release a DLC for *Help Wanted*, titled *The Curse of Dreadbear*, and further pushes the narrative by introducing a villain for the future game *Five Nights at Freddy's: Security Breach*: Vanny. People would assume that Glitchtrap will be the main antagonist for *Security Breach*, since they have already released him to the real world. Unfortunately, the FNAF franchise is nothing but filled with cryptic narratives. In this section, I will illustrate how a normal player should do to unlock all the hidden clues and how we can interpret each step in this intricately crafted narrative.

The Curse of Dreadbear DLC introduces a new and difficult mini-game: The Corn Maze. In it, players have to search for 4 keys in the titular corn maze while Foxy (an animatronic from the initial *Five Nights at Freddy's*) is constantly chasing after them. If players manage to survive and find all four keys, a fifth key will spawn in the maze. Unlike the previous four keys, this one is purple and appears to be glitching out of the game. It is a clear indication of Glitchtrap, the first clue to players that they are on the right track. The fifth key unlocks a cellar. In it, there is a bloody white bunny mask. If players put on the mask while holding the Glitchtrap plushie (obtained after completing the main game), they will hear the following lines spoken by a female character: "Yes, I hear you. I know. No. There is no miscommunication. I understand. Yes, I have it. I made it myself. I think you would like it. No. no one suspects anything. Don't worry. I'll be ready, and I won't let you down. It will be fun." The way this one-way conversation is revealed is unique and combines game mechanics and narrative perfectly. Normally in VR games, the only way for players to acquire information is through interacting with literally everything in the game. By wearing the white bunny mask, players assume the identity of the one who had made it. The plushie of Glitchtrap represents Glitchtrap himself, and players holding it signify they are having a conversation with him. It is more like a theatrical recreation of what has happened (players have to theorize and infer what they have just witnessed) than just a simple information dump. To figure out what is happening in this hidden conversation, players have to seek out information on their own rather than passively sitting back and accepting information presented by developers, which is how video games provide information to players normally. For example, in *BioShock,* audio logs containing background story are scattered throughout the map in game. To find out how Rapture (the city where *BioShock* took place), all players have to do is finding all audio logs (placed in obvious and convenient locations); then, they can sit back

and listen to the logs [7]. They do not even have to piece together various information because all logs are in chronological order. This kind of information is not related to any events happened in game (the main story of *BioShock*, namely the story of the protagonist Jack), nor does it contain any clue for future game of the BioShock series. It is just laid here by developers as an extra treat. This information dump is redundant since it does not help players to understand what is going in game. Instead, *Help Wanted* applies a more complicated way of presenting clues that require players to decipher and theorize.

Unfortunately, players can only hear one side of the conversation, and conclude that this female character is a follower of Glitchtrap. No further clue about her is provided in the new DLC. This does not mean Scott Cawthon is purposefully withholding information. On the contrary, fans found out that on scottvoices.com (where Scott Cawthon hires voice actors for his games), there is an unnamed character simply referred as Reluctant Follower. YouTuber MatPat discovers that there are similar conversations hidden in the source code of scottgames.com (Scott Cawthon's webpage to pose any update or teaser of his games): expect here [on scottgames.com], we actually hear both sides of the conversation: 'Stay the course.' 'I will.' 'Focus on my voice.' 'I will.' 'Don't let anyone lead you astray.' 'I won't.' 'Have you selected one?' 'I have'" (Game Theory: FNAF, The Cult of Glitchtrap (*FNAF VR Curse of Dreadbear* DLC), 00:15:12-00:15:46) [8]. Moreover, further information is revealed in a teaser image release in December 2019 on scottgames.com, depicting a shadow figure in a bunny costume holding a knife. The image has the title "Shadow of Vanny" in the source code of the website, confirming the name of the Reluctant Follower to be "Vanny." [9] All these information clearly indicate Vanny will be *Security Breach*'s main antagonist instead of Glitchtrap. Scott Cawthon develops a remarkable way of storytelling: instead of simply revealing the identity of this Reluctant Follower in *Help Wanted*, he hides her name in source codes of his own website and leads fans to uncover it themselves. As I will discuss in the next section, one of FNAF's trademarks is that almost all of its narrative comes from elaborately crafted clues.

3.3. The Princess' Quest, Vanny's Origin Story

In *Curse of Dreadbear* DLC, players are introduced to future antagonist, Vanny. The clue does not stop from here. As every good storywriter does, Scott Cawthon creates an origin story for Vanny. True to the FNAF franchise, it is told through another set of complicated clues, as YouTuber MatPat comments:

"She [Vanny] is teased twice in the trailer [released September 17, 2020 on YouTube channel PlayStation, titled *Five Nights at Freddy's: Security Breach* Teaser

Trailer]. Once via a bunny shaped shadow in the opening sequence [of the teaser trailer] and as the final jumpscare. Now we suspect for a while she is coming, via teaser images on Scott's website, merch leaks, Easter eggs throughout FNAF VR [*Help Wanted*] … Because even though this game hasn't come out yet… we do already know a ton about this new character [Vanny]. In fact, true to Scott's style of storytelling, we probably won't get much of a backstory for Vanny in this new game [*Five Nights at Freddy's: Security Breach*]. I don't know if you have noticed this of Scott's games, but important story bits tend to happen *around* the games rather than in the games" (Game Theory: *FNAF Security Breach*, I Know the BIG TWIST… I think, 00:06:43-00:07:33) [10]

In this case, Vanny's origin story is not hidden in source codes or teaser images. Rather, it is indicated in the new minigame released in Help *Wanted* mobile edition on October 26, 2020, titled Princess' Quest. In order to adapt to mobile gaming platform, *Help Wanted* mobile edition removes a lot of mini-games form the original VR version. Most importantly, it scraps the cassette collecting mechanism, the very narrative that introduces Glitchtrap to players for the first time as discussed previously. By tapping on the screen randomly and for some time, a mini-game icon appears and brings players to Princess' Quest, as MatPat comments as: "an 8-bit minigame with rudimentary gameplay steeped in symbolic lore" (Game Theory: *FNAF Security Breach*, I Know the BIG TWIST… I think, 00:10:03-00:10:05). In it, players assume the identity of the titular Princess, wandering through a hallway and lighting torches with her lamp, while avoiding glitching bunny monsters. Note that these bunny monsters may not be representing Glitchtrap since they are depicted as black and green, not in purple (the color associated with Glitchtrap). Coincidentally, there are 16 torches in Princess' Quest, corresponding with the 16 cassette tapes in *Help Wanted* VR version. After lighting up the final torch, players are greeted with a twisted purple bunny (clearly representing Glitchtrap). The screen then fades into black and a line of glitchy text appears. MatPat discovers that:

some patterns aren't random, some shapes actually repeat themselves… it's [the glitchy text] actually a letter substitution code [a kind of substitution cipher] that spells out everyone's favorite phrase of from the game: "I always come back." And take it all one step further, we can extract the audio from this moment [where the glitchy text appears] … and do some audio trickery, by doubling the speed and then reversing it, we get this: "I always come back. Let me out" (Game Theory: *FNAF Security Breach*, I Know the BIG TWIST… I Think, 00:11:20-00:12:34).

Obviously, the Princess represents Vanny, and her action of lighting 16 torches recreates her process of discovering Glitchtrap. Unlike the cassette tapes made by Tape Girl, Vanny's Princess' Quest is more

straightforward and consistent: it removes Tape Girl's controversial statement of warning players the dire consequence of collecting all tapes (releasing Glitchtrap) while encouraging them to do so and replaces it with a clear, less confusing representation, which has done a better job of narration.

4. CONCLUSION

The narrative of FNAF franchise is truly outstanding among all indie-horror games. It has elaborately crafted clues sprinkled all over its games that require players to challenge themselves to gain access to them and decipher to come up with their own interpretation. Since some clues are too cryptic for only one player to decipher, fans from all over the world have set up a fandom to discuss FNAF's cryptic lore. My paper only briefly examines, in a retrospective perspective, how each clue is presented to players, where fans have found these clues (in various FNAF games and website), and what these clues tell us about the narrative and the overall lore. The part covered in this paper is nothing but a tip of an iceberg among the whole FNAF meta-universe. I haven't even started to discuss how details in *Fazbear Frights*, a book series consisted of short horror stories that take place in a parallel universe to FNAF game universe, provide possible explanations for FNAF games that had been puzzling fans for years. There is still some issues left unexamined or analyzed in this fantastic franchise, and I encourage everyone to discover this hidden gem of indie horror games.

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