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Kaunisnaama and Me

Affective-Interpretive Agency and Niche Construction in *NHL 20* "Be a Pro" Mode

The article presents an account of discrepancies between the designed sports-game narrative and emergent narrative elements in the hockey game *NHL 20* and its "Be a Pro" game mode, in which players create their own avatars with which to play the game. At the same time, character-creation decisions and the game design can severely disrupt the narrative of winning that the game privileges. These disruptions lead to frustrating player experience, but also to a more realist sport narrative of overcoming adversity than the game intends. With the example of my own avatar, Edwar Kaunisnaama, I show how the game becomes a particular affective niche that emerges when the straightforward narrative of winning fails and player-led narrativization of game events is employed. From failure emerges a surprisingly faithful and even fulfilling representation of athletic struggle, stemming from the player's affective-interpretive action rather than game design.

1. Introduction[*]

The archetypal narrative structure of sports is the quest of winning. As spectators we are glued to our TV-receivers, jump up from benches at the arena, and don our team colors in anticipation of our favored athletes persevering over others. The complex affective dimensions arising from this basic structure of sports and its spectatorship lend their power also to videogame narratives of sports. Playing video games that are about real sports, we again gravitate toward our favorite teams and athletes but get to add in our own agency as players of games – even if we lack the actual skills in the sports that the games represent. But how to make sense of cases where playing a video game creates affects related to frustration, anger, perseverance, and overcoming of adversity in a similar fashion to spectating of actual sport? My playing of and failing at *NHL 20* "Be a Pro" mode offers a possibility to analyze such vicarious – and even unintended – affectivity that video games afford, drawing attention to the nuanced role of the player as co-constituting their narratives.

Admittedly, analyzing my own idiosyncratic gaming experience is unconventional, but I believe it serves to illuminate the myriad of factors that have an effect on our reception of multimodal representative art. The experience of failing at *NHL 20* and my making narrative and affective sense of it could not have been premeditated, or formulated into a research setup beforehand, as it was only after the accumulation of emergent events that it was possible for me to

recognize their significance for analysis. For the purposes of this article, the subjectivity of the experience is thus the point, as the case is made for complex interaction between game and player to establish an affective niche that can accommodate the triumphs and shortcomings of them both.

The sports video game is a venerable institution in the history of video games. From the oscilloscope-based *Tennis for Two* (1958) to *Track and Field* (1983) and the top-selling Madden NFL franchise (1988–), simulating athletic performance and sport has been a staple in the history of the medium from its inception and popularization. A prominent strand in this history remains the oeuvre of EA Sports, the game studio responsible for officially licensed video games based on NBA basketball, NFL football, FIFA football, and, to lesser global attention, NHL, the National Hockey League, operating in the United States and Canada. In this article, I explore playing the NHL series, particularly *NHL 20* (EA Sports 2019) and its "Be a Pro" game mode, to analyze the tension between the verisimilitude such games aspire to, their limited means of narrative representation, and emergent, unintended affective effects arising from player expectation and 'failures' of the game's sports narrative. I argue for recognizing a dimension of affective-interpretative agency of players as they narrativize emergent game events that, at the face of them, are not narratively constituted by the game design and even intervene with meaningful engagement. Such agency, I aim to show, plays a central role in how particular affective niches are constructed as we play video games.

The case example of my own avatar shows how even a rudimentary sports narrative conjures up multiple interpretive possibilities and expectations that can run counter to the game-engine's programming that emphasizes a narrative structure of heroic winning. The game design forecloses player choice and agency in fashioning and interpreting their avatar. Paradoxically at the same time, "Be a Pro" is shown to give rise to an emergent verisimilar sports narrative that it does not intend. With an approach combining game studies concepts and the tools of cognitive literary studies and affect theory, the article contributes to the analysis of instances "where games let their players down due to tensions between gameplay and narrative constituents" as Christian Roth, Tom van Neuen, and Hartmut Koenitz (2018, 94) have it in their work on "ludonarrative hermeneutics" (99). Further, it generates insight into the nature of affordances for player agency and interpretation as they are seen to include and generate player experience in ways that are unintended by the game design and even unexpected by the players. The narrativization by the player of the discrepancies between game design and emergent narrative is analyzed in terms of affective niches, following Giovanna Colombetti and Joel Krueger (2015). Through their theory, the tensions between designed and emergent narrative elements, player choice and ludonarrative failure, as well as conflicting affects of disappointment and eventual fulfillment can be accounted for. The article shows how even the rudimentary narrative structures of games like *NHL 20* point to the significance of player interpretation and narrativization in a complex cognitive-affective dynamic.

I begin by introducing the *NHL* franchise of video games, the "Be a Pro" game mode, and my own avatar Edwar Kaunisnaama as the subject of this case study. I then move on to draw from theories of digital agency and affective scaffolding to analyze the tension between the game's implied narrative of winning and player choice in avatar creation, and the surprising, unintended affectivity that failing to fulfill the game objectives engenders.

NHL 20 is the 29th installment in the EA Sports franchise of ice hockey video games, including official team rosters reflective of the start of the 2019–2020 NHL season. Its regional, rather than global, popularity is reflected not only by the fact that it was developed by EA Vancouver in Canada, but also by the inclusion of alternate game disk cover pictures for the Swedish and Finnish markets, featuring their own star players instead of Auston Matthews playing for the Toronto Maple Leafs. As in any other sports video game, the standard, barebones narrative structure in *NHL 20* is the quest of winning. Whatever the game mode – whether focused on an NHL team, a national team, or the work of the general manager of a team – the game privileges and rewards a style of playing where adversaries are defeated on the ice and the player of the video game is the one responsible for the achievement, usually scoring the majority of the points for their selected team after they have sufficiently mastered the game mechanics.[1]

The "Be a Pro" game mode has been a staple feature of the series since *NHL 09* (EA Sports 2008), allowing players to create and develop their own hockey player avatars on whom the game then focuses, instead of switching from character to character in the team-based game modes. The mode simulates the journey of a young NHL rookie, finishing their career in the minor leagues and getting drafted by an NHL team. As a result, the player of the video game is unable to choose the team their avatar plays for, but can instead decide the avatar's name, height, weight, appearance, playing position, and nationality. From there, the success of the player determines how much time on ice their avatar receives and whether they play in the top lines of their team. Depending somewhat on the difficulty level set for the game and individual player skill, the player will, through repetitions of individual matches, gain the necessary competences to beat computer-controlled opponents fairly reliably.[2] The player's role in the standard quest of winning is further emphasized in the mode, as the game stops alternating between different hockey players of a team, depending on who has the puck, as it does in other modes. The player maneuvers their avatar also without the puck and even sits on the bench, waiting for their turn on ice. The avatar becomes positioned as the star of the team and the road to victory is dependent on their success in winning against computer-controlled opponents. In a sense, this is a structural feature of sports video games, where the player must be granted a better chance of making a difference than all the computer controlled characters around him so as to strike a balance between fulfillment and failure and cater to generic expectation.

I, for one, relished the opportunity to create my own avatar for the game. Despite the limited choices and even more rudimentary roleplaying opportunities of the mode, "Be a Pro" still afforded me the possibility of coming up with

an avatar that reflected my particular preferences and whose actions on ice I could interpret to be in harmony with my image of the avatar. Narrativizing my choices, I could add a layer of affective meaning to the otherwise limited narrative possibilities that the core of the game mechanics presents. I wanted to play an offensive defender, one skilled with the puck but not afraid to engage in the physical aspects of play. Behold, then, Edwar Kaunisnaama, a Finnish native, 24 years of age, and somewhat diminutive in size for a hockey player: only 5'7" tall and weighing the minimum the game allows at 199 lbs. Edwar's appearance on ice is somewhat quirky, as he rocks an iconic 1980s JOFA brand helmet (made in Sweden, long since surpassed by much safer helmets), a macho-man moustache, and a curly mullet worthy of envy. From these aesthetic choices the game allowed me to make, I arrived at a clear headcanon, to borrow the fan term for an interpretation that is not prompted, nor disputed, by a text (just think of all the queer readings of canonical characters like Holmes and Watson, Kirk and Spock): Edwar sees himself as the next Reijo Ruotsalainen, a star defender of the Edmonton Oilers in the 1980s, only 5'8" and 165 lbs., but always compensating his lack of size with his skating ability. With such a self-image, I thought, Edwar has a retro-sensibility, reflected by his appearance and equipment, and an aggressive, never-give-in attitude to playing the game of hockey. Little did I know, that the choices made at character creation would launch me on a path of Sisyphean adversity as Edwar set out to strive for the Stanley Cup, often dubbed the hardest trophy to win in sports (see, e.g., Bensch 2018). But before we get into the sports narrative emerging in *NHL 20* "Be a Pro" and its surprising affective dimensions, it is necessary to get equipped with a conceptualization of agency and the concept of emergent narrative in video games.

2. Digital Agency and Emergent Narrative

In the context of video games and their study, narrative can mean many things. Here, I take my cue from Marie-Laure Ryan's (2006, 201) classic study as she enumerates "the various roles and manifestations of narrative in computer games" as follows:

- the narrative script that is designed into the game
- the narrative that players write though their actions, actualizing a particular sequence of events within the range of possibilities offered by the built-in script
- the narrative that lures players into the game (cut scenes and background information that introduce the game; text on the box)
- the narrative that rewards the player (cut scenes that follow the successful completion of a mission)
- the microstories told by nonplaying characters
- (for games with recording devices): the narratives that players make out of the materials provided by the game (Ryan 2006, 201)

For the purposes here, the first two types appear most pertinent, especially as *NHL 20* engages both types of narratives, but does so in minimal ways. Its narrative script is the rudimentary quest of winning, suggested mostly by its designation as a sports video game and, in the "Be a Pro" mode, emphasized with a few text boxes that indicate the mode as the 'story' of the player avatar's hockey career. In this sense, the "narrative that players write through their actions" is not dependent on a "built-in script" in the sense that the script would be available as a particular narrative that can be accessed within the game. Instead, the script of the game mode depends more on the events of the hockey matches and the elements of the gameplay design as they accumulate through play. Curiously, Ryan's last point about "narratives that players make out of the materials provided by the game" applies here, even if she appears to refer to games where game events can be fashioned into narrative videos or other collages retroactively. For the "Be a Pro" mode, as we shall see with the case study below, potential "materials" for such a construction of a narrative include all the game events that occur to a player avatar and that hold the potential for interpretation in narrative terms, even when the game does not give them such an interpretation. What happens, I argue, is that players narrativize such emergent events by assigning to them chains of causality and narrative meaning with respect to their avatar, projecting a narrative even when no narrative is scripted into the game beyond the implied quest-of-winning structure. This comes across as a form of agency that I call *affective-interpretive*, connoting the meaningfulness of player narrativization for the complex relationship between affects, sense-making, gameplay, and playerly context that contributes to the construction of affective niches with video games.

The affective-interpretive aspect adds to other varieties of player agency recognized in game studies by Bettina Bodi and Jan-Noël Thon. Bodi and Thon (2020, 159) note "the complexity of how videogames afford 'meaningful' action" and propose four dimensions to account for agency in video games in a way that does not unduly privilege "*narratively*" conceptualized agency (italics in the original). Significantly, they recognize the dual role of promoting and constraining agency that game design can afford for players. It is useful to consider how Bodi and Thon's conceptualization of "spatial-explorative," "temporal-ergodic," "configurative-constructive," and "narrative-dramatic" agencies map onto our example of the "Be a Pro" mode in *NHL 20*.

The most significant space in *NHL 20* is the virtual 3D-model of the hockey rink. It is the arena for the matches that simulate the sport where the player controls virtual hockey player characters either one at a time or focuses on the avatar of their own design. It is the single most important virtual environment for the "spatial-explorative agency" of players (Bodi / Thon 2020, 166), the aspects of agency that determines "the player's ability to navigate and traverse the game spaces via their avatar" (159). While various menus and textual prompts also figure into playing *NHL 20*, their role is secondary to the events of the individual hockey matches. With meticulously designed physics, the rink allows a myriad of game events to occur, especially in relation to the movements of the

puck and the hockey player characters. The puck slides and bounces on the ice and character movement is modeled after ice-skating; there are body checks and stick checks, all of which the player can initiate and avoid within the confinement of the rink. This way, the rink as a game space is ludic, it includes "the gameplay-related affordances and constraints" (160) of the game. While it affords the simulation of multiple aspects of the game of hockey, it makes omissions as well. For example, the benches, rafters, and penalty boxes remain outside player agency as do implied locker rooms and corridors. At the same time, the rink is also a "representational space" (160): The individual rinks in different cities around North America are represented faithfully in terms of what they look like, with details such as team banners and mascots, so that they are linked to the "explorative agency" of the player, to their power to discover the "storyworld" of the game (161). *NHL 20*, however, does not afford more opportunities for exploration or discovery; Madison Square Garden in New York feels and acts the same to play in as the SAP Center in San José, California.

Non-representational game spaces figure into the few roleplaying elements of "Be a Pro." Namely, training and other off-ice events of the mode occur in a monotonous interface of textual menus and dialog options. It is in these that the player can develop the skills of their avatar, see how other teams and players are faring, receive (but not meaningfully respond to) comments from their coach and manager, and learn of injuries to themselves and their teammates. There are also options to simulate individual matches, thus relinquishing player agency in their outcome.

The opportunity to simulate match results also represents a variety of "temporal-ergodic agency" (Bodi / Thon 2020, 166) in the mode, that is, agency in terms of "interacting with the videogame as a temporal system" (159–160). Temporal-ergodic agency has to do with possibilities of action in relation to how game-spaces and storyworlds manage time as well as the manipulation of that time by players through acts like fast forwarding, rewinding, or stopping it. While much of the game of ice hockey is tied to rule-based temporalities – such as the 60 minutes of regulation time in every match, two minutes for every powerplay, the clock stopping at every whistle, and the season calendar as a timeframe in which teams need enough wins to qualify for the playoffs – player agency in "Be a Pro" to influence the temporal dimension mostly has to do with skipping or speeding up game time so as to fast forward to more meaningful game events. For example, when their avatar is benched, players can either sit on the bench, observing the computer-controlled characters play (poorly), or simulate time passing to the next moment in which the avatar gets their turn on the ice again. Suffice to say, the observation holds little meaningful interest, making the choice to simulate meaningless as well – fast-forwarding in this way is merely a mechanical step in getting to play with one's avatar. Similarly, the player can set the speed of the in-game clock, so that matches do not take a full 60 minutes plus breaks to complete – the simulation's sophistication actually suffers from playing full time, as game events both become repetitive and lose some of their verisimilitude as, for example, the amount of goals per match reaches unrealistic levels.

The freedom of playing in real time does not, in fact, give rise to meaningful events and the faster clock-times create a better sense of urgency one associates with sports in general.

Choices in "Be a Pro" are limited as well on the level of "configurative-constructive agency" (Bodi / Thon 2020, 166), i.e. the player's agency when fashioning their avatar or changing the game spaces. Game spaces cannot be meaningfully altered to cater to player preference as the sports simulation genre warrants a stability that enables consistent physics modeling and similar features. With player avatars, as indicated above, choices are either related to aesthetics, physical attributes, skills, and playing position. While some things cannot be changed after an avatar is created – they stay the same size, play the same position, and shoot the puck from the same side throughout – a rudimentary experience point system allows the development of their various skills like skating, shooting ability, durability, and endurance. Skills start out at fairly low levels, but reliably go up through playing the game, representing the development of the avatar character. Still, "Be a Pro" is the one mode where avatars can be created in the first place and so one could argue that configurative-constructive agency is the prime attraction of the game mode.

Finally, "narrative-dramatic agency" (Bodi / Thon 2020, 166) refers to the narratively meaningful choices a player can make as they impact the unfolding story of the game. It corresponds to Ryan's (2006, 201) dimension of creating a narrative through player choice, "actualizing a particular sequence of events within the range of possibilities" of the game design. Here, "Be a Pro," arguably the game mode coming closest to more than the simple, implied narrative of winning, falls short. As there is no unfolding story as such, player experience is not built around narratively meaningful elements of the game design. Game events might emerge that can be given narrative meaning, such as the success of one's team, getting traded or asking to be traded to another team, injuries to one's avatar, and achieving various awards for performance on the ice. Yet, none of these are presented as narratively meaningful choices. A good example of this is the in-game commentary that does adapt to player performance somewhat. The commentators will point out successful players, adding to the simulation aspect of the game, but there is no interaction that the player can take as a result. For example, the game does not include off-ice events that would present the player with narrative choices about their character. This stands in contrast, for example, to the *NBA* series of basketball games, where a similar game mode to "Be a Pro" does build a more explicit narrative about the avatar as an athlete even between matches.

Through these design choices, players of the "Be a Pro" mode in *NHL 20* are not guided by the game to make choices in narrative terms. Still, possibilities for engaging the implied narrative of the quest of winning remain, as players can interpret the game events even without being prompted by the game design to do so. They are able to exercise their affective-interpretive agency, even with minimal prompting. The example of *NHL 20* suggests that even game design that does not afford agency with purpose can do so as a by-product or wholly

unintentionally. This dynamic can be usefully approached through the concept of emergent narrative.

In game studies, "emergent narrative" reflects the idea of game design generating events that are not prefigured as narrative, but become narrativized by players. Eric Murnane (2018) offers an overview of the study of emergent narratives in his ambitious dissertation that examines hundreds of forum posts that recount player experiences of the computer roleplaying game *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda 2011). He notes how the concept has been approached through two main lines of inquiry in game studies, either as a design principle for systems that generate game narratives in response to player agency or as the player-generated narrativizations of unexpected occurrences in games (Murnane 2018, 18). The latter is relevant here, that is, cases where "player created emergence is not something that a system is doing by design [but rather] the player is experiencing details that the system does not correlate and giving them new meaning" (21). I refer to *emergent events* when I mean the events that arise in unexpected ways from gameplay, while *emergent narrative* is used to connote the player-created narrativization of those events through affective-interpretive agency, like my headcanon about Edwar Kaunisnaama. This division draws attention to how emergent narratives can be created by players even without emergent events preceding them – but emergent events call for narrativization in particular ways as in Murnane's examples of recounted player experiences.

Murnane (2018, 22–25) goes on to explain his choice of *Skyrim* as the locus of his study by saying that it is an "ideal candidate" for looking into emergent narrative as it is a single-player game that presents a "strong imposed narrative," with "considerable freedom in the gameworld" afforded to its players, and it has inspired players to share their in-game experiences online, so a corpus of evidence is readily available for analysis. The discrepancies between the imposed narrative and the freedom in the gameworld appear as particularly fruitful for this type of narrativization, also attested to by the proliferation of playthrough narratives that circulate online.[3]

The "Be a Pro" mode of *NHL 20* appears as the antithesis of *Skyrim* in that it neither imposes a strong narrative nor gives great freedom to its players. I believe, however, that by analyzing a game whose core mechanics and gameworld are low in designed narrative content, mileage will be gained for a broader understanding of how emergent events can be narrativized in gameplay and for emphasizing the importance of reception and context for that narrativization. In the process, it becomes clear that Bodi and Thon's conceptualization of player agency can be supplemented by an account of agency in the construction of affective niches while playing, that is, of affective-interpretive agency. Such niches can accommodate player generated emergent narratives, even if they arise from failures of the ludonarrative. It is to these aspects that we can now turn and discuss the trials and tribulations of Edwar Kaunisnaama.

3. Narrativizing Emergence and Failure

The quest-of-winning structure of the "Be a Pro" mode affords the fulfillment of a power fantasy that arises from the interplay of affective engagement with character creation and player skill. At the same time, this fulfillment is vulnerable to emergent and unintended narrative features that the game design does not anticipate. This becomes clear in the arduous process through which I managed to get Edwar Kaunisnaama his first Stanley Cup after some 300 matches played, tallying up to around 75 hours of time spent on the one game mode. A brief account of Edwar's career makes salient tensions in agency, game design, narrativization, and their unintended affectivity.

On his rookie season with the Boston Bruins, Edwar has a great debut, scoring points and developing his various skills, and the team advances to the playoffs. In the second game, they face off against the Pittsburgh Penguins, whose defender Kris Letang delivers a body check against Edwar that ends the season for him in injury. The Bruins go on to lose the series without Edwar. As a player, I more or less accept the result, even if it interferes with the road to victory. The event is easy to rationalize in narrative terms as an unlucky break, such things happen in professional sports after all. So better luck next time Edwar, I think and keep playing; there is always the next season.

Fast forwarding Edwar's recovery in the off-season and the 82 games of the following regular season, the Bruins meet the Penguins again in the playoffs. This time, Edwar lasts until the third game in the series, until Kris Letang injures him again. Edwar herniates a disk, the game tells me in a text prompt, and is put out of commission for 88 in-game days. The Bruins go on to lose the series as I click and re-click the option to simulate the matches, the only option for me to continue the quest.

At this point I have indeed played some 170 individual matches as Edwar. The second injury by the same collection of animated pixels, dubbed Kris Letang in the game, has me feel literal, consuming rage. Some of my anger is directed at the actual Kris Letang, as if he were responsible for his game avatar – as I am for mine – and as if hurting my avatar would be like hurting me. The contrast is clear to the conclusion of the previous season, which made narrative sense to me, but this time I feel as if the game is punishing me for my choices. My playing style has stayed consistent over the period (I am also not skilled enough to change it much), so how can it be that Edwar's physical playing style only cripples him in the playoffs in such severe ways?

It takes months before I pick up *NHL 20* again and this time, I request a transfer to a new team for Edwar. He joins the New York Rangers for his third season as a hockey professional, and I put all his experience points to his "durability" statistic (another tedious task of clicking through menus and assigning training hours one by one). As the game always privileges the player's team, the Rangers too are lifted to new heights with Edwar's contributions. This time, he reaches the second round of the playoffs without trouble, until an illegal board-

ing check injures him for the third year in a row. The 45 days of Edwar's recovery see the Rangers lose in the third round, out of the cup race. As they hear about it, my friends have a hard time believing that the same thing happens for the third time in a row, as do I. I feel less livid than before, but more incredulous.

I now harbor suspicion against the game mechanics, as after over 250 individual matches there is something that keeps preventing me from attaining the explicit goals of the game mode. Edwar's maxed out durability does not seem to have helped and the only explanations I can think of point toward a limitation of player agency that does not manifest until a considerable time-investment has been made into the game mode. My working theory becomes, then, that by making a small hockey player avatar, I make him more prone to injury in the first place as he usually faces larger and heavier opponents. During the regular season, this does not matter too much, as periods of injury are mostly fairly short and there is usually enough time to contribute to the performance of one's team so that they make the playoffs. In the playoffs, however, simulating the matches – mandatory when injured – becomes riskier as enough losses will end the season and the team does not fare as well without the avatar. At the same time, it appears that the game ramps up the consequences of physical play and injuries in the playoffs, which reflects them in reality when teams leave everything on the ice to win, but does so algorithmically in a way that endangers the avatars made injury-prone for being small. Only this, I think, would explain the grave injuries Edwar suffers time and again at the same point in the season, now despite his maxed-out durability statistic.

What to make of this? While it is altogether possible that my explanation would not hold water if we were to examine the code of *NHL 20*, that I have only been extremely unlucky three seasons in a row, the effect on my affective engagement with the avatar-driven game mode is real nonetheless (and a part of that is seeking answers in algorithmic or game design unfairness when a narrative explanation seems insufficient). The feelings of frustration, anger, and suspicion are generated by the contradiction between the explicit narrative of the game mode – the realization of a power fantasy in the quest of winning with the added dimension of my affective relationship to the avatar of my own making – and its repeated disturbance by what become interpreted as unfair biases in the game design.

This tension between the game design and the lack of narrative fulfillment can be analyzed through Christian Roth, Tom van Nuenen, and Hartmut Koenitz's (2018, 99) approach of "ludonarrative hermeneutics." With the example of *A Way Out* (Hazelight Studios 2018), a video game foregrounding the tension between game narrative and player agency, they point out that "ludonarrative dissonance," a term used to describe "situations where games let their players down due to tensions between gameplay and narrative constituents," has remained under-theorized in game studies (94). They argue that their case study warrants including the dimension of interpretation into accounts of player agency and videogame narratives so as to address "the hybrid nature of the ludo-

narrative construct" where players and game designers both have their effects on how tension is received and created (94).

In the case of *A Way Out*, the game design forces the tension between agency and narrative on players, as the game narrative cannot be completed without the affectively resonant non-choice of destroying one of the two protagonists of the game after a lengthy period of collaboration. This runs counter to *NHL 20* at hand here, where the Edwar Kaunisnaama example appears as a case where gameplay has not been designed to impede the explicit narrative in the way that emerges, nor is there a designed, resonant narrative strand in place for when that happens. However, as discussed more fully below, this seeming counterexample works to support Roth et al.'s call to take the interpretive dimension – and, more specifically, player-led narrativization – into account when considering the dynamics of game design and narrative.

Edwar's story does not end in defeat, however, as, against my better judgment maybe, I once more return to pursue the quest for the Stanley Cup. During the in-game season of 2022–2023, Edwar is on a new level as a player. This time, he is injured grievously during the regular season and misses 48 games – that is, over half of them, inadvertently saving me numerous hours of playing time. Returning from injury, he lifts the Rangers to the playoffs and this time there is no stopping them. After some 300 matches, I get to see the championship cutscenes, my mustachioed gentleman hoisting the trophy named after Lord Stanley toward the rafters. Edwar has finally lived up to his potential and clears the table of league MVP awards to boot. I am elated, to say the least. Despite adversity, the quest is now at its end.[4]

This final turn of the saga calls for narrativization and fulfillingly so. The promising young superstar has finally overcome his terrible luck, recovered from numerous serious injuries, and against such odds, Edwar has become the best offensive defender imaginable when he finally takes his lap around the rink as a champion.

None of this is recognized by the game design as such, however. It fails to remember the events of the previous seasons in any meaningful way, offering no explicit narrative content for the interpretation of the arc of the avatar over time. The heroic sports narrative that emerges unexpectedly from the game design which first allows an extremely frustrating player experience is, in the end, almost entirely constructed by the individual player, me. Without my idiosyncratic investment – prompting my affective-interpretive agency – in the head-canon of Edwar as a diminutive offensive defender trying to leave his mark in the NHL like his idol Ruotsalainen, there is no narrative of perseverance and triumph over adversity in the game as such – there is only the slog of repetition from match to match and season to season, where the narrative elements designed into the game do not in themselves cohere into anything meaningful. The notion of ludonarrative hermeneutics can explain the significance of the interpretive dimension and how I end up narrativizing the events that emerge from gameplay although these events are not intended to be part of a narrative by the

game's design. Further explanatory mileage can be gained from considering playing the video game as exploration of an affective niche.

4. Affective Niche Construction with *NHL 20*

How is it that the rudimentary narrative elements of *NHL 20* are able to generate a sense of narrative fulfillment even when the narrativization of those elements depends on the idiosyncracies of headcanon and contextual knowledge rather than the game's design, and when the design itself disturbs the achievement of the game's explicit narrative aims? Following Giovanna Colombetti and Joel Krueger's work on affective scaffolding, I would like to suggest that the case study here represents a particular instance of constructing an "affective niche," where the "organism-environment coupling" of me and the video game enables "the realization of specific affective states" (Colombetti / Krueger 2015, 1160). It is in terms of such a niche that the organism can regulate its affective states, i.e. feelings and emotions, scaffolded by both material items and other people. With "Be a Pro," my frustrations and eventual fulfillment can only be reconciled by affective regulation that depends on the video game, my playing of it, and my subjective connections as a spectator to narratives prevalent in and around the game of ice hockey.

In terms of action in the niche, the particular affective regulation I am able to perform through affective-interpretive agency depends on the interplay between the choices I make as I create my avatar and play with him, the inadequate accommodation of those choices by the game design, and my resulting feelings of disappointment, anger, and, ultimately, triumph. The regulation happens in terms of narrativizing the emergent events that arise from the game. As I first enter the affective niche of the videogame environment, I narrativize my character-creation choices as meaningful through headcanon, even when the game appears to lay out those choices in terms of the game design and aesthetic choice rather than narrative meaning. For instance, I know that the choice to play a defender instead of a forward or a goalie will have an effect on the game experience. Simultaneously, I think that choices such as player size are only about aesthetics and am proven to be mistaken. These initial choices, enactions of affective-interpretive and configurative-constructive agency, are the groundwork for my negative reactions that result from the repeated injuries that lead to failure in the explicit, rudimentary quest-of-winning narrative and the ludic goal of the game. The affective niche made up of the video game, myself, and the larger affective context scaffolds these disappointments, allowing the narrativization of the failures up to a point. I can initially think that the events are de rigueur for a rookie player, especially as he relishes bodily contact, but as the pattern repeats, ludonarrative dissonance grows too strong. The positive regulation of affects that the affective niche provides ceases to work and it is only with time's passing that I feel able to return to the bittersweet joys of "Be a Pro." When I

ultimately persevere and win, the niche finds its final form, the joy of affective-interpretive agency returns, and the dissonance dissolves, making it possible to narrativize Kaunisnaama's saga into the narrative of an underdog champion. That narrative, let us once again emphasize, does not exist in the game in a meaningful way, but the resolution is only available to me by tapping into contextual narrative resources that have to do with the game of hockey as a real sport and my personal engagement with its narratives.

Conceptualizing the playing of a video game as action in an affective niche in this way goes to show how affective niches have a curious spatio-temporal nature. I enter the niche whenever I fire up *NHL 20*, but the affective regulation and narrative meaning-making that draw from contextual hockey knowledge span the history of the sport and its current events across the world from the confines of my living room and meaning-making apparatus. Exploring "Be a Pro" mode is, in this way, also an exploration of the sport itself, dependent on an affective fan relation to ice hockey.

Understanding the gaming experience as exploring an affective niche can be connected to Jesper Juul's (2013) account of failure in video games. He points out that games "promise us that we can repair a personal inadequacy – an inadequacy that they produce in us in the first place" (7), as they present players with challenges that are not trivial, but require trial, error, learning, and perseverance. This promise arises from what he earlier has termed the "prototypical game situation," in which the rules of the game afford variable, quantifiable outcomes that have negative and positive valences to which players are invested emotionally, wanting to win rather than lose (Juul 2005, 36). *NHL 20* epitomizes these maxims: one starts out as a player with little skill, but achievements are there at the zone of proximal development (to borrow the Vygotskian term), reached through repetitions of the relevant acts of gaming. Like Juul points out, "we expect resistance and the possibility of failure" (2013, 12), meaning that players want a certain level of challenge to consider a game to be good. Conversely, players "dislike even more strongly games in which [they] do not feel responsible for failure;" and paradoxically, "we do not want to fail in a game, but we also do not want not to fail" (20). My feelings of frustration with Edwar's repetitive injuries are very much about the discrepancy between the game events and my admission of responsibility. I could not reasonably justify the failures, even if I saw in it the results of my own choices in character creation – the price felt too high as the quest for winning was repeatedly interrupted in the same way.

Colombetti and Krueger (2015, 1160) note how agents actively create their affective niches, even if not all manipulation going into them need be conscious. Variations of activity map onto the case of Edwar Kaunisnaama too: the game avatar is imbued with additional significance through the character-creation choices affected by my headcanon and the emergent game events are narrativized and the affective niche is constructed in relation to them. This way, the discrepancies and tensions arising from player choice, narrative elements of the game design, and emergent narrative events that go against the other two can be seen as a part of the same dynamic of experience in the affective niche a player

constructs with a video game. Considering gaming through the concept of affective niches is thus a possible avenue into accounting for the cognitive-affective action that players, from their idiosyncratic positions, take as they play, narrativize, and construe meaning from their experiences. It allows for an appreciation of the receiver's power over games as designed artworks. Further, it shows the usefulness of considering the affective scaffolding that less-than-artful video games such as *NHL 20* generate to draw attention to the complex interplay of game, gamer, and their environments, responsible for our attraction to gaming as a pastime.

5. Concluding Remarks

Marie-Laure Ryan (2006, 203) notes that "the major innovation of computer games compared to standard board and sports games is to allow a combination of strategic action and make-believe within the same environment." With our account of the dynamic between the limits of game design, the events that make up an emergent narrative, and the paradoxical verisimilitude that depends on player-led narrativization in the *NHL 20* "Be a Pro" mode, we can see how the combination Ryan theorizes depends also on affective niche construction. The game space that affords the make-believe also makes up a complex environment of affective (in addition to ludic, narrative, and cognitive) action that persists over time. This links up with Roth et al.'s (2018, 104) observation that "narrative interpretation can be situated on several dimensions" of the ludonarrative experience, as they advocate for a "cognitive perspective" in analyzing the relationship between interaction and narrative in games and other digital narrative systems.

Where the explicit sports game narrative affords a power fantasy of becoming a winner in *NHL 20*, the procedurally unfolding emergent narrative events hold the potential of complicating, disrupting, and interrupting that fantasy. In Edwar Kaunisnaama's case, the emergent events not only build a positive tension between goal-fulfillment and failure, but they eventually lead to a foregrounded affect of frustration. Still, upon finally persevering, that same frustration can be narrativized into an emergent sports narrative that, in fact, corresponds to a much more fulfilling fantasy than that of mere winning, that is, winning despite adversity, overcoming odds stacked against the player. Where the level of the explicit narrative can be seen as a narrowly realist simulation of grind, skill, and chance through which goals are fulfilled, it is only on the level of the emergent narrative that a more nuanced and satisfying level of verisimilitude is achieved. The underdog triumphing after multiple failures or against seemingly stronger opponents is a cherished sports narrative since at least David vs. Goliath. In the "Be a Pro" mode, the underdog narrative only becomes available through narrativization by players as they tap into their knowledge of and affective relations

to the sport itself – and does so without an effect on the lackluster narrative design of the game.

I hope to have shown how playing a video game, relating to its explicit and emergent narrative features, and conceptualizing gameplay as exploring an affective niche point to how players tap into a vast register of narrative-affective meaning that works dynamically with elements of the game design to give rise to interpretation and affect. Further, arriving at such an idea through the analysis of such a narratively lacking case study as that of the *NHL 20* "Be a Pro" mode works to nuance the understanding of player agency. It points to how narrative-dramatic agency is not reserved for games that are focused on the interplay of meaningful player choice and the progression or branching out of 'story.' Instead, the dynamic of narratively inflected agency is dependent on player-led narrativization, on interpretive-affective agency, that can do a myriad of things that game narratives as designed systems do not anticipate or cater for.

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[1] I use the term *player* to refer to the flesh-and-blood agent playing the video game, *hockey player* and *character* to refer to the game characters modeled after real hockey players, and *avatar* to distinguish player-created characters in the game.

[2] I, to be honest, am not very good at playing the *NHL* games – showcased by lackluster performance against human opponents – but can still beat the game against the computer.

[3] The parodic Finnish webcomic about the murderous adventures of Kunnon Vitun Sika is a prime example. While they might not adequately translate into English, the politically incorrect, but hilarious, adventures can be found at punkinfinland.net/forum/viewtopic.php?f=32&t=169491 and punkinfinland.net/forum/viewtopic.php?f=32&t=196461 (date of access: 12/12/2025).

[4] A simplification, since one can always return to play more, of course.