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Picaresque Experiences in Video Games

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Abstract

This article explores how video games, with no apparent connection to the literary rogue, still articulate Picaresque episodes and simulate Picaresque experiences through their intended gameplay and worldbuilding. These experiences are a specific expression of the combination of mechanics, narrative, and the agency of the player around a defined type of character, the rogue. They show how pervasive the influence of Picaresque Literature is, influencing design choices and informing key forms of being and acting in virtual worlds. This paper aims to define what a Picaresque experience in video games is and how it is possible to produce them. To achieve this, three video games will be analysed to show the different specific tools video games use to enable these experiences. The analyses will be supported by a theoretical framework based on existing bibliography about agency, videoludic narrative, mechanics, and Picaresque Literature with the objective of offering a comprehensive description of Picaresque experiences while also explaining them as a transmedia phenomenon that demonstrates the influence of Picaresque Literature in video games.

Keywords

Roleplaying videogames; video games; rogues; Picaresque; narrative; agency; literature; mechanics

Rogues are popular video game characters, especially in computer role-playing games (CRPG). We see them in numerous CRPG such as those from the *Dragon Age* series (BioWare 2009; BioWare, 2011; BioWare, 2014), the *Baldur's Gate* series (BioWare 1998; BioWare 2000; Larian Studios; 2023), the *Final Fantasy* series (Square, 1994; Square, 2000; Square Enix 2006) or the *Fire Emblem* series (Intelligent Systems, 1996; Intelligent Systems, 2002; Intelligent Systems, 2007; Intelligent Systems, 2019). But also, in stealth and adventure games like the *Thief* series (Looking Glass Studios, 1998; Looking Glass Studios, 2000; Ion Storm, 2004; Eidos-Montréal, 2014). When video games introduce rogues as part of their main cast of characters or allow the player to customize their character as a rogue, they usually feature the possibility of

experiencing rogue-centric gameplay episodes that remind us of those from Picaresque Literature. In those cases, players participate in Picaresque experiences that contribute to what I have called the “Videoludic Picaresque” (Matencio 2024).

Picaresque experiences happen when players have an interactive role performing meaningful actions tied to Picaresque fiction in the virtual world that surrounds them. These experiences are attached to certain mechanics, narratives and characters that introduce instances of social criticism, transgressive storytelling, and diegetic dark play. Players that engage in these experiences are involved in narratives where social class struggles, ethnic discrimination and non-normative sexualities are the daily bread. On the mechanical level, Picaresque experiences feature stealthy actions, mockery, pickpocketing, scamming, and other types of deception skills. These are complex experiences in which we can observe a transmedia cultural manifestation where video games assimilate a literary tradition that it is tightly connected to certain characters and adapt it using the characteristics of video games as a medium, motivating unique gameplay.

Due to its peculiarities, this type of videoludic expression linked to literature should be addressed and explained to help discerning Picaresque experiences and their consequences in video games from other videoludic experiences. Thus, this paper has two objectives:

- Explaining and exemplifying how Picaresque experiences are created in video games.
- Explaining the literary origins of these videoludic experiences.

To fulfil these objectives, a theoretical framework will be established in the first and second sections. In the first one it will be explained how Picaresque literature pollinated video games, and what are the main defining characteristics of rogues. The second section will focus its attention in defining how Picaresque experiences are created in video games. The third section will consist of an analysis of the selected video games to show examples of the elements that shape Picaresque experiences. To explain the features of Picaresque experiences, this paper will use three video games with different characteristics: the stealth video game *Thief: The Dark Project* (Looking Glass Studios, 1998), the open world digital action RPG *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), and the CRPG *Baldur's Gate III* (Larian Studios, 2023). These games are selected because they are paradigmatic due to the complex Picaresque experiences they feature and because they are different enough to show that Picaresque events may happen in video games with different characteristics.

The study of transmedia archetypical characters in video games, tied to possible mechanics or narratives, has been previously performed by Jan-Noël Thon (2019) and, especially, Joleen Blom (2023). This paper inherits their transmedia intention, but also makes a special focus in the genetic connection between videoludic and literary rogues as an expression of the evolution of Picaresque Literature. Since rogues are part of diegetic dark or transgressive episodes, the analyses of this paper

can be partly connected to Kristine Jørgensen's (2015) analysis of *Dishonored* (Arkane Studios, 2012) and Holger Pötzsch's study on transgressivity in video games (2018). In the same fashion, since this paper features the analysis of experiences where the agency of the player is essential, it can be linked to Bettina Bodi and Jan-Noël Thon's (2020) analysis of the agency in video games, Leanne Taylor-Giles' (2020) exploration of agency and choice in CRPGs, and Bettina Bodi's deep study of agency in video games (2023). This paper also inherits the narratological interest that we can observe in the studies of Sebastian Domsch (2013; 2019), Jan-Noel Thon (2016a; 2016b; 2017), and Harmut Koenitz (2018; 2023; 2024) to explain interactive narrative experiences in video games.

Rogues and Picaresque: From literature to video games

The road of Picaresque Literature has led to the global presence of rogues in contemporary fiction¹. To understand how it happened, it is necessary to explain a cultural process of diluted literary references and complex transmedia and cultural relationships that connects literature and video games. This process involves three key concepts: hypertextuality, the shared encyclopaedia and the myth of the rogue.

As authors like Souvik Mukherjee (2015), Jan Švelch (2017) or Regina Seiwald (2023) have done before to explain key narratological aspects of video games such as paratexts, this paper also uses the theories of Gerard Genette. In this case, this author is used to explain the nature of the influence between past literary works and video games. The concept of "hypertextuality" (Genette, 1989) is fundamental to explain the continuous expansion of this type of fiction across history. This concept describes that previous literary works, or "hipotexts", inspire directly or indirectly new ones, called "hypertexts" (Genette, 1989, pp. 14–16). As more hypertexts are created, the amount of hipotexts increase, leading to the creation of a corpus of related literary works that expands across time. These works share common characteristics that are gradually updated and modified but will always have a permanent connection with their literary roots. This way, there is a regular process of expansion text by text that may give birth to hypertexts in the same medium or different media. In the case of Picaresque fiction, this process led to the creation of Picaresque hypertexts that took the shape of video games.

¹ When talking about rogues' global presence, we must not confound the mythical identity of rogues and tricksters. Every rogue is a trickster, but not every trickster is a rogue. The trickster is a universal prehistoric myth that can be found through time in cultures across the globe. For example, it is specifically fertile in Native American and African cultures (Berezkin 2010; Szyjewski 2020; Jeremić-Molnar and Molnar 2021). However, the rogue is a prolific modern variation of the trickster, with clear and traceable literary origins and specific characteristics, that has become a myth by itself.

The characteristics of these Picaresque texts are shared between members of different cultures, sometimes despite not knowing their origin or true nature. They are part of what Umberto Eco calls a “shared encyclopaedia”² (1995, p. 38), where myths, literary works and other cultural references are shared by the members of a culture. The shared encyclopaedia does not need conscious or explicit references to allow the use of the elements contained in it. As Claudio Paolucci (2021) explains, it features a rhizomatic structure of collective literary and non-literary references that do not necessarily need an identifiable origin. The shared encyclopaedia works as a compendium of information about certain topics that is always ready to be used in different contexts. Authors/developers, generally, use it unconsciously, receiving the influence of cultural traditions indirectly.

Within the shared encyclopaedia, the information about the characteristics of Picaresque fiction and rogues is stored within the myth of the rogue. In this paper, the concept of myth follows Roland Barthes’ definition. The myth is one of the strongest and more fertile forms a story or character can take (Barthes, 1972, p. 107). As authors like Fajriannoor Fanani (2016), Ekaterina Galanina and Alexey Salin (2017), and Eugen Pfister (2019) shows in their studies, the potential that the Barthesian myth holds to create new narratives and connections to past ideas or current social challenges in video games is immense. For example, Pfister insists in the capability of the myth of the collapse of the state to explain the cultural intricacies of zombie-based video games, while Fananj explains the political power behind military video games. Similarly, Galanina and Salin analyse video games that develop the myth of the revolution, stablishing a connection with the French Revolution.

Barthes defines myths as semiological systems where a meaning or “signified” is expressed through a form or “signifier” that changes every time the myth is articulated (Barthes, 1972, pp. 115–116). The relationship between form and meaning is called “signification”, which allows us to understand why the form is connected to that meaning. The key aspect of the Barthesian myth is its fertility, which is caused when the signification dilutes as new forms are created and time goes by. When the myth is articulated, the form adapts to new contexts, different from those directly connected to its original meaning, making the relationship between form and meaning more difficult to track (Barthes, 1972, pp. 120). This increases the flexibility of the myth, since myths do not need the full context of its original meaning to produce new forms and significations. At the same time, the myth accumulates all its previous forms and every semantic relationship the signification has motivated across history, being literary or extraliterary, waiting to be potentially used in any cultural

² Eco’s theories have already been applied to Game Studies to explain how players interpret the cultural associations behind video games (Chandler and Noriega 2005; Cayatte 2016; Liu and Gao 2024).

media. For instance, when the myth of the rogue is articulated we can use the “original” rogues and all their evolved forms mixed with extraliterary information about them (prejudices, ideologies, etc.), creating new forms and significations derived from previous ones.

Rogues evolve and take different shapes as they expand in different cultural media, inspiring a transmedia character with its potential forms contained in the myth. Thus, this mythical system of possible articulations created through time is perforce transmedia in its nature. This treatment of myths is similar to Joleen Blom’s transmedia approach towards video games characters (Blom 2023, pp. 10–11; pp. 44–49), where they have a mythological nature (having a meaning and a changeable form) that is developed with the experiences of the player (the personal input that fills its meaning) and their iconic visual aspect, but also by external factors such as popularity, fandom or even market practices. In the same fashion, for Blom (2023, p. 167), the discontinuity of their stories is key to construct successful transmedia characters. In this case, it is precisely the capacity to create different stories around the figure of the rogue what makes the myth so fertile as a system of potential characters and stories.

In fact, each articulation of the character in those discontinued stories contribute to what Blom (2023, 56–58) defines as “transmedia character network”, following Thon (2019, 187). For Blom, this network is the sum of all the versions that a character may take in different media as it reproduces itself constantly. Although Blom talks about characters with proper names like Sherlock Holmes, this concept can be also applied to a myth. Like the transmedia network defined by Blom and Thon, myths keep the sum of all the forms it has taken through history. In this case, the difference is that we are talking about a descriptive prototype for future potential defined characters. In other words, the myth of the rogue produces characters with proper names and shared traits like Guzmán or Gray Mouser for “discontinued” stories.

The process of the rogue to become a literary myth was one of the fastest in the History of Literature, since it needed less than a century to surpass the barriers of the genre that brought them to life (Rico, 1970, p. 114; Ardila, 2015). The rogue was born along a genre of novels called Picaresque Novels in Spain during the 16th and 17th centuries. The first novel, *Lazarillo de Tormes* (Anonymous, 1554), became a national (Lázaro Carreter, 1972, p. 20) and international success with multiple editions and translations (Bjornson 1977, p. 126; Rabaté, 2017). However, the novel that became the main piece of inspiration for future rogues in those centuries was *Guzmán de Alfarache* (Mateo Alemán, 1599–1604). It worked as the main inspiration behind the first original Picaresque novels in English (Parker, 1971, p. 156; Bjornson, 1977, p. 129), such as *The English Rogue* (Richard Head and Francis Kirkman, 1665–1671). When the English Literature took the baton of the Spanish Picaresque, the myth was already established and was used to give birth to multiple hypotexts and hypertexts that featured new variations of the rogue during the following centuries such as *Moll Flanders* (Defoe, 1722), *Roderick Random* (Smollet, 1748), *Oliver Twist* (Dickens, 1837–

1839) or *Huckleberry Finn* (Twain, 1884). In the 20th century, the myth started to be used in fantasy settings,³ upgrading its potential traits, such as Robert E. Howard's short story *Rogues in the House* (1934), J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937) or Jack Vance's *The Eyes of the Overworld* (1966). However, the most important example is the *Fafhrd and Gray Mouser series* (1939–1988) from Fritz Leiber, in which the city of Lankhmar is influenced by the Seville depicted by Cervantes in *Rinconete y Cortadillo* (Cervantes, 1614), and Gray Mouser is a rogue that features most of the characteristics and potential episodes contained in the myth.

The 20th century adaptation of the myth to a fantasy setting is key to understand the important role that Picaresque had in the history of tabletop RPGs (TRPG), which influenced video games afterwards. These novels were used as inspiration for the “thief” class from *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax, 1975; Gygax, 1979), that started as a mod class in 1974 (Peterson 2012), and the “rogue” from *Tunnels and Trolls* (St. André 1975). We can see this literary influence in the article that introduced the new class (Gygax, 1974, pp. 8–9), the Appendix N of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax, 1979, p. 224) and the first edition of *Tunnels and Trolls* (St. André, 1975, p. 7). Shortly after, new supplements appeared where rogues were developed in detail in Picaresque cities using classical Picaresque inspiration, as it is mentioned in *Thieves' Guild* (Meyer and Lloyd, 1980, p. ii) and *Thieves' World* (Asprin et al, 1981, p. 3). These TRPGs influenced future CRPGs, as it has been already pointed out by Tresca (Tresca, 2011) and Schules, Peterson and Picard (2018, pp. 107–108). This establishes a clear implicit connection between Picaresque Literature and video games that explains how rogues are depicted when the myth is articulated in this medium.⁴

During this expansion of the myth, rogues shared a series of traits that distinct them from other characters. They are portrayed suffering the effects of social determinism, that is, the incapacity of the rogue to ascend in the social ladder or thrive in their society depending on their social class, religion, gender, or ethnicity. This concept has been studied and pointed out as one of the main traits of the rogue by several authors (Bataillon, 1969, p. 210; Rico, 1970, p. 104; Lázaro Carreter, 1972, p. 211; Sevilla, 2001, p. 17; Rey Hazas, 2003, p. 23; Ardila, 2010; Piso & Tomoiagă, 2012; Elze, 2017; Clark, 2019; Baldritch, 2019, p. 87). Rogues are characters that are usually oppressed by the institutions of an estate that makes them suffer situations of hunger or other life-risking circumstances. They are part of the lower classes, ethnic minorities, or sexual minorities. In some exceptions, they are normative people that fell from grace in the past. Social determinism is the reason behind the criminal career of rogues, who start being young scoundrels and end up becoming full-fledged

³ Dennis Wise (2019) and I (Matencio 2024) explore this Picaresque influence in fantasy literature.

⁴ For a more detailed evolution from Picaresque Literature to video games check my PhD dissertation (Matencio 2024).

criminals. In their stories, they are used as the counterforce of the higher classes through their actions, proposing a different way of living. Due to this, social determinism is used to introduce social criticism as an important element tied to the rogue and Picaresque Literature. It invites authors to criticise political ideologies and sociocultural issues.

Delinquency has also been explained as one of the main characteristics of rogues (Molho, 1972, p. 15; Rico, 1970, p.106; Parker, 1971, p. 156; Ardila, 2010; Dahlstrom, 2016). Rogues are characters that use their wits, playful charisma, and instincts to fight the effects of social determinism while also engaging in criminal schemes. We can see traditional rogues stealing (Alemán, 2020, p. 310; Dickens, 1999, pp. 65-68; Leiber 2020, p. 147), pickpocketing (García, 2001, p. 779; Salas Barbadillo, 2012, p. 89), lockpicking (Alemán, 2021, pp. 240–241; Leiber 2020, p. 284), scamming (López de Úbeda, 2012, pp. 631–632), seducing (Salas Barbadillo, 2012, pp. 94–95; Defoe 2011, p. 117), gambling (Cervantes, 2018, p. 166; Thackeray, 2008, p. 117), assaulting (García, 2001, p. 789) or assassinating (Quevedo, 2016, p. 177; Head 2008, p. 156), among many more examples. Thus, rogues participate in stories where they confront the normative society, delinquency is a tool for survival and oppression is the bread and butter of their daily life. These traits are the main differential elements of the rogue.

Creating Picaresque experiences in video games

The characteristics that the myth of the rogue carry to new hypertexts can be experienced in video games. As has been explained before, Picaresque experiences happen when players can perform meaningful actions historically attributed to literary rogues in Picaresque Literature. This definition has three main components that should be explained: a ludic aspect closely connected to certain core mechanics and gameplay; a narrative aspect; and the agential aspect, that affects both ludic and narrative facets of the Picaresque experience, since players have influence over them (Bodi, 2023, pp. 41–42). The narrative and ludic aspects are explained in separate parts for the sake of easing their comprehension, but it is important to remark that they are intertwined, as Koenitz points out (2023, p. 114). In fact, the narrative aspect of video games can be a core mechanic by itself in dialogue-focused games or multiple-choice story-driven games (Dubbelman, 2016).

Ludic aspect of Picaresque experiences

The ludic aspect of Picaresque experiences is motivated by mechanics that allow the actions that have been historically associated with rogues. They establish which actions the player can perform, limiting the game's experiences to those that depend on using those mechanics. Following Fernández-Vara (2019, p. 108) and Zubek (2020, p. 17), mechanics can be considered as the verbs that execute inside the video game. These verbs, or core mechanics using Salen and Zimmerman's terminology

(2004, chapter 23, p. 4), can be combined to perform other, more complex, actions that are part of the gameplay (Heussner et al., 2015, p. 25). For a Picaresque experience, these mechanics should represent the dubious actions attributed to rogues since their origins, those are activities such as stealing, pickpocketing, lockpicking, moving silently, scamming, manipulating characters, etc. In the case of a video game in which rogues can engage in combat, they should be portrayed being dexterous or agile (Cervantes, 2018, p. 167) and carrying weapons such as daggers (Alemán, 2020, p. 352; Leiber, 2020, p. 63), light swords (Cervantes, 2018, p. 163; Smollet, 2017, p. 346), bows (Leiber, 2020, p. 391), pistols (Quevedo, 2016, p.41; Cervantes, 2018, p.183), or sticks (Thackeray, 2008, p. 63). If some of these actions and weapons can be used, we may be before a video game that allows Picaresque experiences. The main mechanics that we observe in Picaresque experiences are those related to stealing, performing stealthy criminal actions (for example, breaking into a house), scamming or harming other characters as part of criminal plots using certain weapons limited to these characters.

These mechanics, combined with the Picaresque narrative episodes and traits mentioned earlier, guide the player to engage in a type of dark play, which Linderoth and Mortensen define as “content, themes, or actions that occur within games that in some contexts would be problematic, subversive, controversial, deviant, or tasteless” (Linderoth & Mortensen, 2015, p. 5). Dark play is a type of transgressive play, meaning that is provocative or controversial in the diegetic or extradiegetic levels of the video game (Jørgensen and Karlsen, 2018, p. 3). In the case of Picaresque experiences, the dark play that we observe is diegetic. The videoludic rogue engages in actions that can be labelled as controversial in their own virtual world. This is inherited from Picaresque Literature, which has always been transgressive (Rey Hazas, 2003, p. 19) since it starred non-normative characters that challenged the status quo through satirical or criminal episodes. Moreover, it can be considered an example of dark literature due to its criminal and sexual passages (Luna, 2001, p. 814; Head, 2008, pp. 154–162). Thus, a fundamental aspect of Picaresque experiences is being able to perform some type of dark play mechanically that reflects the immoral actions traditionally attributed to rogues. For example, a video game starring a rogue with stealing mechanics that allows the player to also manipulate other characters can, potentially, feature Picaresque experiences.

This core diegetic and mechanical dark play feature three types of transgressive gameplay if we consider Pötzsch’s division of the types of transgressivity in video games (Pötzsch, 2018, p. 50). We are especially interested in the diegetic, critical, and hegemonic transgressivity. The diegetic transgressivity is the most important one for Picaresque experiences. It implies the possibility of using transgressive actions with diegetic consequences in the video game’s world (Pötzsch, 2018, p. 52). For example, stealing, scamming, or breaking into houses. Similarly, this author combines the critical and hegemonic transgressivities to explain those gameplay practices that might be considered as an attempt to break extradiegetic conventions, rules, or

power relations. As political cultural products, video games always carry certain ideologies along the way, as we see in the analyses of Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig De Peuter (2009), Souvik Mukherjee (2017), Craig Johnson and Rowan Tulloch (2017) and Fitrawan Akbar and Bevaola Kusumasari (2021). This is not different in the case of video games that feature Picaresque experiences, in fact, it is reinforced since they replicate what has been done historically in Picaresque fiction. We can find the intentional use of rogues as the nemeses of characters that represent certain institutions or discourses that can be linked to the real world as a form of protest or social commentary. In the same fashion, rogues may represent different minorities in their stories, bringing over the table passages of reflection about the life of real people in their situation. Rogues carry an immense political potential as oppressed characters that represent non-normative ways of living. Knowing this, Picaresque experiences should be diegetically transgressive and are supported by critical and hegemonic transgressivities.

Narrative aspect of Picaresque experiences

Part of this transgression can be found in the narrative aspect of Picaresque experiences. The story and the characters we find in video games are essential to produce them. If we consider Jenkins' theories on narrative structures within video games (Jenkins, 2004, pp. 124–129), these characters may appear or participate in enacted, embedded, and emergent narratives. Enacted narratives can be found in video games with a main story that is developed through different compulsory episodes located between or within gameplay cycles. This type of narrative, which is not always named as "enacted", can be developed through cutscenes, dialogues or interactive sequences located in certain spaces, like Ryan (2006), Domsch (2013), Thon (2016a) or Klevjer (2023) have studied. These strategies can be used in Picaresque experiences since they are not limited to certain types of stories or characters.

Embedded narratives can also be developed using these strategies, but they are established through different non-compulsory framed stories such as secondary quests located within a main story or those that can be found in books or item descriptions. This type of narrative has been studied by Ryan (2006, p. 205), Wei (2010) and Domsch (2019, p. 114), among others. Embedded narratives, following these authors, increase the complexity and depth of certain stories, allowing the inclusion of multiple characters and plots, which makes them susceptible of being used in Picaresque experiences since they allow the inclusion of related characters and stories. Finally, emergent narratives are those that usually happen circumstantially while exploring in video games. They are developed through spontaneous interactions with other players, non-playable characters (NPCs), objects, etc. They have been studied as one of the main narrative structures that produce stories in different types of video games (Meifert-Menhard, 2014; Bergstrom, 2019). These stories are unique for each player since emergent narratives are not pre-established, and they are heavily dependent on the actions of the player (Chauvin et al., 2015).

These narrative structures can be used to create a Picaresque experience or a non-interactive Picaresque episode that may happen in a cutscene or similar situation. For example, an emergent narrative where the player tries to pickpocket the keys from an NPC, and they end up getting caught red-handed can be considered a Picaresque experience. On the other hand, a monologue where a character talks about their past as an oppressed rogue that is part of an ethnic minority, does not create a Picaresque experience, but it can contribute to it.

These narrative structures are reinforced by the cast of characters. Videoludic rogues are what Blom calls “dynamic game characters” (Blom, 2023), which are defined as characters “whose identity changes depending on how the player plays the game” (Blom, 2023, p. 10). Dynamic game characters can be characterized by the ludic, narrative and performative aspects (those allowed by design in pre-scripted scenarios) of a video game (Blom, 2023, p. 80–89). For Blom (2023, p.10), dynamic characters are part of the mythological beings we have been experiencing since our childhood, which aligns with the approach of this paper. We have already claimed the mythical nature of the rogue in video games, but it is important to insist on them as part of the type of character that Blom is defining. Rogues, as myths, are dynamic. They change with each articulation, something that it is not different in video games. In fact, video games allow them to be more dynamic than ever before through the actions of the player, especially if the playable rogue is what we know as *avatar*. An avatar is a blank page that can be defined by players’ actions (Taylor-Giles, 2020, p. 300), something shared with the dynamic game character. The avatar has no voice and their interactions and relationships with the elements that shape the world are limited to the decisions of the player. When a game introduces an avatar as the character controlled by the player, it usually features meaningful decisions in dialogues or actions that customize the experience that they want to achieve. An avatar which is a rogue should be able to define their potential Picaresque traits through different types of agencies, mechanics, and narratives. If the aspects that define the avatar reenact the potential characteristics contained in the myth of the rogue, they will support a Picaresque experience. The avatar is opposed to the *actor* (Taylor-Giles, 2020, p. 300), a type of character that has preestablished storylines, morals, and motivations. These characters have less margin to be defined by the actions of the player, making them less dynamic, but they are still dynamic characters due to their mythical nature and, in case of being playable, the meaningful actions and decisions they are involved in.

Independently of being avatars or actors, rogue characters are usually labelled with a character class in CRPGs. Classes serve as preestablished frameworks of mechanics and skills, sometimes even narratives, attributed to the character that belongs to that class. We may think that only those characters labelled as part of the rogue class can be considered as such in these video games. However, the concept of the rogue transcends these categories since it references a literary myth that existed before role-playing games existed. If a character of a different class participates in the type of stories mentioned earlier, has access to certain mechanics and gameplay, they

can still be rogues and participate in Picaresque experiences, despite not being categorized as such in the game's system. The same happens in video games where the concept of character class does not exist. Thus, rogues transcend these practical classifications due to their unrestrictive dynamic mythological nature. A rogue does not need character classes to be identified as one, it just needs to follow its historical characteristics.

Apart from the playable rogue, there is a cast of secondary characters that are typical in Picaresque narratives and can be a supporting element of Picaresque experiences. Rogues interacted with these characters in the texts they starred. For example, rogues usually act against corrupted high classes. Historically, these characters have been corrupted nobles, clerics, or bourgeois merchants, but it can change depending on the setting of the story since they are part of the tradition of a dynamic mythological character. Likewise, rogues can interact with other robbers, pickpockets, charlatans, beggars, or prostitutes, while also be connected to cruel or merciful parents/masters. If these characters appear in the story in which the rogue participates, the Picaresque experience is supported, especially if the player can interact with them.

Agential aspect of Picaresque experiences

If the participation of players is important, their agency is key to develop Picaresque experiences on both the narrative and mechanical level, since both levels might be affected by the actions of the player (Bodi & Thon, 2020, p. 158). The use of certain mechanics and the possibility of being part of different narratives are linked to players' capacity to interact with different characters, items, or spaces. If the game enables certain actions, like lockpicking a door, and include narratives that use them, players will be able to engage in Picaresque experiences. Considering the theories of Marie-Laure Ryan (2006, pp. 190–191), only the involvement of the player can lead to the creation of certain videoludic experiences. Taylor-Giles follows the same approach, defining agency, using Janet Murray's definition (Murray, 1997, p. 110), as "the ability of the player to feel they are having an impact upon the game world" (Taylor-Giles, 2020, p. 297). Bettina Bodi and Jan-Noël Thon's theories about players' agency can be connected to this idea since they also focus on the possibilities of the player to perform certain actions that have consequences in the video game's world. They call them "meaningful actions" and are also restricted by design (Bodi & Thon, 2020, p. 158; Bodi, 2023, p. 23). These actions can take place through four types of agencies: the spatial-explorative agency, the configurative-constructive agency, the narrative-dramatic agency, and the temporal-ergodic agency (Bodi & Thon, 2020, pp. 159–160; Bodi, 2023). First, the "spatial-explorative agency" (Bodi, 2023, pp. 43–44) is established by those elements of the video game's design that affect the ability of the player to traverse and explore the game's virtual spaces. It can be separated in "spatial agency" and "explorative agency". The first focuses on the character's movement, while the second considers how the player interacts with the space. In our case, for the spatial agency we are interested in how rogues move (acrobatically or

stealthily, for instance). On the other hand, for the explorative agency, we are interested in the possible actions players use to interact with the elements of the game's world like rogues, such as lockpicking.

Second, the "configurative-constructive agency" is afforded by the inclusion of customizing options for our character and some of the video game's spaces (Bodi, 2023, pp. 53–56). It can also be separated into "configurative" and "constructive" agencies. The first is focused on the character's customization, using tools like character classes, choosing skills, or customizing the background of a character. Thus, we will be looking at possible ways to configure a character to express their Picaresque traits. Meanwhile, the constructive agency is interested in the ability to change the landscape of a video game. However, there are considerably less significant cases in which rogues can change the space to introduce Picaresque experiences, so this agency will be left aside for future research. An example can be found in *The Guild 3* (GolemLabs and Purple Lamp, 2017), which allows the construction of thieves' houses as a crime lord of a medieval city.

Meanwhile, the "narrative-dramatic agency" (Bodi, 2023, pp. 58–62) explains the use of meaningful actions that affects the progress of the story. It can split up in "narrative agency", which focuses on what degrees the player can alter the narrative events of the game, and "dramatic agency", which allows players to create emergent personal stories with the different elements that shape the game. For instance, there is narrative agency if players can solve parts of the story in a different way because they are acting as rogues, and this is acknowledged by offering different resolutions, dialogues, or rewards. On the other hand, the dramatic agency is used when players, as rogues, are allowed to steal or manipulate NPCs at their will to create a personal coherent story filled with Picaresque experiences.

The narrative-dramatic agency involves certain degree of what it has been called "embodiment", as part of the player's subjectivity (Keogh, 2014; Schröter, 2017; Berents and Keogh, 2019; Vella, 2021). That is, the circumstance in which a player embodies the character they are playing with and explore new ways of being in a personal manner (Gualeni and Vella, 2020). Picaresque experiences allow the player to embody a rogue introducing them to their circumstances and abilities. If the video game invite players to think and behave like rogues in contexts like those explained before, they may participate in Picaresque experiences while embodying that type of character. This is limited to games where the player can control a rogue as a main character, especially when there are avatars as protagonists. The virtual existence of an avatar is filled with the embodying experiences of the player, who interacts with the ludic space in certain ways to explore new identities. This way, the narrative-dramatic agency, but also the configurative agency, create a new layer of complexity in the development of Picaresque experiences.

Finally, the "temporal-ergodic agency" (Bodi, 2023, pp. 48–53) is not the most important in Picaresque experiences, but it should be addressed. It can be divided into

“temporal agency” and “ergodic agency”. The temporal agency focuses on how the time is used and perceived in certain game states, such as game over states. In addition, the ergodic agency involves players’ ability to modify temporal structures in the game. For example, if they can advance or reset the time of the game through their actions. In the case of Picaresque experiences, we are interested in the ergodic agency in case the time of the day is used to facilitate certain activities for rogues. One interesting case would be the use of the night as the main time frame for criminal activities.

Thus, Picaresque experiences are shaped in the following way: first, they are heavily influenced by the agential possibilities that a video game offers. Players should be able to act as an avatar or actor rogue through the mechanics introduced in the game, which usually inspire a diegetic dark and transgressive gameplay. Similarly, the narrative and the cast of characters should support the Picaresque experience, recreating what we see in Picaresque fiction. If the player can perform the previously explained meaningful actions within certain stories, a Picaresque experience takes place. These experiences are not limited to characters labelled as rogues in the game, since players may participate in them using characters that are part of the myth of the rogue, but the game does not consider as such. Picaresque experiences do not depend on labels, but in the actions that the player is allowed to perform and the different narratives they may participate in.

Exemplifying Picaresque experiences

The first step in the analysis of the elements that create Picaresque experiences should consider the tools of the configurative agency that are at the disposition of the player. *Thief: The Dark Project* (TTDP from now on) features an actor named Garrett as the rogue main character. The player cannot modify any visual aspect or background information of the protagonist. There is not a character class that frames the character within a myth or stereotypical character. However, it is stated in the prologue that the character is a rogue, since he is an orphaned pickpocket of the streets of The City that has been trained to be the perfect thief.

On the other hand, both *Skyrim* and *Baldur's Gate III* (BG3 from now on) include an avatar which the player might embody to participate in Picaresque experiences. The only information that *Skyrim* provides us about our avatar is that they are a prisoner for an unknown reason. The game has no tools to develop this background information, but we can configure their race or ethnic group; the gender of the character, limited to men and women, and their visual representation. The race of the avatar affects some skills or statistics. Races like the Khajiit, the Argonians, the Dunmer and the Bosmer carry bonuses that are related to Picaresque skills such as sneaking, pickpocketing or lockpicking, making them ideal in the case of playing as a rogue while reinforcing the role of the explorative agency and the potential carried by the dramatic agency in the Picaresque experience. Furthermore, these subgroups are

part of suspected minorities in the region of Skyrim, associated with smuggling, thievery, or drug dealing. Thus, if we select the races that carry bonuses for Picaresque skills, or interact with characters of these races, we might experience situations of blatant racism and oppression that align with the Picaresque episodes we can observe in Picaresque Literature (Alemán, 2020, p. 162; Salas Barbadillo, 2012, pp. 108–110). The racial and ethnic origins of the avatar, combined with their condition as a prisoner at the beginning of the game, might help the player build a fitting background for a rogue that enables multiple agencies.



Figure 1. Garrett as a young rogue in *Thief: The Dark Project* (Looking Glass Studios, 1998).

© Eidos Interactive

BG3 provides more options for the configuration of the background of its characters. We can select one out of 11 backgrounds that support specific dialogue interactions and skill bonuses, backing both the narrative and dramatic agencies. Three of them provide an increased proficiency in statistics traditionally attributed to rogues: “charlatan”, “criminal”, and “urchin”, which are aligned with Picaresque Literature. They increase the capacities of the character for stealing, tricking other characters through dialogue choices, and moving silently, which support the explorative and dramatic agential aspect of the games, as well as their ludic aspect. These backgrounds provide brief narrative descriptions of the past of the character that support the Picaresque experience that the game proposes. For example, the urchin background includes the following description: “After surviving a poor and bleak childhood, you know how to make the most out of very little”. Apart from these backgrounds, players may select different races and ethnic groups for their character.

Among them, “lightfoot halflings”, “deep gnomes”, “wood elves” and “wood half-elves” have bonuses in either stealth actions or movement speed, which are required to play rogues effectively, affecting the spatial and explorative agencies. Both types of wood elves and “drows” (roughly, underground elves that are considered as evil) also feature proficiency using weapons historically connected to rogues such as short swords or daggers. These races, except for drows, are not discriminated in the world of BG3, so they do not add a racial narrative Picaresque background to the character creation. Finally, we can select a character class that increases the proficiency of the character with certain mechanics and give access to class-specific skills. Among these classes, the “rogue” class is the one made to support Picaresque experiences. It increases the stealth, pickpocketing, backstabbing, and deception skills of the characters. Knowing this, we can confirm that, except for TTDP, the configurative-constructive is used to improve future Picaresque experiences through the selection of certain races, background information or classes in the selected video games. BG3 also introduces the possibility of using the narrative agency in its Picaresque experiences, since it allows the player to resolve quest dialogues using the social background established through the configurative-constructive agency, for example in the quests “Return the locket” or “Kill Raphael's old enemy”.



Figure 2. Choosing a background in *Baldur's Gate III* (Larian Studios, 2023). © Larian Studios

If the mechanical aspect of Picaresque experiences is considered, we can see that the three games include mechanics that support it along the explorative agential aspect. TTDP is focused on stealing objects and breaking and entering somebody

else's property. Supporting the spatial agency, this game features stealthy and acrobatic movements that allow players to break into those properties. The obtained loot is later added to an accumulative gold reward that reflects the success of the actions of the player. TTDP is a stealth-based game supported by detailed sound-detection and lightning mechanics that affect the explorative agency. As part of the offensive mechanics, the main character can also fight using a light sword and a bow. The player might decide to knock out enemies or kill them, if necessary, which aligns well with Picaresque Literature and gives space to use the dramatic agency. TTDP presents refined mechanics aimed to recreate Picaresque experiences when combined with the narrative setting provided in the different chapters of the game. The setting situates Garrett's adventures at nighttime, but the player cannot modify it, making the ergodic agency irrelevant in the game.

In *Skyrim* and *BG3* we find several mechanics that contribute to Picaresque experiences, which represent the historical literary dexterity and charisma attributed to rogues. In both games, rogues are encouraged to be played using bows, daggers and light swords, following their literary past. They also introduce a "stealth mode" that the player may use to move silently, hide from other characters, pickpocket them and attack them using a backstab or surprise attack that deals extra damage. In the same fashion, both games feature a lockpicking mechanic which allows the avatar to open doors and chests. As a side note, in *BG3* rogues can distract their victims using disguises or decoys that allow easier lockpicking, pickpocketing or backstabbing. Similarly, players may manipulate other characters through persuasion, intimidation or deception. *Skyrim* goes beyond that including the guard bribing mechanic, used to avoid the consequences of stealing, and the fence mechanic, which enables selling stolen goods to fences. In the same game, players that want to act as rogues can forge business ledgers to get extra money, or brew powerful poisons using their "alchemy" skill. Additionally, showing the potential of the ergodic agency, *Skyrim* players may change the time frame using beds or an option in the menu to facilitate their criminal attempts during the night, when most NPCs are sleeping. It can be seen that these mechanics motivate Picaresque experiences affecting the spatial, explorative, configurative and dramatic agencies.

As a paradigmatic addition in *Skyrim*, if the avatar steals objects, lockpicks certain doors or chests, forges business ledgers or kills an NPC, they will put into action the law-enforcement mechanics the game features. The objective of these law mechanics is penalizing the excessive use of these criminal actions. They balance the game, since players could become rich very quickly if they steal without consequences, while also supporting the creation of emergent Picaresque experiences close to their literary counterparts. The previous actions, which are examples of diegetic transgressions and dark play, are considered as illegal within the video game's world. Each time the player commits a crime, they are assigned with an internal number that indicates the amount of money they owe called "bounty". As the bounty increases, players will be followed by the guards of a town and bounty collectors hired by the authorities that will try to kill or subdue the avatar. Players may pay a

fine depending on their bounty or bribe the guards, otherwise they will be imprisoned. In the case of imprisonment, the players lose all their items, and an emergent Picaresque narrative starts. In this event, players should decide to escape from prison using lockpicks and getting back their items or serve the amount of time that has been decided, losing skill levels and money. BG3 also features this type of mechanics, by introducing an opinion and revenge system in case of stealing or killing NPCs. When the player is discovered, they engage in a dialogue that can be solved through bribing or manipulative dialogues that are improved with the deception proficiencies of the character. In case of not convincing the victim, players may end up being attacked by a group of enemies. These video games use the diegetic transgressivity, the consequences of behaving as a rogue, and the dramatic agency to increase the number of Picaresque experiences in which the player can participate.



Figure 3. Getting caught and bounty increase in *Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011).

© Bethesda Softworks

Mechanics are supported and motivated by the narrative aspect of these video games. TTDP features a protagonist that steals to survive and humiliate the corrupted high classes of The City. As the game progresses in its enacted narrative, it is inferred that he became an orphan due to the oppressive politics of the crime lords that control The City. The game starts with Garrett trying to steal from Lord Bafford's Manor, a minor corrupted nobleman, and it progresses as Garrett ends up involved in a bigger plot after humiliating one of these crime lords. His motivation is clear, enriching himself while also confronting those that caused the oppression suffered during his childhood. The more we know about the politics of this state, the more we understand that the high classes are exploiting the most vulnerable to extend their influence. Thus, Garrett becomes a defiant side that represents witty resistance and freedom.

Skyrim features a main story which does not include Picaresque stories, but there are factions and embedded narratives in side-quests that develop them. Whether they are played or not, depends on the dramatic agency of players. In the slums of the decadent city of Riften, we can find the Thieves' Guild faction. It introduces the player to a long side-quest, an embedded story, in which the player initiates a career as an amateur scoundrel and ends up becoming the master of the guild. It also gives access to randomly generated minor quests, emergent stories called "city influence quests", that are focused on stealing, pickpocketing, breaking into properties, fencing items, tampering with accounting books, or slandering rivals. This faction enables the introduction of stories or dialogues about oppression or delinquency throughout the game. For example, Sapphire's side-quest, another embedded story, introduces us to the story of an illegitimate child that was kidnapped and abused by bandits until she killed them. This rogue became an assassin and thief afterwards since it was the only type of life she knew. These types of stories can be found in novels such as *Guzmán de Alfarache*, *La hija de Celestina*, *The English Rogue*, or *Moll Flanders*.

Likewise, the Dark Brotherhood faction takes a darker approach to rogues. This embedded storyline introduces the player to stories of assassination, political intrigue, and treason in exchange for money. Through this faction, the player can experience the most violent side of rogues that is very similar to what we see in Leiber's stories, Cervantes' *Rinconete y Cortadillo* or *The English Rogue* where there are rogues within guilds or fraternities that are employed to hurt or kill people. Additionally, cities like Riften, Markarth or Windhelm include slums where the player can observe the life of rogues and other poor people that may end up becoming criminals. For example, thieves, like Brynjolf; thugs or assassins, as Nazir; drug addicts, like Wujeeta; beggars, such as Edda and Snifl; racial minorities, like the argonians in the ghetto of Windhelm, and orphans, as Lucia. These characters support Picaresque experiences through side-quests like "Skooma trade" or "Argonian dock workers".

Meanwhile, BG3 includes the possibility of participating in Picaresque experiences in its main enacted story, since it allows to solve most of its stages through manipulative dialogues, stealthy gameplay and other actions derived from the mechanics featured in the game. That means that the narrative and dramatic agencies are heavily developed in its main quest. In this video game, the player can constantly use their abilities as a rogue in conversations or exploration to progress in the story through sleights of hand, deception or acrobatic movements. This shows a complex combination between the three aspects (ludic, narrative and agential) that results in detailed and pervasive Picaresque experiences. It also expresses narratively the life of rogues through different groups of peoples that introduce several quests or embedded stories for players.

For instance, BG3 develops Picaresque experiences through the eyes of rogue children starting from its first act. Not much time after starting the story, the player may

find a gang of rogue children that represent an oppressed racial minority in this virtual world. These children are tieflings, the result of human and demonic relationships, which are considered as pariahs by many other characters. Most of these children are orphans trying to find a way of living in a world that turns its back against them; like what we see in Picaresque Literature. Their leader, Mol, is a female rogue that resorts to witty plans and trickery to get money to protect the rest of the children. At the same time, another rogue called Mattis tries to scam the player with false magic rings to ensure Mol's objective while also maintaining his sister. During this first act, we can see other rogues of the gang pickpocketing characters or learning to defend themselves. They offer quests, embedded stories, related to robbery and deception that introduces players to several Picaresque experiences. As the game's story progresses, the vulnerability of these children manifests itself and the player shall decide if they participate in their plans, helping them, or cause their deaths through different emergent or embedded narratives. For example, Mol ends up being deceived by a devil, and the player may trick the same demon to save her or let her suffer the consequences in the future. As an interesting easter egg with this group of rogue children, if the player has a rogue with urchin background, they can engage in a competition of rogue techniques with Mattis that may end up in the player receiving a background goal called "Artful Dodger" which is the name of one of the main rogues in *Oliver Twist*. This shows the literary influence of the video game and reinforces the Picaresque experience if the player knows the reference.



Figure 4. Start of a Picaresque experience with Mattis using a rogue avatar (Larian Studios, 2023). © Larian Studios

Furthermore, these three video games, through their mechanics, characters, and stories, allow the inclusion of hegemonic or critical transgressive episodes in which players might interpret different situations as the result of political and social struggles that can be reflected into the real world. For example, the rogue children context from BG3 can be understood as an example of discrimination towards ethnic minorities and the consequences it has in children. The same can be applied to Garrett's story in TTDP or the stories connected to ethnic minorities in Skyrim. On the other hand, the adventures of *Skyrim's* Thieves' Guild might lead the player to think about the consequences of living in a deprived urban area.

If we consider the agential, mechanical and narrative aspects of these games. We can see that the dramatic agency stands out in Picaresque experiences. Since players know that they have certain tools at their disposal, as well as a narrative role that can be fulfilled, they are invited to create personal narratives filled by unique Picaresque experiences derived from their actions. The dramatic agency then becomes a key element of Picaresque experiences, since players, in their context, act as rogues in the way they consider using the designed elements of the game to create their own story. This personal narrative, which is highly political due to the characteristics of Picaresque fiction, can be used to support the previous transgressive episodes within the games.

Conclusions

From the previous examples, it is possible to see how Picaresque experiences take shape. They need a combination of mechanical and narrative potential combined with a rather flexible agential aspect that allows players to reenact passages that resemble those of the Picaresque tradition. The selected video games show that there are several options to create these experiences embodying rogues. Mechanically, they offer numerous actions that can be tied to rogues and Picaresque Literature such as pickpocketing, lockpicking, manipulating other characters or assaulting them. To increase the feeling of being a rogue, two of these video games feature law-enforcement mechanics like the bounty system that works as a tool to point out the transgressive aspect of behaving as a rogue, but also balance the performance of rogues within the video game. Narratively, video games use Picaresque dynamic characters located in the myth of the rogue to introduce different narrative approaches towards rogues, like those living situations of oppression and social determinism or being part of criminal groups. Similarly, the portrayal of rogues living in the slums of cities or being discriminated shows possible transgressive political interpretations of their situation while also enriching the Picaresque experience by interacting with characters with different motivations and backgrounds. The dramatic, narrative, explorative and configurative agencies have also been shown as fundamental in the creation of Picaresque experiences.

Ultimately, Picaresque experiences allow us to reenact episodes which we can observe in literature since the 16th century. As it has been explained, this situation is not necessarily conscious. It is an example of the implicit literary influence that video games receive as cultural products. The myth, after the evolution of Picaresque Literature, is articulated once more offering a bridge that connects the literary past of the rogue with its contemporary videoludic expressions through the unique tools that shape this medium. Despite the different settings introduced by video games, we can state that they allow rich Picaresque experiences and episodes that are part of the contemporary Picaresque fiction through the articulation of the myth of the rogue.

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