Blacksad: Under the Skin. Transmedia and Ludification as Cultural Experience

Blacksad: Under the Skin. Transmedia y ludificación como experiencia cultural

Fernández Ruiz, M. y García-Reyes, D.[1]

ABSTRACT: Media convergence and transmediality have led fictional worlds originally developed in graphic novels to be expanded in more recent media such as video games, where environments and characters become playable and where storytelling elements intertwine with game mechanics and rules. This work aims to study the graphic novel saga *Blacksad* (Díaz Canales and Guarnido, 2001) and the video game *Blacksad: Under the Skin* (Pendulo Studios, 2019) in order to shed light on how the storytelling in the graphic novels is complemented by that of the video game, and what specific affordances of video games amplify the experience of the Blacksad universe. Both the graphic novel saga and the video game are analysed from the perspectives of media ecology, game studies, the foundations of transmedial worlds and the aesthetics of new media. Comics and video game coexist in a logic of transmediality and intertextuality that immerses users/players in a fictional world whose extension grows as they interact with their environments, characters and ethical codes, as well as with the different platforms and content generated by the community of fans or users.

Keywords: comics; video games; transmedia; media ecology; fictional worlds.

RESUMEN: La convergencia mediática y la transmedialidad han supuesto que los mundos de ficción desarrollados originalmente en las novelas gráficas tiendan an expandirse en medios más actuales como los videojuegos, donde los entornos y los personajes se vuelven jugables y los elementos de la narración se entrelazan con las mecánicas y las reglas del juego. Este trabajo tiene como objeto estudiar la saga de novelas gráficas *Blacksad* (Díaz Canales y Guarnido, 2001) y el videojuego *Blacksad: Under the Skin* (Pendulo Studios, 2019) con el fin de arrojar luz sobre cómo la narración de las novelas gráficas se complementa con la del videojuego. Además, indaga en las prestaciones específicas de los videojuegos, que amplifican la experiencia del universo de *Blacksad*. Tanto la saga de novelas gráficas como el videojuego se analizan desde las perspectivas de la ecología de los medios, los *game studies*, los fundamentos de los mundos transmediales y la estética de los nuevos medios. El cómic y el videojuego conviven en una lógica de transmedialidad e intertextualidad que sumerge a los usuarios/jugadores en un mundo ficticio cuya extensión crece a medida que interactúan con sus entornos, personajes y códigos éticos, así como con las diferentes plataformas y contenidos generados por la comunidad de fans o usuarios.

Palabras claves: comics; videojuegos; transmedia; ecología de los medios; mundos de ficción.

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[1] **Marta Fernández Ruiz** es Doctora en *Game Studies* por la Universidad Carlos III de Madrid y profesora e investigadora en el Centre de la Imatge i la Tecnologia Multimèdia de la Universitat Politécnica de Catalunya. Imparte las asignaturas de Narrativa en Tiempo Real, Diseño de Juegos Serios y Realidad Aumentada. marta.fernandez.ruiz@citm.upc.edu, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3004-3242

David García-Reyes es Doctor en Literatura Latinoamericana por la Universidad de Concepción y profesor e investigador visitante de la Facultad de Humanidades y Arte, Universidad de Concepción. Imparte asignaturas de postgrado en torno a los estudios culturales de Iberoamérica y al análisis intermedial en las creaciones artísticas. davgarciareyes@gmail.com, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3445-1304

1. Introduction

The current media ecosystem is characterized by the expansion of fictions and cultural experiences through different platforms, as well as by the existing convergence between new and old media (Jenkins, 2006; Scolari, 2015). In this respect, we see how different fictional worlds that had their origin in graphic novels (*Fables* by Bill Willingham, or *The Walking Dead* by Robert Kirkman and Tony Moore) have grown in new media such as video games (*The Wolf Among Us* or *The Walking Dead*, both from Telltale Games). In these video games, environments and characters become playable and a higher level of user engagement is pursued.

Each medium embracing the expansion of the same fictional world offers a specific expressive language, new modes of interaction and, ultimately, a different experience. For example, video games allow the discovery of a story through interactions and navigation inside a digital environment (Jenkins, 2004; Manovich, 2005). Video games also allow the fusion of storytelling elements with mechanics, dynamics and game rules.

At the same time, processes of gamification of media and cultural experiences are increasing (Bogost, 2011; Waltz and Deterding, 2015). Today, it is normal to interact with a gamified application, to participate in an escape room, or to find in different video games the favourite fictions of a wide social spectrum such as the polysemic, sequential and expanded *Star Wars* and *Marvel* universes.

This study deals with the analysis of the *Blacksad* graphic novels saga (2001-), created by Juan Díaz Canales and Juan José Guarnido (comic writer and comic artist, respectively), along with the recent publication of the video game *Blacksad: Under the Skin* (Pendulo Studios, 2019).

Blacksad is a Spanish comic strip album series whose first volume *Blacksad #1: Somewhere within the shadows*, was released in 2000. Subsequently, the following numbers appeared in the series: *Blacksad #2: Artic Nation* (2003), *Blacksad #3: Red Soul* (2005), *Blacksad #4: Silent Hell* (2010) and *Blacksad #5: Amarillo* (2013)[2]. Since then, different numbers of the series have achieved successes such as the National Comic Award (2014) and the Eisner Award (2015) for the best foreign album. These circumstances demonstrate the qualitative recognition of Canales and Guarnido's work and global projection. The graphic novel saga has been translated into dozens of languages and published by mythical publishing companies such as Dargaud (French edition[3]) or Dark Horse (American edition). The release in 2021 of the sixth number of the series has recently been announced, tough it still is not available.

The series takes place in the North America of the 1950s, at the beginning of the Cold War. Both the atmosphere and the stories remediate the aesthetics of noir cinema and the classic codes of the detective crime novel, with the peculiarity that all characters are zoomorphic people. In addition to the publication of the video game *Blacksad: Under the Skin*, 2019 was the year in which publication of a sixth volume of the graphic novel saga was announced. In 2015, *Nosolorol*, the Spanish publisher of role-playing games, published *Blacksad: The Role-Playing Game*. Through an agreement reached in 2019 between *Nosolorol* and Raven Distribution, the game was translated, produced and distributed in Italian language.

From the character's appearance it should be noted that John Blacksad is designed like any of the canonical noir's private investigators, from Sam Spade by Dashiell Hammet to Philip Marlowe

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[2] Although *Blacksad* was originally published in France by Dragaud, we worked with the Spanish edition, published by Norma Editorial.

[3] Before being published in Spanish, *Blacksad* was originally published in French by Dargaud.

by Raymond Chandler (raincoat and tie suit), or Mike Hammer[4] (moustache and tough guy face). In Díaz Canales and Guarnido's vignettes we find an extremely careful work, from the props and scenery to the details in the story, whose realistic ambition shows a thorough work of documentation.

From a storytelling point of view, both the graphic novel saga and the video game could be linked to the detective fiction genre and to the distinction Todorov (1997) makes between the story of the crime and the story of the investigation. The story of the crime takes place before the story starts, and the story of the investigation happens while the first story is discovered. Far from remaining as isolated crime stories, the comic album series and the video game establish connections between them, providing details of John Blacksad and the other characters, as well as of how America was in the 1950s.

This research aims to shed light on:

- How the storytelling of the graphic novel saga is complemented by the video game.

- How the analogue experience provided by the comic strip series is related to the digital experience provided by the video game.

- What specific features and affordances of the video game contribute to the transmedia amplification of the experience of the Blacksad universe initially introduced in the graphic novel saga.

To achieve these goals, a textual and aesthetic content analysis of the comic strip album series and the video game was carried out. A framework was built based on the notion of transmedial worlds and the transmedia experience (Tosca and Klastrup, 2019), as well as on game studies' perspectives (Pérez Latorre, 2015; Sicart, 2014; Juul, 2013; Sutton Smith, 1997), new media aesthetics' considerations (Jenkins, 2004; Murray, 1999) and studies focused on detective fiction (Fernández-Vara, 2018).This content analysis was combined with an exploration of reviews and comments that fans of the Blacksad universe shared on YouTube and in the Steam[5] community, as well as with an interview with one of the video game's co-writers.

2. Play as an element inherent to the human being

Although we can speak of an increasing ludification of the current cultural and social context (an example is the implementation of games in areas that go beyond pure entertainment, such as serious or persuasive games), play and games are not new. Play is an inherent and traditional action among humans and has become a necessary condition for their evolution and survival. Certain features of play and games, which are related to evolutive matters, allow us to identify differences in video games with respect to other media as platforms leading to transmedia experiences.

Play can be found at the roots of evolution, mainly because it promotes adaptive flexibility (Sutton-Smith, 1997). For Sutton-Smith, it is through play that we expand our scope from the real to the possible. We human beings constantly try to confront and find solutions to changes and unexpected events that arise in our lives and environments. Play and games have a connection to this matter, as they work as models of interaction in unpredictable environments, where successful adaptation depends on certain behavioural and/or cognitive flexibility.

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[4] Created by Mickey Spillane. Apart from being a detective novelist, he was the scriptwriter of comic strips such as *Captain America* or *Captain Marvel* (from 2011, renamed *Shazam*). Hammer became popular through the CBS TV series (1984–1987), with Stacy Keach as the protagonist and Larry Brodie as the showrunner.

[5] Steam is a digital games distribution platform developed by Valve Corporation in 2003.

In his essay on the design of cultural experiences, Pérez Latorre (2015) addresses different investigations that assess play and games as an adaptive asset for the development and evolution of human beings and identifies three different ways in which video games make this contribution: adaptation to the rules of the game, problem solving processes, and the exercise of freedom and decision-making.

From the point of view of adaptation to the rules of the game, we implement adaptive flexibility when we try to adapt to an integrated rule system in a new or unknown environment. This process can be gratifying as video games promote a non-transcendence factor. An example of non-transcendence is the case of the multiple lives of the player, which allow her to start again as many times as she wants or needs. Following Pérez Latorre, this non-transcendence is the basis of play and games as tools to practise serious roles such as mums and dads or patients and doctors (and even training for complex situations such as that provided by flight simulators, which is offered to commercial or military pilots.)

Regarding problem solving, video games can be considered experimentation environments where it is possible to try different ways to solve a problem or a challenge safely. Through different trials, we make inferences, analyse variables, establish strategies and apply lateral thinking techniques (breaking with realistic routines in solving problems) to find the appropriate combination or solution. This promotes flexibility not only at the cognitive level, but at the emotional level. In his essay *The Art of Failure* (2013), Juul argues that one reason why we like games is because we tend to lose with them: games lead us to assume defeats and promote learning to progress in the right direction. We internalize constructive ways of assuming failure and practise attitudes that promote resilience and our ability to face what is unfavourable to us.

Finally, from the point of view of freedom, creativity and transgression, and according to Sicart (2014), games provide us with a way to exercise freedom, self-knowledge and personal expression through the attitude we have when interacting with the rules of the game. For example, graphic adventures allow players to choose between various possible decisions to progress through the game.

3. Media convergence and the ecological metaphor

In an environment marked by the consolidation of global information networks, the cultural convergence phenomenon and the emergence of new media, added to the insights provided by the ecology of the media, are useful considerations to understand the ways in which different media relate to each other (Scolari, 2015). Media ecology theory covers almost all aspects of communication processes, from the relationships between media and economy to perceptual and cognitive transformations that subjects undergo from their exposure to communication technologies. It neither focuses on any particular medium (that is, it can be considered a transmedia theory) nor on a limited period (referring to the appearance of language, orality, writing, digital environments, etc.).

Media ecology theory was born during the 1960s, with Neil Postman and Marshall McLuhan as the main drivers (Morrison, 2006). It starts from two complementary considerations of the ecological metaphor (Scolari, 2015). On the one hand, we consider media as environments in terms of their structure, content and impact on consumers/users. According to this interpretation, media create an environment that surrounds the subjects and shapes their perception and cognition. Technologies (from writing to digital media) create environments that affect the subjects who use them. On the other hand, we have the consideration of media as species according to which no medium exists alone or has meaning on its own, but it is in permanent relationship with other media. Under this interpretation, media are species that share the same ecosystem and establish relationships with

each other. McLuhan (1964) used this metaphor to explain that what a medium does in culture is more important than the content it delivers.

In the context provided by media ecology, and in the specific relationship between comics and video games, it is possible to perceive a convergence that not only encompasses the possibility of sharing and expanding content, but also the possibility of amplifying experiences. In his essay *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter* (2016), Sax highlights the importance that analogue media (erroneously thought of as obsolete), such as physical books, vinyl or board games, continue to have today. For Sax, analogue media promote physical experiences that digital media cannot (the touch or aroma of a newly released book, the visual pleasure that comes from taking a vinyl from its cover, the possibility of playing face to face with friends and acquaintances, etc.). These physical experiences are still valued by consumers/users.

4. Towards transmedia games and user experience

From the specific point of view of how different media share and expand content, a distinction must be made between the terms 'multimedia' and 'transmedia'. While the term 'multimedia' refers to the centripetal movement of concentration of languages and media in a single interface, the word 'transmedia' refers to the centrifugal movement that expands a narrative in many media and platforms with the complicity of prosumers (Scolari, 2019). The expansion of a narrative on different platforms is partly due to the concern to produce greater immersion of the consumer/user/fan into a fictional universe. Depending on how a fictional project is conceived from the beginning, we can speak of proactive transmedia projects (conceived as transmedia from the beginning of their planning) or reactive ones (devised as such on the fly) (Scolari, 2013).

The design of the transmedia experience involves approaching the user's journey, understood as a diagram that reflects the multiplatform routes that the viewer/consumer can make through the fictional world. Time is allocated on the X axis and the platform on the Y axis. This provides a clear picture of the dependencies and bridges between each component and serves to highlight problems with entry points, calls to action or service departures (Hayes, 2012).

Among the platforms on which it is possible to expand a story, we can find video games. Gone is the confrontation between ludologists and narratologists that took place with the birth of game studies in 2001. Although some scholars such as Aarseth (1997) argued that the narrative layer of games is irrelevant from the point of view of gameplay, other theorists such as Murray (1999) justified that in video games it was possible to enjoy a story as much as it is enjoyed in a comic, a book or a movie.

Murray highlights four properties of digital environments that contribute to expand the possibilities of storytelling in the media ecosystem. On the one hand, digital environments can be developed procedurally; that is, narrative experiences are not created manually, but are based on algorithms that work following a series of rules and procedures. Moreover, they are participatory, in the sense that procedural environments are not only attractive because they develop rule-generated behavior, but also because users can induce that behavior. That is, digital environments react to users' input. They are also spatial, because of their power to represent a navigable, enactable and traversable space. Linear media such as books and films can show a space through verbal description or image, but only digital environments can present a space through which we can move or perform spatially. Finally, they are encyclopedic. Since all forms of representation are migrating to electronic media and all the computers in the world are potentially accessible to each other, we can conceive of a global library of paintings, films, newspapers, television programs, databases, etc. A library that would be accessible from anywhere in the world.

Regarding the spatiality property, the work of Jenkins (2004) was significant in proposing the idea

of video games as environmental narratives, since the player explores and creates through her navigation and her interaction with the game environments and their objects.

Also, against the assumption that the narrative layer is games is irrelevant from the point of view of gameplay, Fernández-Vara (2018) focuses on detective games as a lens to examine the relationship between gameplay and storytelling and supports the idea that detective literature can be considered a game, as it is mainly about building a puzzle to find out what happened (Suits, 1985). Among the features that detective fiction stories have in common, Fernandez-Vara points out that this genre "can lead to story-driven gameplay, where the goal of the player is piecing together the story of previous events. The core of the game is making sense of this story, and / or using the information revealed to solve the problems of the game" (p. 3). That is, there is a puzzle-solving mechanic that is intertwined with figuring out what happened.

Fernández-Vara also rescues Murray's (1999) notion of scripting the interactor, to refer to "how specific genres create expectations about what players should be doing (or not) in a game, without having to provide explicit instructions or explicitly constraining their actions" (p.3). That is, fiction genres lead to behavioral scripts that players can reproduce. In other words, "the behavior of the detective provides the core mechanics to solve the mystery" (p.3). Finally, in the context of games, and in addition to Todorov's differentiation, Fernández-Vara highlights the difference between the story of the crime and the story of the player when the game begins.

Twenty years after the emergence of game studies, not only it is assumed that video games can tell stories, but specific work has also been carried out on video games as expansion platforms for fictional and transmedial worlds.

4.1. Transmedia games and transmedia play

Kennedy (2019) examines different degrees of gameplay in transmedia games, based on the difference that exists in the Anglo-Saxon language for the words 'play' and 'game'. Although in languages such as Spanish the words 'play' and 'game' are translated the same way (game), they express different ideas. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) associate the term 'play' with the definition that the game theorist Parlett (1999) builds for informal play, characterized by the lack of specific rules and patterns. In contrast, they link the term 'game' to the notion of formal play, consisting of a structure of means and ends. In this structure, the means constitute a series of resources that are manipulated, according to a set of rules, to achieve a victory situation.

The distinction between formal play and informal play is similar to that proposed by Caillois (2006) with his concepts of *paidea* and *ludus*. *Paidea* refers to a type of game that does not depend on rules (which brings it closer to the word 'play'), while *ludus* refers to systems with a set of formal rules, such as chess or soccer (which is closer to the notion of 'game' and to video games, as far as the purposes of this research are concerned).

Based on these considerations, Kennedy (2019) establishes a distinction between transmedia games and transmedia play as providers of different experiences. For Kennedy, from the simplest and strictest point of view, a transmedia game is an adaptation or expansion of a movie, series or book to a video game, usually in the form of games for consoles or platforms such as Steam, with ruled systems (aligned to the concept of *ludus*). Examples of transmedia games would be the AAA franchises from *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter* or *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and web games or games accessible through social networks. However, Kennedy points out more experimental forms of game design that give rise to alternate reality games (ARGs), live action role playing games (LARPs), and other games that consider the game as a *paidea* system—that is, a game without a rigid structure of rules or specific ends. These games are placed in the 'transmedia play' category.

In addition, according to the analysis by Kennedy, transmedia games usually obey the logic of the market and commercialization, while transmedia play connects with experimental, social and political concerns. The type and format of the transmedia play goes beyond a specific platform or console and extends to geographies or spaces in the urban landscape.

Whether for commercial or experimental purposes, transmedia games and transmedia play can be placed within a broader trend toward the gamification of cultural experiences as part of the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 2011), a trend in which there is an increasing demand for interactive and playable experiences that extend our engagement with existing cultural forms.

4.2. User experience approach to transmedial worlds

In relation to the transmedia experience, Tosca and Klastrup (2019) propose a model for analysing what they call transmedial worlds (TMW). We can understand TMW as those acts of imagination, mental images gradually built from various interactions with fictions that share the same universe, that come into existence in acts of aesthetic reception:

> Transmedial worlds are abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms. What characterises a transmedial world is that audience and designers share a mental image of the 'worldness' (a number of distinguishing features of its universe) (Tosca and Klastrup, 2019, p. 392).

Tosca and Klastrup's work is based on theories related to the incompleteness of fictions (Iser, 1978; Eco, 1979). Users (readers, players, etc.) need to carry out interpretive and emotional work to experience the narrative they interact with aesthetically. For these researchers, the experience of watching a film belonging to a huge transmedial world, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, is a complex process where the receiver interprets, gets emotionally involved and accesses her previous memories or repertoire of knowledge about this transmedial universe that she has developed throughout her life as a reader, viewer, consumer or user. Not only does she react to the scenes in the film, but she relates these scenes to the rest of her knowledge about the world, as well as what the rest of the fan community thinks and knows about this world.

To describe this process, Tosca and Klastrup (2019) use three concepts:

- *Mythos*: backstories that explain the TMW.
- *Topos*: scenarios (places and people).
- *Ethos*: philosophy and ethics that make sense in that world.

Any interaction with a transmedia product will evoke all the knowledge and affection that the user associates with that specific TMW. This TMW will later be reordered with the new addition. The transmedia experience is, therefore, the update a user makes of a TMW (*mythos*, *topos* and *ethos)* which has been expanded on a specific platform with its own affordances (specific possibilities each platform or media affords to the user).

Therefore, the transmedia experience is always situated in time (in relation to previous and future encounters with TMW), in space (the materiality of the medium also plays a part) and in the body of the user, who is involved in a sensory, intellectual and emotional way. Figure 1 shows the transmedia experience model proposed by Tosca and Klastrup (2019, p. 393).

Figure 1. Transmedia experience model proposed by Tosca and Klastrup (2019)
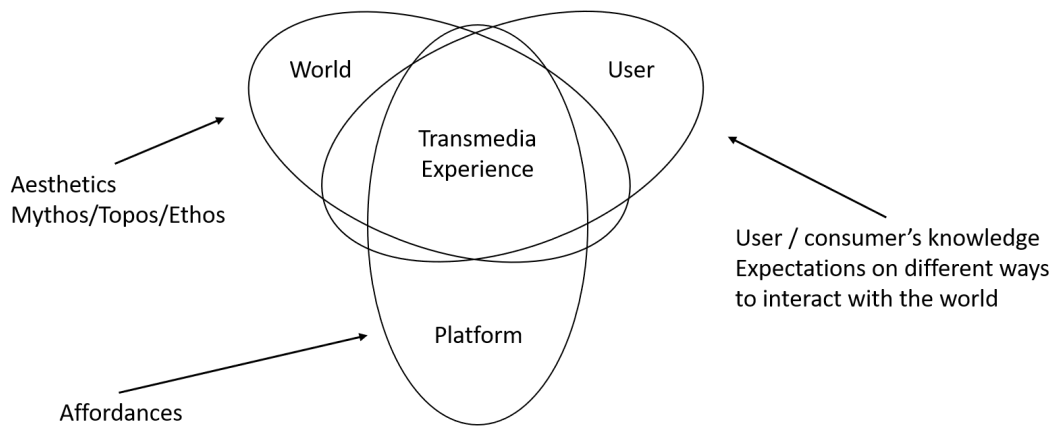
5. Method

To address the connections between Díaz Canales and Guarnido's comic album series and Pendulo Studios' video game in the context of transmediality and their shared media ecology, we carried out a textual-aesthetic content analysis. Tosca and Klastrup (2019) argue that to capture the transmedia experience, an aesthetic-analytical approach can be combined with qualitative empirical research. In other words, it is interesting to investigate each fiction as an individual work (formal properties, thematic and stylistic features) and as part of the TMW universe that is activated by the imaginative interaction of the user.

Bardin (1996) defines content analysis as the set of techniques of communications analysis aimed at obtaining indicators by systematic procedures of description of the content of messages. These techniques allow the inference of knowledge relative to the conditions of production/reception (inferred variables) of these messages. Following Bardin, content analysis consists of three phases: pre-analysis, exploitation of the material and processing of the results and elaboration of interpretations. Each of these phases is described below in the context of this research work.

Regarding the pre-analysis phase, we proceeded to a re-reading of the comics (insofar as we had established previous contact with the comic strip album series) consisting of connecting our reading experience with our research goals and the literature review. We also played Pendulo Studios's game, connecting it to the notion of transmedia game proposed by Kennedy (2019). When classifying *Blacksad: Under the Skin* we observed that it is mostly a rule-driven game (*ludus*) and developed for a type of player who is used to consoles or platforms such as Steam. In this phase we also perceived that the game also seeks player engagement through contact with the *Blacksad* universe. Additionally, there seems to be a motivation from the producer's side in the commercial expansion of the universe rather than an artistic or experimental concern.

After this phase, we proceeded to analyse the material according to a series of items arising from our first observations and experiences with the Blacksad universe and the literature review. Since this research aims at detecting the connections between the graphic novel saga and the videogame, the items of the analysis were built upon the three pillars of TMW proposed by Tosca and Klastrup (2019), namely world, platform, and users. These pillars were complemented with additional items to assess both the specific features of the Blacksad universe (detective fiction features) and the affordances of video games as platforms (since one of the specific goals of this research is to assess the possibilities of video games to contribute to generate experiences in the transmedia ecology). These items are explained below and summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. List of items to carry out the content analysis on the Blacksad transmedial world.

	Items		
Transmedial World (Toca and Klastrup, 2019)	World (Toca and Klastrup, 2019)	Mythos Topos Ethos	
	Platform (Toca and Klastrup, 2019)	Digital media properties (Murray, 1999)	Procedurality, spatiality, participation, encyclopedic features
		Game properties (Pérez Latorre, 2015; Sicart, 2014; Juul, 2013; Sutton-Smith, 1997)	Problem solving Trial-and-error Self expression
		Detective games properties (Fernández-Vara, 2018)	Behavioral script
	Users (Toca and Klastrup, 2019)	Comments and reviews	

Source: own elaboration.

- World: fictional world composed by the connections existing between both the graphic novel saga and the video game. It encompasses the notions of mythos (the foundational stories of the Blacksad universe, its most central backstory), topos (the time and space where the Blacksad transmedial world exists) and ethos (ideas and moral systems that are valid in the Blacksad universe).

- Platform: the specific elements of video games that contribute to the transmedia amplification of the Blacksad experience, introduced previously by the graphic novel saga. To be more specific on the assessment of the video game affordances, we introduced the properties of digital environments claimed by Murray (1999) as items to carry out the analysis (procedurality, participation, spatiality and encyclopedic features). Additionally, we also implemented the specific affordances of games and play described by Pérez Latorre (2015), Sicart (2014), Juul (2013) and Sutton Smith (1997) in the list of items (games and play as opportunities to enrol in problem solving activities, trial-and-error experimentation, and expression through the attitude we have when meeting the rules of the game). Finally, we addressed the specific affordances of detective games. As Fernández-Vara (2018) indicates, "by exploring the narrative nature of detective games, how detective stories have been turned into games (digital and non-digital), and how genre expectations and conventions shape gameplay, we can gain a better understanding of the integration between gameplay and narrative" (p.1).

- Users: attitudes and users' reception towards *Blacksad: under the Skin*. A qualitative exploratory analysis of the opinions of players of the video game was carried out, mainly on YouTube (walkthroughs, reviews) and Steam (opinions of the players who consumed the game).

- Apart from the textual-aesthetic content analysis and the exploration of users' impressions on the video game, we carried out a semi-structured interview with Josué Monchan,[6] co-writer of the game, together with Ramón Hernáez. After creating the list of items to carry out the analysis, we proceeded to carry it out. The processing of the results and the elaboration of interpretations is discussed in the next section.

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[6] We highly appreciate Monchan's contribution and kind support of this work.

6. Analysis and discussion

The analysis of both *Blacksad: Under the Skin* and the graphic novel saga (from *Blacksad #1* to *Blacksad #5*) allowed us to gain insights which are shared in the following sections.

6.1. Repertoire and world: *mythos*, *topos* and *ethos*

From the *mythos* point of view (backstories explained by the TMWs), although the beginning of the game may take the reader to elements of the first volume of the comic album series, the story soon begins to show narrative differences. This time, instead of the murder of the protagonist's girlfriend and the languishing Golden Age Hollywood atmosphere, *Blacksad: Under the Skin* shows the case of the murder of Joe Dunn, the owner of a boxing gym. Joe Dunn's daughter hires detective John Blacksad, protagonist of the comic series and the game, to discover who the murderer was. Facts and events are new, but they share the same background as the graphic novel saga: the America of the fifties in terms of crime fiction and detective films.

Among the main topics found in this background is racism. Monchan attests to the hard work Pendulo Studios did in faithfully portraying African American characters, primarily through dialogue. African American actors participated in the dubbing and made valuable contributions to represent this group. As Monchan points out, Pendulo Studios' work wanted to approach the problem of racial discrimination and Rosa Parks' movement through subtle details such as incorporating African American characters into back seats of buses while white characters remained in the front seats. These details are directly connected to *Blacksad #2: Artic Nation.*

Another recurring theme is the rigid gender roles. In this sense, a contrast between the main female characters can be observed: María, traditional, close to the angel in the house stereotype, who seems to have books that advocate that feminism begins at home; and Sonia, detached from the nuclear family environment and ready to break with the expectations of the time, closer to the second wave of feminism and the publication of *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949) by Simone de Beauvoir.

More indirectly, homosexuality is reflected through the campaign carried out in the United States in the 1950s against the LGBT group, the Lavender Scare. Also, the United States' relations with Cuba are referenced. These elements were omitted or not directly addressed in Díaz Canales and Guarnido's vignettes, which shows the literary resources of the video game scriptwriters and designers to expand the fictional world.

The detective's universe is enhanced and intensified in the video game with the incorporation of a jazz music soundtrack (strongly connected to *Blacksad #4: Silent Hell*). From an interactive point of view, the video game's mechanics also reinforce this detective universe. For example, a game mechanic consists of collecting clues to fit them together later as a puzzle. Each puzzle solved leads to deductions that allow the player to get closer to the murderer of Joe Dunn. This matches with the connection Fernández-Vara establishes between the detective fiction genre and the story-driven gameplay where the goal of the player is solving puzzles to piece together the story of the crime.

Regarding the *topos* (the different locations and their inhabitants), we have John Blacksad's office, as well as the places frequented by the characters in the story. The video game maintains the zoomorphic appearance of the highly humanized characters. As Monchan indicates, this realism or humanism in the characters was mainly sought through their voices.Even though Pendulo Studios' decision to use motion capture systems (derived from the cinematographic industry and 3D animation) could also be connected to the idea of achieving more realism or humanism in the characters' movements, according to Monchan it was mainly due to production criteria, although it gave rise to aesthetic differences between the comic album series' characters and those in the

game. For example, John Blacksad's exaggerated facial expressions in the comics are smoothed out in the game. While the language of comics allows artists to have a character portraying a serious expression in one frame and be smiling in the next, the audiovisual language needs to look for transitions between facial expressions, which in the 3D animation field resulted in obtaining extremely complex riggings (bones structure attached to 3D meshes and used to animate characters in digital animation software).

The game constantly draws on secondary characters from the comics. This is the case of Smirnov, the policeman, and Weekly, the journalist, with whom John Blacksad meets on a recurring basis. The video game reflects the same type of relationship that Smirnov and John Blacksad have in the comics. Smirnov is intentionally represented as a dog. He belongs to the police force and seeks collaboration and teamwork, which clashes with the independent and solitary traits of a feline who works as a private detective. Also, and with respect to Weekly, the video game makes reference to the first time he and John Blacksad met (*Blacksad #2: Artic Nation*) as when they became friends when Weekly proposed, through a phone call, to go out for an ice cream.

Other secondary characters from the comics are the polar animals, philophascist segregationists closely related to the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), introduced in the second volume of the series (*Blacksad # 2: Artic Nation*). The video game introduces these polar animals as part of the background story, as black characters attest to being intimidated by them in the gym.

In general, and as in the graphic novel saga, the video game characters reveal more information about themselves through their zoomorphic attributes than through their dialogue. In an interview held on *Radio Televisión Española* (2014),[7] Díaz Canales confirmed using animal attributes as a metaphorical resource to build the different characters' personalities. Through this resource, it would be possible for any reader, regardless of their mother tongue, to attribute a series of personality traits to each character. Apart from the graphic novel saga being translated into more than 20 languages, the animal metaphor can be used as a kind of universal language.

Regarding the *ethos* (philosophy and ethics that make sense in that world), in the universe of private detectives, the use of violence in self-defence or as a method to advance in the solution of each case or crime is recurring, establishing a rigid and stereotyped vision of gender roles. In this sense, and through the detective genre's code, it is coherent to find corrupt characters like O'Reilly who do not hesitate to personally assassinate anyone who threatens their family or business. As per the contrast between María and Sonia, Monchan indicates that Pendulo Studios did not want to judge them, but to maintain the *ethos* of the time and the codes related to the detectives and noir genre.

From these observations it can be said that *Blacksad: Under the Skin* is not limited only to exposing and reconstructing the story of a crime. It rather prioritizes the process of discovering what really happened, which makes possible to share a backstory (America in the 50's impregnated with racism and conservatism, and yet enriched with contributions from the African-American community such as jazz music) and to add multiple and coherent connections between characters and spaces in the saga.

6.2. Platforms and affordances

Considering the affordances of digital environments provided by Murray (1999), and focusing on the notions of procedurality and spatiality, it is noted that Pendulo Studios' game is not just a game that makes the scenarios navigable, but navigation becomes an essential requirement (a rule to

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[7] Interview with Juan Díaz Canales in *Tres14*, published 1 December 2014 online: https://www.rtve.es/ alacarta/ videos/tres14/entrevista-juan-diaz-canales-tres14/2883508/

accept) to interact with characters and items spread across different parts of the game levels. In this way, *Blacksad: Under the Skin* promotes the exploration of environments by allowing the player to earn rewards. These rewards can be quotes or messages written on the walls that show deeper details about the *mythos* of the transmedial world, which also matches with Jenkins' assumptions on environmental storytelling (2004). Examples of this are the phrases about victory and effort in the gym.

Navigation is thus a core action to achieve the different goals set by the game, just as the exploration of the environment is important for the detectives (along the whole detective fiction genre) to discover what happened in a crime scenario. We can connect this fact with the concept of behavioral script (Murray, 1999), as the expected behavior of the detective (looking for clues) provides the core mechanics to solve the mystery (navigate the environment, collecting pieces of the story).

Also, regarding the notion of behavioral script, and directly aligned to the expectations that a fan of the Blacksad universe may have, there is the implementation of the cat's feline senses into the game's mechanics, specifically when searching for clues. Sight, smell, and hearing help John Blacksad obtain relevant information on fixed and black-and-white screens, where a circle indicates where the detective should fix his senses.

As per the participation affordance assessed by Murray (1999), consisting of allowing the users' input to have an effect on the story or on the behaviour of the interactive system, one action that the video game allows the user, which the graphic novel saga cannot, is to handle John Blacksad himself or, at a specific moment, Weekly.

Considering both spatiality and participation, it is interesting to note Pendulo Studios' decision to offer the possibility to gain extra rewards, such as collecting stickers from famous athletes. These stickers are rewards to the navigation through the environment and allow us to obtain more details or clues about the fictional world, that is, the mythos, the topos and the ethos.

These stickers are not mere memorabilia, but they contain key details of the fictional world. In this respect, Pendulo Studios did arduous documentation work, from the biographies of sportsmen of the time, along with comics of the police genre of the forties and fifties, such as *Rip Kirby*,[8] to achieve the tone and atmosphere of the time. In other words, the studio worked to get players immersed in the pulp culture, providing a complete experience for the player, as demanding, or more, than any audiovisual spectator.

Additionally, there are connections between these collectibles and the boxing corruption story of *Blacksad: Under the Skin*, as one of the sticker characters is also a character in the game's story (Tim 'Iron Arm' Thorpe). There are also connections between the stickers and the characters in the graphic novel saga. For example, one of the baseball players is the brother of the frog that appears at the end of *Blacksad #1: Somewhere within the Shadows*. This shows that the game's scriptwriters and designers looked for connections and links with the graphic novel saga even in the least obvious aspects.

As Monchan indicated, this logic is aligned with Ken Levine's[9] concept of the pull narrative, consisting of players performing voluntarily non-mandatory actions to obtain more details on the story. In contrast, we can find the push narrative, the one in which the players are involved and dragged into the story because the very design of the game forces them to follow a specific set of actions.

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[8] *Rip Kirby* is a detective comic strip created by Alex Raymond in 1946.

[9] Video game designer, mainly known for leading the development of *BioShock* (2K Games, 2007).

In relation to the participatory and encyclopedic properties, which refers to the capacity of digital media to store large amounts of information (Murray, 1999), we can speak of the affordance of replayability. Depending on the dialogues the player chooses throughout her game, John Blacksad's personality traits will change. This matches with the differentiation made by Fernández-Vara (2018) around stories in detective games: on the one hand we have the story of the crime, and on the other, the story experienced by the player when the game begins, which depends in part on the choices she makes. As Monchan commented, in the comic album series you can see an evolution in John Blacksad's character and personality, from a more romantic, rebellious 'hard boy' in the style of Humphrey Bogart, to a more practical and flexible character with respect to certain moral principles, 'hard boy' only on the surface. Pendulo Studios wanted to reflect these traits in the different decisions that the player could make in the game. The game therefore provides access to the *My Blacksad* section, where it is possible to observe character statistics in relation to the player's actions (being honest or practical, being supportive, or the concept of traditional family, showing a tendency towards romantic love, etc.). This can also be linked to Sicart's (2014) idea that games provide us with a way to exercise freedom, self-knowledge and personal expression through the use and attitude we have when meeting the rules of game.

Also, throughout the game, it is possible to fail to achieve a goal (for example, to lose a character in a fight, not being able to match the different clues correctly, or not choosing the most suitable answer in a dialogue) and restart as if nothing had happened. This can be connected to the idea of adaptivity and experimentation with different situations (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Juul, 2013). In this sense, there is a link between the trial-and-error possibility in video games and the idiosyncrasy of John Blacksad in the graphic novel saga, as he does not seem to act always for money. He often ends up ruined, without work and without the certainty of a stable future, and still keeps on taking risks to unravel mysteries and achieve his own concept of justice.

6.3. The user: expectations and motivations

After showing the crime scene in Joe Dunn's gym, *Blacksad Under the Skin* starts with the same monologue as in *Blacksad #1: Somewhere within the Shadows*. This monologue is shown from the same frame and point of view that is used in the comic (with the exception, as Monchan indicates, that the comic does not show it in 16:9 format):

> Sometimes, when I enter my office, I have the impression of walking among the ruins of an ancient civilization. Not because of its disordered and chaotic appearance, but because they certainly seem to be the vestiges of that civilized being that I was (Díaz Canales and Guarnido, 2001, p. 5).

Far from being a simple coincidence, it is an intertextuality action that generates complicity between the game scriptwriters/designers and the user, who remembers the first moments when she interacted with the comic album series. The incorporation of phrases belonging to the graphic novel saga recurs throughout the game.

The qualitative analysis of players' comments in social networks such as YouTube and the Steam community shows that these intentional connections between the game and the comic album series through dialogues or monologues is highly appreciated by fans. For example, we find this testimonial/review in Steam[10]: "There are references to all *Blacksad* comic novels. Normally only noticeable by fans" (an object in the scenery, a sentence uttered by John)[11].

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[10] Comments on Steam consulted on 1 May 2020 at https://store.steampowered.com/agecheck/app/1003890/

[11] The comment was originally written in Spanish: "*Hay referencias a todos los volúmenes de Blacksad, pero normalmente solo para fans (un objeto del escenario, una frase de John)*".

According to YouTube and Steam reviews, some specificities of the video game as a transmedial platform affected players' experience both positively and negatively. The audiovisual nature of games affected the experience positively, especially in matters related to dubbing and the jazz music soundtrack. The possibility for the player to decide on John Blacksad's personality was also highly appreciated. Reviews also compared Pendulo Studios' work in terms of quality with Telltale Games productions, this studio being an international reference in the production of interactive drama:

> Amazing Game, 9/10 really, only problem is some bugs and sometimes button presses not working. Good Story, Hard and puzzling, well puzzles, Good Deduction skills are needed as somethings might make you think its correct when it probably won't be correct, The company that made this needs to try and make another Telltale like game as this was Great experience that filled in the gap of detective like games until The Wolf among us Season 2 comes out, Thank you to the game developers for making this Gem![12]

Thanks for the review. Definitely will pick this game up on release day. I was hoping for another Wolf Among Us to be made, but since that don't look like it will happen ... This may be as good as it gets. Hope it does well.[13]

An example of video game elements which affected the experience negatively was the presence of some bugs in the first published versions of the game. These bugs were fixed progressively later.

7. Conclusions

The goal of this research was to shed light on the connections between the stories of the *Blacksad* graphic novel saga and the one provided by the video game *Blacksad: Under the Skin* in the context of a media ecology strongly characterized by convergence, transmediality, the rise of the experience economy and ludification. Also, on how the analogue experience provided by the comic strip series can be enriched with the digital experience provided by the video game. That is, this research aimed at getting to know the specific affordances of video games that contribute to the transmedia amplification of the experience of the Blacksad universe initially introduced in the graphic novel saga.

A textual-aesthetic content analysis of the comic strip album series and the video game through a list of items containing foundations of transmedial worlds, considerations on game studies and the features of detective fiction, allowed us to access an experience where still and colourful images in comic strips are enriched by gameplay sessions with non-linear dialogues, environmental storytelling, puzzle solving activities and the possibility to decide on different game events.

As per the connections between the stories of the graphic novel saga and the one provided by the video game, and taking into account the foundations of transmedial worlds, t not only to discover the mystery of isolated crimes, but also

Regarding the assessment of the specific affordances of video games that contribute to the transmedia amplification of the experience of the Blacksad universe, addressing the connections between the *Blacksad* comic strip album series and *Blacksad: Under the Skin* allowed us to address how the universe and atmosphere of a graphic novel saga give rise to a new and autonomous narrative object whose fictional dimension cannot be understood without its ludic nature. The story-driven gameplay based on collecting cues and solving puzzles, and the possibilities for players both to repeat actions in search of new results and to align decisions with the main character's personality

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[12] Comment on Steam consulted on 1 May 2020 at https://store.steampowered.com/agecheck/app/ 1003890/ Copied directly.

[13] Comment consulted on August 2020 at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0YbPDu4AERM Copied directly.

traits are inherent features of Pendulo Studio's game that allow for an expansion of the experience of Blacksad's transmedial world.

The game cannot be solved (rules of the game, procedurality) if the player does not explore the environment (spatiality), gets cues and joins these pieces of information as a puzzle-solving mechanic (participation) and decides between different possibilities (encyclopedic). Just as in detective fiction, it is expected that thess (behavioral script)

From the users' point of view, *Blacksad: Under the Skin* can be considered, multimodal Regarding multimodality, it is interesting to note the positive assessment audio elements had among the fan community. That is, the possibility to hear the characters' voices (dubbing) and the jazz music, which is part of the video games' original soundtrack. This has been reflected in YouTube and Steam's video game reviews.

This research has several limitations. One of them is the absence of further empirical methods in the user's experience side. Interviews, questionnaires and focus groups with *Blacksad* graphic novel saga's fans could have added more precise information on how users perceive Pendulo's Studios video game and its contribution to the transmedia expansion of the Blacksad universe. Another limitation is the impossibility to assess the sixth volume of the comic strip album series, as it has not yet been released. Further research on these aspects will be carried out to provide a deeper understanding on transmedial worlds and user experience.

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