



Gris: metaphor, symbol and story in (inter)action.

Gris: metáfora, símbolo y relato en (inter)acción.

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ABSTRACT

Gris, an independent Spanish video game, explores the expressive possibilities of this creative medium through a story that is, on one hand, a symbolic representation of the psychological process of the protagonist, and, on the other hand, a foundational narrative about the loss and recovery of identity. This title employs the expressive tools of the history of art to build its aesthetic proposal; in particular, it is categorically placed in the line of surrealism as an artistic current. The analysis of this elements is realized through fundamental notions of rhetoric and poetics, referencing authors such as Helena Beristáin and Carmen Bobes, and the narrative hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur, as well as theoretical perspectives that allow building bridges of analysis between literature and the visual arts.

Keywords: Video games. Narrative. Art. Poetics.

RESUMEN

Gris, videojuego español de producción independiente, explora las posibilidades expresivas de este medio creativo mediante un relato que es, por un lado, una representación simbólica del proceso psicológico de su protagonista, y, por el otro, una narración fundacional sobre la pérdida y la recuperación de la identidad. El título recurre a las herramientas expresivas de la



historia del arte para construir su propuesta estética; en particular, se coloca categóricamente en la línea del surrealismo como corriente artística. El análisis de este conjunto de elementos se realiza a partir de nociones fundamentales de retórica y poética, retomando a autoras como Helena Beristáin y Carmen Bobes, y la hermenéutica narrativa de Paul Ricoeur, así como aportes teóricos que permiten tender puentes de análisis entre la literatura y las artes visuales.

Palabras claves: Videojuegos. Narrativa. Arte. Poética.

Introduction

Video games are a means of expression capable of articulating narratives through discursive tools that give it its technical characteristics; in particular, the ability to integrate the concrete actions of the players into the narrative and, even more, that the development of that narrative is determined by such actions. In turn, its eminently visual character allows us to take up the discursive tools developed by the visual arts throughout its history.

Gris (2018) is a video game of surreal aesthetics developed by the Spanish team Nomada Studio, located in Barcelona. The game tells the story of a woman who has lost her voice, and with it the ability to sing, which triggers in her a deep depression, and such a circumstance will take her on a metaphysical journey of self-discovery. It is cataloged as a two-dimensional platform game that implements elements of riddles and tests of skill, with an artistic direction inspired by some of the pictorial avant-garde of the early twentieth century, as well as references to the history of animation and cinema. During the Game Awards 2019¹ ceremony, he received the award in the category of *games for impact*, which is given to games that highlight aspects of social or cultural development, such as the inclusion of people from different ethnic backgrounds and the visibility of mental illness.

¹ Since 2014, the Game Awards is the award ceremony for video games as the most widely disseminated medium among the audience that constitute the consumers of the industry, although they are not the only ones, since there are also recognitions given by the Developers Game Conference and the Independent Games Festival. The vote to determine the nominated and winning titles is determined by designers, developers, critics and journalists of the industry, as well as a public vote carried out by The Internet.



The game uses metaphor as a poetic trope to configure its meaning. When it is said that in this game the actions of the central character behave as metaphors, he refers to this notion as eminently rhetorical-poetic. As long as the actions carried out in the world of a game, like those of the agents in a conventional literary narrative, carry meaning, such a sense can manifest itself metaphorically, a juxtaposition of two semantic realities.

The mark of analysis with which the present approach is made is, on the one hand, a foundation of this metaphorical character as its own and pertinent of some visual works, and its relationship with the poetics described from literature as an academic discipline. Helena Beristáin, in her *Dictionary of Rhetoric and Poetics*, in which she collects notions from Aristotle to Roman Jakobson, identifies metaphor as a concept and relates it to dynamics of meaning that this game aims to replicate:

In every form that the metaphor takes, there is one idea that is preached about another. Sometimes it is implicit [...] and sometimes it is explicit, when there is a verb.

Metaphors that relate symbolic or mythical elements (mythological metaphor), already metaphorical elements, offer greater resonance than those that relate elements of another nature such as visual, tactile, etc. (1995, p.316)

In the case of *Gris*, (2018) the narrated story is constituted in turn as an allegory, of which Beristáin also explains: "in allegory, to poetically express a thought, from comparisons or metaphors, a correspondence between imaginary elements is established" (1995, p.36). *Gris* elaborates networks of metaphorical meanings that raise an allegory, as in the narrative the different temporal episodes are constituted in a configurative sense that permeates the entire story.

On the other hand, Paul Ricoeur's narrative hermeneutics are also used, in particular the idea raised in *Tiempo y Narración* (2004), the triple mimesis, which explains that the process of articulation of a narrative starts from a general understanding of the world by the author or creator, is constituted as a structure of meaning mediated by a materiality, a novel, a movie or a video game, and, finally, it places the reader (or spectator, or player) in a space of interpretation that allows him to understand



the story as a possibility of being and, in turn, observing himself in that space of possibility that is the world of narrative.

Metaphors between verse and pixel

Two-dimensional platform games are one of the most iconic genres of video games as a medium. In general, they consist of passing tests of motor skills to take the avatar² from one point to another, overcoming obstacles and enemies, moving in a two-dimensional way, almost always from left to right. During the eighties and nineties, the vast majority of games produced for the most prominent gaming systems belonged to this category; the *Super Mario Bros.* series it is the most recognized example of that trend.

Gris draws on the elements of this genre to articulate very clearly a discursive thesis regarding emotional depression around the notion of grief, which in turn relates to the loss of identity as a psychological phenomenon. This is raised metaphorically from the audiovisual resources, mainly, as well as the actions that the player must perform given the mechanics and rules of the game. All this configures a narrative that takes the main character on a journey of personal rediscovery, which is symbolically figured by moving through dreamlike fantastic spaces. Given the aesthetic character of this set of iconographic elements, the articulation of meaning is traced by the aesthetic strategies of surrealism as an artistic style.

To put it more simply, *Gris* is a surreal game. There is no categorization with an artistic style criterion in everyday industry practice; descriptions that allude to art history terminology are rarely found to outline the characteristics of a game. And it's not that there aren't games with elements of art history; quite the opposite, but it is true that in the field of video games as a medium and industry there is no recognition of a line of surreal games to which *Gris* could integrate.

² Avatar is the technical term used within the field of video game design with which the character or entity by which the player manifests his actions in the game world is designated. Mario, the protagonist of the series of *Super Mario Bros.*, from Nintendo, is one of the most emblematic examples.



In that sense, what makes this title surreal is not to be part of a specific trend, but to take for itself the tools of surrealism as a set of aesthetic and significant elements, of which both poetry and painting have been part, as well as works of cinema, literary narrative, theater and music. In fact, Conrad Roset, a Spanish visual artist and creative director of the game, never mentions that *Gris's* aesthetic is intended to be surreal, and refers more directly to the history of animation and other independent games as more forceful inspirations in his creative work;³ this, of course, does not deny that the categorization that is proposed is not only appropriate but especially relevant.

In *Del texto a la acción*, Paul Ricoeur describes narrative works as "experiments" of reality, in the same sense that a scientific laboratory test is an experiment of events occurring naturally in the world (2002, p.21). Thus, the metaphor represents the tropological core of the hermeneutic phenomenon in general, the space of possibility for interpretation. While the metaphor refers to something different from itself, as a semantic figure, the story throws truths about the real world from which its author starts for its construction; this is *mimesis I*, the prefiguration.

However, metaphor is only an individual element of the larger system that is the story. Alluding to the notion of discourse that Ricoeur recovers from Émile Benveniste, the *phrase* is the minimum unity of meaning, and a set of phrases articulates a discursive sense; these phrases can manifest themselves in the form of metaphors. Thus, in this story there are sets of metaphors that shape a meaning.

A fundamental feature of metaphorical phrases is the relationship of similarity they establish between their parts. While the reference relationship between the linguistic sign and the object to which it designates is, in principle, arbitrary, the metaphor has a motivated relationship between referent and reference; that is, the metaphor implies some form of analogy. Carmen Bobes, in her very exhaustive work *La metáfora*, explains:

The ontological foundations of an analogy can be of similarity between things by their situation, by their nature, by their relationships, and subjectively the analogy occurs in the

³ Statements made during the lecture given by the author at the Japan Weekend Japanese Culture Festival in Madrid in 2019.



perception that the subject has of two realities. The faculty of thinking by analogy allows lexical units to be used for metaphorical relations. (2004, p.119)

The intrinsic similarity in the metaphor takes for granted a first criterion of interpretation of it: the analogy. In the phrase "your pearl teeth" there is no concrete comparison as a rhetorical figure or syntactic construction, but there is an inescapable analogy between the two capital elements of the phrase, teeth and pearls. Although the sense of similarity is not explicit, the metaphorical nature of the phrase (and this is evidenced by the clear figurative sense of the sentence, since a literal interpretation would be incoherent) demands an analogical interpretation. It should also be considered that the similarity between lexical units can be obscure, ambiguous or cryptic in each case, especially in poetic texts with a prominent authorial intention, in which this similarity is motivated by an individual vision of the world.

Finally, hermeneutic analysis admits the extension of metaphor as a linguistic trope to other systems of meaning, that is, other languages besides verbal, since, as systems of signs, they are capable of configuring discourses. Describing the relationship of Pablo Picasso's drawing, *Deucalión y Pirra*, which illustrates a passage from *Las metamorfosis* by Ovidio, with the literary text that inspires it, Eduardo Peñuela states:

In the hair of Deucalión and the child, watery undulations are collected with tenderness and in the mane of Pirra a kind of wetness is preserved in which, poetically, the feminine humidity of a great flood is summarized. But, with certainty, those places, one has to order them so that reading, or the desire to read, finds the points where the connections of meaning are located. (2006, p.76)

Peñuela's article, "La metáfora visual", from which the previous quote is extracted, discusses in general the relevance of thinking of images as metaphors and, more specifically, whether images lend themselves with greater ease to free interpretation than literary texts due to the apparent indeterminacy of pictorial language. Peñuela determines that such indeterminacy is not inherent in



one medium or another, but in the poetic intention manifested in each work. The literary passage on which Picasso bases his sketch is ambiguous as to its meaning for the characters themselves, but the painting itself carries a clear metaphor, linguistically and semantically articulated: "Everything happens in drawing, as if the forms could be several things at the same time and, nevertheless, those forms have their laces, its rules of concordance, its declensions" (Peñuela, 2006, p.76).

This transcendence of metaphor as a visual rhetorical trope arises from the linguistics raised by its system of signs, visual in this case, which has also been exposed by Seymour Chatman (2013) in what he calls the *substance of expression*, the "material" from which the signs, words, images, sounds, or the set of all of them are made; and extends to the narratology itself in what it identifies as the *semiotic* structure of the story, the inherence of meaning configured as narration, independent of its means of expression, cinema, literature, video games and other possibilities.

Surrealism at stake

Now it is necessary to delve into the nature of surrealist aesthetics. Surrealism as an artistic avant-garde bases its proposal, in part, on the representation of the dream world as a manifestation of the artist's internal reality. Bárbara Barreiro explains:

The Surrealists preferred to ignore reality and be guided by the images that their dreams and wakefulness produced, turning these into real and true images of the nature of the subject. This is why we identify Surrealism as a movement in which each artist represents their own inner world, their needs and their deepest desires. (2014, p.453)

André Breton in his famous first manifesto proposes an initial definition, and although surrealism does not depend exclusively on it in its subsequent historical development, it is also true that this development has not lost sight of the aesthetic spirit of that first manifesto. For Breton, surrealism is a kind of irruption of the free association of ideas, images and desires within the artist in the world of rationality that modern culture intends to inhabit:



Surrealism: masculine noun. Pure psychic automatism by which one tries to express both verbally and in writing, or in any other way, the real functioning of thought. Dictation of thought, to the exclusion of any control exercised by reason and regardless of any aesthetic or moral concern. (Breton, 2001, p.44)

Surrealism as a discursive aesthetic proposal (that is, consciously articulated by an intentionality) also incorporates psychoanalysis; specifically, Sigmund Freud's proposal that describes dreams as a symbolic manifestation of the unconscious: "Freud has rightly focused his analysis on sleep. [...] Man, when he ceases to sleep, becomes above all a toy of his memory" (Breton, 2001, pp.27-28). Breton and the artists adhered to his proposal take this psychoanalytic theory to the plane of artistic expression and turn it into a free association of ideas and images, which in itself is characteristic not only of dreams but of all forms of thought disassociated from the rational will, that which Breton calls psychic automatism.

Neither Bárbara Barreiro, in her presentation of the history of the surrealist movement, nor André Breton himself emphasize the theoretical characteristics of his images (in part, surrealism was a rebellious replica against all forms of rationalization of art), but it is evident in any way that, explained from a semiotic perspective, the dreamlike images of surrealism behave as symbols, especially when considering the important influence of psychoanalysis on this avant-garde. The symbol, as described by C. S. Peirce, depends on a structure of meaning that transcends the sign itself: the symbol refers to something other than itself, but its relationship with it is not arbitrary but culturally, historically or intertextually motivated, while the symbolic signifier demands attention on itself (1986, p.55). In the case of surrealism, symbols are also defined in their relationship with that which is encoded from the unconscious, and which manifests itself as a dreamlike, imaginary, lysergic or schizophrenic image.

It is in this symbolic nature of surrealist images that lies their relationship with metaphorical language. R. Wellek and A. Warren, in *Teoría literaria*, deliberate on the conceptual juxtaposition between image, metaphor, and symbol (1966, p.225). Their discussion revolves around lyrics, but



they also review visual images by pointing out the use of symbols in Christian iconography. The authors conclude that, although notable differences between the concepts can be pointed out, their behavior as figures of literary language always oscillates between these definitions. Poetic images imply the intertwining of the realities alluded to directly and indirectly by the signs that constitute them, as Helena Beristáin and Carmen Bobes have also pointed out; and since there is this intertwining, the signs show a metaphorical behavior. Symbols are always—and surrealist iconography brings this metaphorical character to the forefront—a interweaving of realities; in the case of this avant-garde, the internal reality of the artist and the iconic figuration by which he is represented.

The result is a set of discursive strategies that manifest, through the painting or poem, the denotative-connotative relationship of metaphor as a rhetorical trope. The psychological connotation is observed between the symbol, associated image, and that with which it establishes a relationship of similarity. In surrealism, more times than not, this similarity behaves like an empty space that demands an interpretation based on analogy.

This is just the juncture in which *Gris* is forcefully placed. The main tool of significance of this title is the symbolic association between the images, the iconography that configures the interactive audiovisual story of the game, and what it refers to in the emotional spectrum.

In contrast to classical pictorial surrealism, *Gris* resorts to a rather simple and explicit iconography in itself, although always of a symbolic nature. The visual motif that dominates the narrative of the game is the image of the woman. The anonymous avatar is clearly a female character, although her silhouette never emphasizes her body, as she wears a wide and loose clothing. The female body, however, appears constantly, as the avatar travels through the spaces of the game, in the form of broken sculptures in different expressive postures, of lament, vulnerability, reflection or peace. These sculptures serve a double narrative function; they are, on the one hand, real objects in the dream world of the story with which the avatar interacts in various ways (their significance within the game world is never entirely clear, as the space of this story has an unspecified metaphysical nature, and there is no explicit reason why these statues exist); but they are, more decisively, symbols



of the emotional journey of the main character, whose significance is addressed to the player as an interpreter.

As symbols, these sculptures are also explicit because their metaphorical sense of similarity is, in part, in the image itself, bodily expressiveness alone denotes a clear emotional state, since it resorts more clearly to what Umberto Eco (1986, p.179) calls codes of recognition, elements of the represented object that are interpreted based on experience with reality. In this case, however, the allegorical sense is not only in bodily expressiveness. The sculptures always appear fragmented, broken; in this clear metaphorical strategy of the image, the space for interpretation opens exponentially: Why are they broken? What do they represent allegorically, on the one hand, and as objects in the world of the story?

In pictorial surrealism, fragmented monolithic bodies are a recurring visual motif. Salvador Dalí, for example, in *La metamorfosis de Narciso* illustrates the classic Greek myth, in which Narcissus falls in love with his own reflection on the surface of the water and throws himself to his death, by means of a split into two fragmented stone figures, one that dies and another that resurfaces to life in the form of the homonymous flower that grows between its cracks. The painting is, therefore, a symbolic, not figurative, representation of an emotional process.

In the case of *Gris*, the symbolic representation of these stony bodies is also linked to notions of emotional fragility, although of different kinds, and of an incomplete identity; it is worth noting, even, the coincidence in the appearance of new life in the form of flowers emerging from the fragmented stones in both examples.

A transcendental aspect for the interpretation of these codes is also the set of their intertextual elements, the artistic references present in the visual language of *Gris*. The animation of the game is essentially done by hand, like traditional cartoons, which is then digitized to allow it to be integrated into the computer code. In the first instance, this type of images breaks with the most common visual styles in the production of current video games, and is rather reminiscent of children's animation popularized by Walt Disney from the 30s of the twentieth century. The game overlays a grainy filter on the main cinematic sequences, and, in conjunction with the use of smooth textures



and overlapping shots that almost eliminate the depth of field, it seems to also allude to the style of animation director Chuck Jones, famous for producing some Warner Bros. animated classics, as well as short films of larger cinematic ambition, such as *The Dot and the Line* (Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1965) and *The Bear that Wasn't* (Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1967). Moreover, the art direction of *Gris* by Conrad Roset, whose general work⁴ and his work for this game are characterized by a style of flat colors in watercolor, is clearly fed by the French art *nouveau* of the early twentieth century, in particular the designs of Alphonse Mucha, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Théophile Alexandre Steinlen, as well as the minimalist surrealism of Joan Miro, which in turn are heirs of pictorial romanticism, impressionism and the avant-garde of the beginning of the century in general.

This intertextual network, the icons of surrealism and references to avant-garde art and animation, is part of the code for the interpretation of *Gris* as it confers an artistic "aura" to visual design. It is possible, of course, to find or establish bridges of intertextual reference from any game, as it is in any artistic or literary work, since the nature of art is intertextuality; but games whose references point to a sphere culturally associated with art history will present players with a horizon of expectations categorically different from that of games that find their references in other contemporary games, or in predominant visual styles in other popular narrative media.⁵ *Grey*, in alluding to these expectations, tacitly demands a much more contemplative and thoughtful kind of interpretation than a first-person shooter game set in a military context or a motor racing game in which the visual aesthetic is merely practical and functional for the objectives of the competition.

The intertextual network calls for an interpretation not only based on the mere recognition of the signs and symbols presented, but on the artistic character of the intertextual elements brought to the screen and the visual proposal of the game itself. The similarities established in the metaphors of visual aesthetics would be overlooked by players if the intertextual network did not call them to consider a deeper reading of their experience with the game.

⁴ Which can be reviewed on its official website: <https://www.conradroset.com/portfolio>

⁵ A significant percentage of the video games produced and marketed worldwide during the 90s were of Japanese origin, and collected design notes from the popular comics known as *sleeve*, and traditional Japanese animation, *anime*; today, even games of non-Japanese origin persist in that line of design.



Demolishing and sculpting identity

It continues to discover the other capital aspect that determines the processes of interpretation configured in *Gris*, the narration itself, and the actions that the player must carry out.

Although the significant load of the images as symbols is undoubtedly a determining feature of *Gris* as a narrative work, in reality those senses scattered in the images are carried to their ultimate consequence in the interpretation through the configurative dimension of the plot, which can be reviewed as follows:

A woman⁶ sleeping perched on the palm of a stone hand wakes up and begins to sing, which causes her to enter a certain ecstasy. However, at the same time that the stone hand begins to crumble under her feet, the woman loses her voice and is prevented from continuing to sing, which manifests itself in an attack of confusion and anguish. The stone hand completely crumbles, and the woman falls into the void. When the bottom of his descent arrives, he realizes that all the colors around him have faded, and the world is barely delineated by grayish tones. At that moment the player takes control of the avatar and calls her to get up and walk, but a few seconds later she collapses and prevents the player from moving further. After a few more moments, the woman rises again, allowing the player to finally take full control over the character. The woman then goes on to find a desert on which the ruins of an ancient city rise, in which stone statues with the figure of women in a state of mourning live. Among these ruins she finds the fragments of the stone hand that held her while she sang, and at that moment from inside a burst of red color sprouts that dyes the space around her. The desert becomes reddish and the contours of the objects become more solid, allowing the woman to observe and explore space. As she walks, the woman finds some fatuous lights like stars that begin to follow her, and when she reaches the center of the ancient city, these stars rise to form a constellation in the sky.

⁶ Given the absence of verbal narration in the game, a name is never released to designate the protagonist; journalists in their reviews typically refer to her as *Gris*, given the game's title, and members of the Nomada Studio team also use that name to refer to the character in interviews and game descriptions. It is preferred for this analysis, however, to persist in the ambiguous character of the visual story and not to give a name to the character.



From that moment on, without any verbal narration that makes it explicit, it is inferred that the objective of the game is to return one by one the colors to the world and find the rest of the stars to complete the constellation. The adventure will take the protagonist through different places and a confrontation with the only enemy of the game, a dark metamorphic entity that takes the figure of various animals and chases the woman at different times of her journey. The identity of this antagonist is not clear at first, but like all the visual elements of *Gris*, his symbolic significance is constructed as the story unfolds, and his final identity, although metaphorical and ambiguous, will be revealed as transcendental.

Gris presents a narrative that is very simple to follow, it is almost entirely linear even in the moments that are granted some freedom of sequence in the plot to the player. For example, the fourth section of the game, which places the avatar in an underwater space that he can explore more freely since it is possible for him to move through the water without the restriction of gravity, asks the player to collect four of the stars with which he will complete the constellation before allowing him to move forward. These four stars are located in a series of grottoes joined by tunnels that connect with a central chamber. The player begins this small mission right in that chamber, and can decide which of the paths to take first. However, this freedom has no interference in the overall development of the plot; this whole section could be interpreted, narratologically speaking, as a single episode or narrative function, which in the functional logical sequence of actions is placed at a single precise point.

As the plot develops, the avatar's skills are also developed. An important part of the development of the episodes of the story is the discovery of new abilities, which manifest themselves as new possible actions to be performed by the player, and as a metaphor for the emotional progress of the main character. In addition to walking and jumping, the two most recurrent and necessary actions, in each episode the woman needs to discover new skills to continue her path. In the Red Desert episode, the avatar discovers the ability to transform into a heavy block, so he can stand in sandstorms without being blown away by the wind, and can crumble fragile objects by dropping on them to clear a path or collapse the roof of closed structures.



This aspect, the discovery of new possible actions to be performed by the player, is especially remarkable, since it is the one that most decisively depends on the medium by which this story is configured, video games. A viewer who sees the screen on which a game of *Gris* is projected, but it is not he or she who has control in his or her hands, will not only be able to learn the meaning of the story, but will be able to enjoy it (although this will vary with each individual, of course) as a traditional audiovisual narrative, such as an animated film; this is reinforced by the notation that Hans-Georg Gadamer makes in *La actualidad de lo bello* (1991) by explaining that observing the act of playing of others is an immersive act in itself, and involves the viewer. However, the actions performed by the player themselves make sense, so the experience of playing and watching someone play are essentially different, as will be seen below.

From the very beginning of the game, this interpretive bridge between interaction and image is built. When the player first takes control over the avatar (which happens just a few minutes after starting the game and having watched the initial cinematic), it is explicit that the woman is in a depressive state, given her body posture and the newly represented events. The player would expect to have direct control over the avatar regardless of the character's intradiegetic mood; however, this expectation is immediately shattered by the woman's body collapsing and not allowing the player to move at will for a few seconds. In this way, the action itself is imbued with meaning by the game's configuration: the narrative somehow "forces" the player to experience the emotional development of the character on the screen in his own experience by taking away direct control and making him as incapable of moving forward as the character himself. Thus, the player's actions are themselves symbolic, revealing their character as signs, and in *Gris's* case, they are integrated into the overall metaphorical nature of the game.

Of this symbolic nature are emblem just the new skills learned during the development of the plot. Each section of the game's plot can be interpreted as one of the stages of the grieving process according to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's celebrated psychological model: denial, anger, negotiation, depression, and acceptance. In fact, this is confirmed with certain elements of paratextual information about *Gris's* creative process that can be accessed once the game has been finished, similar



to the typical "behind the scenes" documentaries contained in the formats of home video, DVD, Blu-ray, etc.; either way, neither knowing this information nor even having familiarity with the Kübler-Ross model is necessary to interpret the emotional development of the main character, but only pose a broader context around the creative process of the game. Taking this into account, the abilities that the avatar discovers in his journey are symbols of this emotional development. Just as to traverse the underwater caves the avatar discovers the ability to dive indefinitely underwater, or to move between the treetops in the forest discovers the ability to float to stay longer in the air, he also discovers that it is possible to move forward in his emotional process of rediscovery and find new ways of being and relating to the world, even in the midst of mourning.

The most significant of these skills is the last one, which is also the only one that is not really new: singing. Throughout the game, the player has had at their disposal an exclusive control button to tell the avatar to sing. However, every time that button is pressed, the character is barely able to exhale a breath of air that lets his inability to sing the song understand. This allows us to infer a particular meaning in the line of actions as metaphors, that the protagonist is prevented from performing this action as much as the player himself, and that even trying is futile, despite the always latent possibility of doing so. But in the last stage of the story, once all the colors have returned to the world, the protagonist recovers her voice, the player can press the dedicated button for the action of singing and thereby infuse life on certain objects in the world.

By endowing these objects with life, new possibilities of interaction with them are opened, necessary to overcome this last stage of the game. But as for the emotional significance of this action as a symbol, recovering the voice and singing satisfactorily closes the narrative thread of the story, the protagonist has recovered what she had lost and thereby restores her identity.

At this point in the plot it is just to return the rest of the stars to the constellation and discover the effect that this will have on the world. Upon returning to the city center, the protagonist returns the stars to the sky, with which she builds a staircase of light that will allow her to ascend to the heights. But at that moment the final form of the dark entity is revealed, a woman's face that resembles that of the protagonist herself.



This last representation of the identity of the antagonist allows the player to finally make sense of it in the surreal context of the story. Precisely because his identity, like all other aspects of the game, always remains ambiguous, there is no single univocal interpretation⁷ of the identity of this aggressor; but the most recognizable line is the one that establishes relationships of similarity with some emotional trait of the main character, so the dark entity could be a representation of his own fear, of his inability to overcome his limitations or of the psychological traumas that prevent him from developing resilience; simply put, her main enemy is herself.

The dark entity devours the protagonist and transports her to the bottom of a black and viscous sea, which immediately gives rise to the idea that this sea is made of the same matter as the dark entity itself. But the avatar manages to reach the surface, and making use of his most intimate ability, singing, calls the statue of the woman to life. The pieces of stone of the effigy are completely reincorporated, and he finally manages to hold the protagonist in his palm without falling apart. The singing intensifies and causes the dark entity to fade completely. The statue takes the woman to the center of the city, and she ascends the ladder of stars to disappear between the light and the clouds.

It is worth one last point regarding the intertextual nature of this title in light of the plot already fully developed. Although Roset does not mention any allusion to Hans Christian Andersen's classic tale "The Little Mermaid," some coincidences are remarkable enough, both anecdotally and symbolically, to at least suspect an influence. The loss of voice of the protagonist of *Gris* is the most evident of these coincidences. Although Andersen's character sacrifices his voice voluntarily in contrast to the sudden loss of the avatar's voice, the consequence of this lack is equivalent in both cases, the loss of identity. Also in both cases, the process to compensate for the damage, awaken the love of the prince and then sacrifice for him in the story, and the journey of self-discovery and overcoming the duel in the game, share important points. The Little Mermaid discovers the possibility of transcending to a new spiritual plane in the clouds and wind, while the avatar in *Grey* ascends to

⁷ An interesting anecdote about it is that, in the conference given by Conrad Roset at the Japan Weekend Madrid 2019, a participant of the talk asked him directly what the meaning of the story is. Conrad refused to answer, arguing that making public his interpretation of the story as author would diminish the different interpretations that each of the players can give him individually.



the sky and fades into the clouds once he has reached that transcendence by regaining his voice and conquering his fears. Finally, both works construct an initiation story (*bildungsroman* or *coming-of-age story*, are the most traditional terms in literature to refer to this type of story), whose symbolic aspect is precisely the consolidation of identity as a sign of maturity, almost always through loss or sacrifice.

These coincidences, in addition to contributing to the network of intertextual signs of the game, allow us to find certain veins of interpretation that go beyond the aesthetic visual towards the properly literary, and specifically towards the themes that works such as the fantastic narrative of H.C. Andersen articulate around childhood. Although an age range is not clearly defined in the audience to which the game is addressed, and the physical features of the character in *Grey* are deliberately inconcrete in that aspect as well, the intertextual relationships pointed out point to the reflection around the recovery/construction of identity as a form of rite of initiation, and this also as a form of liberation after having been victims of what Beatriz Alcubierre calls *infantilization* in her text "The infantilization of the child" (2016), the dispossession of their agency before the world both by circumstantial factors of the physical-psychological development of the first years of life, as well as the social and institutional pressures historically exerted on this population. That the player is an agent of this process in the game places him in the role of both guide of this development (parallel to the "supernatural help" in the day of the hero of Joseph Campbell), and of participant of the process itself.

Conclusion

It has been found that it is not only the visual symbols that behave a surrealist aesthetic, but that the story itself narrated by *Gris*, as a set of actions structured in a plot, is also symbolic, or more properly, allegorical. It should be borne in mind that this type of allegorization is not an eminent feature of Surrealism, especially in its conception and earliest manifestations, in which the free association of images takes chaotic forms more similar to collage; An example is the classic surrealist film *Le chien andalou* (1929) by Luis Buñuel, in which the plot, although obviously symbolic, does not raise an



allegory around a specific theme as precisely as *Gris* around grief and psychological development.⁸ This distinction is important, as it poses a contrast with any other narrative that does not pretend to be allegorical in the same way.

Any story deals with themes with different applicability to the reality of the reader, viewer or player; this is the space of possibility opened by the text. But that possibility stands precisely on a certain tangible verisimilitude of the world built by the story, its spaces and its characters as a valid reality in and for itself. The allegorical accounts of the nature that *Gris* entails are not based on this plausibility of the world of the story, but on its metaphorical sense, in what they mean through the discursive act that is the text or, in this case, the game. This does not mean that the story is only an accessory to the discourse; if so, there would simply be no story, only speech. But the world of the story does manifest itself as less tangible, less contained in itself, and more dependent on what it wants to convey as ideas.

Thus, it is possible to conclude that a surrealist game like *Gris* is as closely related to poetry and painting as to literary narrative or cinema, so the codes for its interpretation are also in line with poetic and pictorial analysis, or at least require more patently these tools than other narratives that reveal a more explicit and figurative sense.

The dimension of the configuration from the player's actions has also manifested itself as symbolic metaphorical. A recurring criticism that is made to *Gris* among the reviews made in the field of video game journalism is that the part of the gameplay (*gameplay*) is its weakest aspect, as it does not propose anything radically new for the genre of platforms in two dimensions, although its level of execution is outstanding in the technical (*Skill Up*, 2018). And indeed; Roset himself admits that some tests throughout the game may seem nothing more than a procedure to mark the requirements of a title of this type. However, given the emphasis on the other significant aspects of the game, and the already explored symbolic charge of the player's actions, it is concluded that these tests and

⁸ But the allegory can be present both in paintings and in surrealist films; *8½* (1963), by Federico Fellini, although with a tone almost as ambiguous as that of Buñuel, does build an allegory into the identity of the protagonist and the film industry.



obstacles are integrated into Gris's overall intentionality: the story recounts the process of development and emotional overcoming of the duel, and the tests of dexterity and riddles that the player must overcome through the avatar symbolize that journey, the internal effort of the character that the player shares through control and their own physical and mental effort, however trivial they may seem to each player in particular. The fact that the rules of the game do not foresee a state of failure, that is, it is not possible to "lose the game" by failing or "dying", as in classic platform games, is significant in itself: in the game, as in dueling, it is always possible to move forward.

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