

Semiotic in Narrative of Video Games: A Case Study of *Detention* (2017)

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ABSTRACT

The research studies the semiotic elements of video game narratives, with a particular emphasis on the critically acclaimed game *Detention* (2017). The game is renowned for its ability to intricately weave its narrative through a sophisticated interplay of signs and symbols. Semiotics, the study of signs and their meanings, provides a robust framework for understanding the layers of interpretation that enrich the interactive storytelling experience within video games. The study draws from the theoretical foundations established by influential semioticians such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. By focusing on *Detention*, the research not only explores the game's narrative but also delves into its historical and cultural context within Taiwan, offering a detailed analysis of its semiotic landscape. The central research questions address the narrative elements, the semiotic analysis of the game's settings, and the role of symbolism in video games, with a particular emphasis on how these elements enhance the depth and richness of the narrative. Adopting a qualitative methodology, the study utilizes Peirce's triadic model of sign classification to analyze the game. The significance of this research lies in its contribution to the understanding of how narrative, semiotics, and symbolism are intricately fused in video game design. The research is well-defined in its objectives and scope, acknowledging its limitations, and aims to bridge the gap between semiotic theory and the immersive world of video games.

Keywords: *Semiotic, Narrative, Video Games, Symbolism, Detention*

INTRODUCTION

Video games have evolved into a medium of profound narrative complexity, engaging players in immersive storytelling experiences. In this dynamic landscape, the semiotic analysis of video game narratives has emerged as a fascinating study area. This exploration delves into the intricate web of signs, symbols, and meanings that underlie the narrative fabric of video games. In particular, we focus on a captivating case study, *Detention* (Chang, 2017), a video game that defies conventional storytelling norms

by weaving its narrative intricately through visual and symbolic elements. As we embark on this journey, we endeavour to decipher the rich semiotic tapestry that envelops *Detention*, peeling back layers of meaning and uncovering the underlying structures that drive this narrative. This case study is not merely an analysis but an immersion into the world of semiotics in video game narratives. In this realm, every sign holds significance, every visual symbol carries meaning, and every interaction reveals a deeper layer of the story. In the next paragraph, we will dissect, interpret, and marvel at the semiotics that *Detention* presents, shedding light on the profound interplay between symbols, signs, and storytelling in video games.

Semiotics is a discipline that transcends the sum of its components—'semeion' from ancient Greek and '-logy.' It's not just a scientific reading; it's an intricate process concerned with constructing and interpreting meaning. Semioticians contend that every human-made artifact carries intrinsic meaning intricately woven into its fabric. This significance resides within the artifact itself, waiting to be unearthed. Semiotic techniques focus on reshaping and dissecting the intricate structure of meaning, extracting, subverting, and deconstructing it. These methods rely on a meta-language to achieve this. This meta-language serves as a bridge to reestablish and unveil the tapestry of meanings inherent in the subject's language, often a work of art, effectively transitioning to another language. However, this meta-language demands rigorous conceptualization and formalization. Navigating semiotics involves engaging in reading, rooted in this meta-language. It's a process that necessitates time and experience to comprehend fully.

Furthermore, numerous schools of thought and various approaches employing semiotic methods can confound the conceptual landscape, making the field challenging to grasp. To master the meta-language utilized in semiotics, one must first acquaint oneself with the intellectual foundations, methods, objectives, and research constraints within different semiotic schools and the models that underpin the study of semiotics. (Batu, 2012).

Detention is a distinctive atmospheric horror video game strongly influenced by Taiwanese and East Asian culture, drawing references from Taoism and Buddhism, and set against 1960s Taiwan during martial law. Using a simple point-and-click gameplay mechanism, players take control of characters who venture into a haunted school plagued by hostile supernatural events to uncover the stories behind this eerie place. The game incorporates religious elements rooted in Taiwanese and Chinese culture and mythology, offering players a unique and culturally rich gaming experience. The idea for this game emerged from a simple question: "Why are there no games that represent our culture and allow the world to experience the place where I grew up?" Game designer Mr. Yao, also known as Coffee, carried this idea with him for years. In 2013, he created a horror game universe infused with Taiwanese and Eastern elements, combining Taoism and Buddhist beliefs with traditional Chinese culture. After a year of production, Coffee realized the game had grown too large in scope, leading him to approach Light Wang and Henry Wang, known for creating Taiwan's first greenlit indie title, *Constant C*. They quickly recognized the unique appeal of *detention*, which is rich in Taiwanese cultural flavor. This uniqueness attracted renowned composer Weifan Chang, artist Finger, game designer Doy, programmer Chia-Sheng, and Vincent, who all joined forces to share with the world a game unlike any other (Chang, 2017).

This research aims to explore and understand how semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, is used in the narrative of video games, with a specific focus on the 2017 game *Detention*. The researcher will provide an in-depth background of existing literature on these topics. The research problem and corresponding objectives will be clearly outlined, followed by a detailed discussion of the significance of the research and its scope and limitations. Finally, relevant terms used in this study will be defined.

While it's known that *Detention* (2017) uses semiotics as a narrative and thematic tool, a detailed analysis of these semiotic elements and how they shape the story and themes needs to be included. This

research aims to fill this gap by exploring the semiotics in *Detention* (2017) and how they influence the game's storytelling and themes. Moreover, the issue of semiotics in video game narratives arises because some individuals believe that video games, although captivating and visually striking, should primarily focus on gameplay mechanics and visual storytelling without delving deeply into semiotics.

"If games want to tell a big cinematic story, that's okay but not necessary. 'Storyless' games like 'Pac-Man' and 'Donkey Kong' will continue to be beautiful in their own way through the mastery of their players and wonder of their mechanics. However, such things are beautiful in a mechanical way, which isn't moving immediately that a JMW Turner painting might be, but more like how a high-level game of chess is beautiful. Whether or not this is art, however, is anyone's guess." (Battaglia, 2018).

To thoroughly explore the video game *Detention* (2017), one must first identify its narrative elements and the deeper meanings they convey. This includes analyzing a semiotic analysis of the game's settings, which play a crucial role in shaping the atmosphere and themes. Additionally, as demonstrated in *Detention* (2017), the significance of symbolism in video games highlights how these symbolic elements can significantly enhance narrative storytelling, adding layers of meaning and emotional depth to the player's experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous semiotic pioneers, scholars, practitioners, and authors, including Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, Roland Barthes, Roman Jakobson, Charles Morris, and Umberto Eco, have collectively defined a concise definition. To clarify, semiotics encompasses anything that can be observed or interpreted as a sign, as articulated by Umberto Eco in his work titled 'A Theory of Semiotics.' Eco posited that "semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else" (1979; 7). Importantly, Eco notes that this "something else" does not necessarily coexist with the sign that represents or substitutes for it. Hence, he often characterizes it as a theory of falsehood or deception because it can be employed to mislead or deceive others (1976, p. 6-7) (Mohd Yakin, 2014).

The roots of semiotics, particularly classical semiotics, can be traced back over two thousand years to Greek philosophers who pondered the significance of signs in human life. The medieval era further delved into the meaning and use of signs, notably by Stoic philosophers like Zeno and other scholars. However, the term 'semiotic' only entered the scene in the late 18th century, courtesy of German philosopher Lambert. It was in the 20th century that systematic thought and use of signs gained widespread attention, evolving into an ongoing field of research and scholarly discourse. Two prominent figures significantly shaped modern semiotics: Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, and Charles Sanders Peirce, an American philosopher. This paper aims to undertake a comparative analysis of their semiotic theories, representing two distinct approaches from different continents. Both Saussure and Peirce have pioneered this epistemology and transcended their fields of study, leaving a multidisciplinary impact. Their semiotic concepts have permeated diverse areas, including philosophy, linguistics, arts, literature, music, communication, psychology, and more, making them foundational references across various disciplines (Mohd Yakin, 2014).

Narrative Semiotic grammar

Semiotic grammar, as defined by Peirce, is primarily concerned with establishing the formal requirements for a sign to be recognized as such. Peirce identifies four formal conditions a sign must meet

to be considered a genuine sign. The first condition asserts that a sign must relate to or represent an object. In other words, a sign must point to something or claim to be about something. The second condition states that the sign must represent or relate to that object in some manner or aspect, often called its "ground." This means that every sign must possess some level of meaning or depth to qualify as a sign (Lizska, 1996). The third condition is that a sign should be capable of generating an interpretant, another sign that translates and expands upon the original sign. The sign must have the potential to create an equivalent or more developed sign in the mind of an interpreter, thereby articulating the original sign's meaning and reference comprehensively. This condition is crucial because a sign should convey something to a sign user that represents the representation itself as a representation (Lizska, 1996). The fourth and final condition pertains to the relationship between the sign, the object it represents, and the interpretant it generates. Peirce insists that this relationship must be triadic, meaning it's a fundamental interrelation where each component derives meaning through interaction with the others. The sign's representation ability is mediated by its grounding and interpretation, just as each of the other components relies on this interdependence. Essentially, a sign must represent something to an interpreter in a particular manner to be classified as a true sign. In the most comprehensive sense, these are the four formal conditions of a sign: representing something to some interpreter, and these conditions are interdependently triadic (Lizska, 1996).

Narrative in Video Games

Games are interactive experiences, so crafting the game world and its levels is akin to storytelling. Whether it's a gritty military action game or any other genre, the player should perceive that every design choice aligns with the game's theme. If you're depicting 1940s France in a WWII game, it should authentically resemble that era, even if players haven't been to 1940s France themselves. The designer doesn't need 100% accuracy but should do the groundwork for an immersive experience. To design effectively, you must understand the level's narrative and role in the game. Let's say the story unfolds in 1940s France during the Allied resistance against German forces, and the player is part of an Allied platoon. This narrative serves as the "why" behind the level. The level's purpose is twofold: aesthetics, evoking a war-torn 1940s French setting, and functionality, guiding the player to their objectives without causing confusion or frustration, all while delivering gameplay elements like enemies, cover points, and puzzles. Character and level design go hand in hand because the game's world and inhabitants are closely intertwined. Consider a game combining first-person shooters, stealth, and a Victorian-like world. The design of the game world is a character in itself, as crucial as the playable characters. Designers and artists begin by sketching and creating art that conveys the game's aesthetic and sets the tone. Concept art builds upon reference images and character designs to develop the world's appearance and backstory, aligning it with the game's vision and technical constraints (Salmond, 2016).

Fundamental components of a narrative. At its core, a narrative serves as a vehicle for storytelling. This narrative is essentially a sequence of interconnected events, featuring characters who fulfill various roles within the story. Narratives can manifest in diverse mediums, including spoken or written text, film, images, live performances, or even combinations. In the context of spoken or written narratives, a central and pivotal figure emerges—the narrator. This narrator assumes the crucial task of articulating and presenting the narrative text to the audience, effectively becoming the storyteller responsible for conveying the events and characters that constitute the story. In summary, a narrative encompasses any form of storytelling underpinned by a sequence of events involving characters, with the narrator as the conduit for presenting this story, be it through spoken or written words (Jahn, 2021).

Detention (2017) primarily employs an interactive narrative in its gameplay. This type of narrative allows players to make choices that influence the game's story and outcomes. It's a form of storytelling commonly found in video games where the player's decisions impact the direction of the

narrative, leading to different endings or plot developments based on their choices. In *Detention*, the player's decisions and actions are crucial in unfolding the story, making it an engaging and immersive experience.

Semiotics in Video Games

Semiotic theories are frequently encountered in architecture and the arts through the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, whose ideas gave rise to Structuralism and Post-structuralism. Coincidentally, the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, a contemporary of Saussure, independently developed an extensive theory of signs. Interestingly, Peirce and Saussure worked in isolation, unaware of each other's contributions (Peirce, 1902). While Peirce didn't extensively address the concept of play, he did delve into creativity, offering insights applicable to play and computer gaming. In Peirce's writings, his emphasis on structured categories sometimes gives the impression of reducing the sense of play or adventure compared to his more rhetorically vibrant Pragmatic followers, like William James and John Dewey. Peirce, as a communication theorist, places significant emphasis on the issue of interpretation. However, in contrast to Peirce and Saussure, and stemming from a different philosophical tradition, Phenomenology, Hans-Georg Gadamer highlights play as a central theme in his interpretation explanation. One particularly intriguing and game-like aspect of Peirce's insights is the indeterminate process through which we derive one sign from another. He terms this process "abduction," which I've explored in more detail elsewhere, and it stands as a creative cornerstone of his semiotic framework (Coyne, 2016).

Peirce's semiotics offers a broad perspective that extends beyond conventional language-based signs, which is particularly valuable in investigative fields where professionals like scientists, explorers, diagnosticians, or detectives don't primarily analyze texts for evidence but deal with tangible elements such as test tube substances, river behaviours, skin abnormalities, or carpet bloodstains. In contrast, Pokémon players embark on virtual quests for rewards, interactions with other players, and various in-game indicators, often centred around the collection and repetitive tasks rather than deep mysteries. What's more intriguing in the realm of "abductive games" than Pokémon are mystery adventure games. A prime example is the early game "Myst," where players take on the roles of investigators, researchers, and solvers of mysteries. This structure, commonly found in gaming, provides an engaging platform for exploring and unravelling enigmatic narratives (Coyne, 2016).

Digital games, especially in adventure and interactive drama genres, have become influential mediums for conveying ideas, messages, and promotional content. They represent a new form of discourse in the postmodern era. Games like *Heavy Rain*, for example, artfully portray reality's dark and challenging aspects, emphasizing themes of family tragedy, injustice, and the loss of innocence. Colour symbolism plays a significant role in these narratives, shifting from bright and carefree childhood memories to a more sombre and grey-toned depiction of life. In today's digital age, video games hold substantial power in marketing and culture. They bear ethical, pedagogical, and social responsibilities as they address various societal issues. Contrary to the notion that gamers are exclusively young individuals immersed in virtual worlds, the gaming industry has evolved to encompass a diverse range of players, and it now surpasses the music and film industries combined. Virtual reality is no longer limited to entertainment but extends to fields such as psychology, sociology, computer science, cultural studies, philosophy, anthropology, education, and even healthcare (Jukić, 2021).

Detention (2017) Video Games

The Taiwanese film *Detention* (2017), which has been a significant success, grossing over NT\$130 million just nine days after its release on September 20, has brought attention to Taiwanese psychological horror cinema. What's particularly eerie about this film is its basis in actual events. It's an adaptation of the 2017 video game of the same name. It tells the story of Fang Ray Shin, a student during Taiwan's White Terror period, characterized by severe military suppression and censorship after World War II. The plot is rooted in the actual 1947 Keelung Senior High School Incident, where students distributed underground communist materials, leading to arrests and the execution of writer Lan Ming-gu. Lan Ming-gu's daughter has recently come to understand her father's role as a communist spy during that oppressive era, where any association with censored or communist-related materials led to immediate execution. Director John Hsu, drawing inspiration from posters featuring Lan Ming-gu's wife advocating for elder rights, aims to educate about history through visuals. With *Detention* becoming the first domestic film to surpass \$100 million at the box office, his message effectively reaches a broad audience (Leslie, 2019).



Figure 1. The Setting in *Detention* (2017)
(Source: *Detention*, 2017)

Taiwan's history carries a dark chapter characterized by political corruption, violence, and authoritarian rule, stemming from the 228 Incident in 1947. Triggered by the violent actions of the Tobacco Monopoly Bureau against a cigarette vendor on February 27, the situation rapidly escalated, with an agent's shot into a crowd leading to protests on February 28. These protests spanned Taiwan, resulting in local Taiwanese control of cities and towns. Yet, the turmoil came to a brutal end with the Kuomintang's crackdown starting on March 7, involving violence against unarmed civilians, rapes, and beheadings, causing a climate of terror. The Committee to Settle the Monopoly Bureau Incident aimed for democratic reforms, echoing the issues addressed in the American Declaration of Independence. Amid reinforcements arriving from the mainland, a dark period of oppression commenced, with countless individuals, especially dissidents, disappearing without a trace (Shattuck, 2017).

Taiwan's history has been marked by various colonization periods. Portuguese explorers arrived in the 16th century and named it "Ila Formosa," signifying a beautiful island. In the 17th century, Taiwan saw colonization by both the Netherlands and Spain, with the Netherlands eventually expelling the Spanish and ruling for three decades. In the late 19th century, Taiwan was ceded to Japan following a war with the Republic of China (ROC). After World War II, Japan returned Taiwan to ROC control in 1945, marking the post-World War era for the island. Significant developments occurred in 1949 when the communist government took over mainland China, leading the ROC government to move to Taiwan and impose martial law to reclaim the mainland. This suppressed social movements in the 1960s but coincided with economic progress, especially in labour-intensive industries. Taiwan established Asia's first export processing zone, maintaining strong economic growth until the first oil crisis. Over time, Taiwan has

transitioned into a developed country, politically embracing democracy in 1987 and shifting towards technology-based industries like biotechnology and semiconductors. Taiwan has modernized and westernized significantly compared to fifty years ago (Chiang, 2011).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research endeavours to delve into the intricate landscape of semiotic usage within the narrative framework of the video game *Detention*. Semiotics, as a theoretical lens, offers a profound understanding of how signs and symbols contribute to meaning-making, and its application to the dynamic realm of video game narratives remains a compelling area of exploration. The chosen qualitative research approach aligns seamlessly with the nuanced nature of semiotics, allowing for an in-depth analysis of the visual and narrative elements present in *Detention*.

Qualitative research, by its very essence, provides a nuanced and context-rich exploration of the phenomena under investigation. In semiotic analysis, which involves interpreting the meaning embedded within signs and symbols, a qualitative approach allows for a thorough examination of the intricate details present in the game's narrative. Through qualitative methods, such as visual semiotics and narrative analysis, we aim to uncover the subtle layers of meaning woven into the fabric of *Detention*. The selection of *Detention* as the primary case study is deliberate, considering its significance as a narrative-driven game and its potential for rich semiotic exploration. The case study design enables a focused and in-depth analysis of the semiotic elements embedded in the game's narrative structure.

In this research, Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory will be the foundational framework for analyzing the narrative elements within the video game *Detention*. Peirce's triadic model of signs, consisting of the sign (representamen), object, and interpreter, will guide the investigation into the semiotic dimensions of the game's narrative structure. The video game, a complex medium combining visual, auditory, and interactive elements, offers a rich ground for semiotic analysis. The signs within the game, whether linguistic, visual, or interactive, will be examined in terms of their representative capacity (sign), what they signify or refer to (object), and the mental concepts they evoke in the player (interpreter). Furthermore, Peirce's classification of signs as icons, indexes, and symbols will be applied to understand how different elements within the game contribute to meaning-making. This semiotic approach will provide a nuanced understanding of how signs operate within the narrative of *Detention*, shedding light on the dynamic relationships between the game's symbolic elements and the player's interpretative processes (Peirce, 1902).

Data collection will employ a multifaceted approach. Visual semiotics will be scrutinized through detailed examinations of the game's visual elements, including graphics, symbols, and storytelling. Narrative semiotics will involve meticulously analysing the storytelling techniques, plot structure, and the semiotic devices employed to convey meaning. Additionally, participant experiences will be investigated through qualitative methods such as game reviews, blog discussions, or observational studies. These methodologies are designed to comprehend the significance of narratives in the video game *Detention* (2017). In summation, this qualitative research methodology aims to unravel the intricacies of semiotic usage in the narrative of *Detention*, offering valuable insights into the symbiotic relationship between signs, symbols, and storytelling within video games.

FINDINGS

Detention is a distinctive atmospheric horror video game strongly influenced by Taiwanese and East Asian culture, drawing references from Taoism and Buddhism, and set against 1960s Taiwan during martial law. Using a simple point-and-click gameplay mechanism, players take control of characters who venture into a haunted school plagued by hostile supernatural events to uncover the stories behind this eerie place. The game incorporates religious elements rooted in Taiwanese and Chinese culture and mythology, offering players a unique and culturally rich gaming experience. The idea for this game emerged from a simple question: "Why are there no games that represent our culture and allow the world to experience the place where I grew up?" Game designer Mr. Yao, also known as Coffee, carried this idea with him for years. In 2013, he created a horror game universe infused with Taiwanese and Eastern elements, combining Taoism and Buddhist beliefs with traditional Chinese culture. After a year of production, Coffee realized the game had grown too large in scope, leading him to approach Light Wang and Henry Wang, known for creating Taiwan's first greenlit indie title, *Constant C*. They quickly recognized the unique appeal of *Detention*, which is rich in Taiwanese culture. This uniqueness attracted renowned composer Weifan Chang, artist Finger, game designer Doy, programmer Chia-Sheng, and Vincent, who all joined forces to share with the world a game unlike any other (Chang, 2017). In the next paragraph, we will dissect, interpret, and marvel at the semiotics that *Detention* presents, shedding light on the profound interplay between symbols, signs, and storytelling in video games.

Red Candle

In the realm of symbolism, red candles are laden with diverse meanings, often associated with vitality, passion, and intense emotions like rage, lust, aggression, bravery, and determination (Chris, 2022). Aligned with the root chakra, the lively fire element in red candles is believed to unblock life force energy, serving various purposes such as attracting power, enhancing intimacy, inspiring financial success, providing self-protection, and amplifying the efficacy of spells.



Figure 2. Ray awakens with red candles around her, with the lifeless body of Wei suspended upside down.
(Source: *Detention*, 2017)

In *Detention's* opening chapter, Ray awakens surrounded by red candles, suggesting a ritualistic or ceremonial context. Carter (2023) elaborates on the significance of red candles in Buddhism, where they symbolize enlightenment, compassion, and positive energy. Red candles are used in meditation sessions to

improve concentration and focus, and they invoke the presence and guidance of enlightened beings in prayers. As the narrative transitions from Wei to Ray, the prevalence of red candles becomes a powerful symbol in *Detention*. The red candle, a visual narrative of intense emotions, aligns with the fiery hues representing a spectrum from rage to determination. This symbolism is a lens to interpret Ray's mood, surroundings, situations, and intentions. The vibrant fire element, resonating with the root chakra, implies an unblocking of life force energy, metaphorically representing Ray's emotional intensity and determination.

Beyond aesthetics, the red candle is multifaceted in Ray's narrative, symbolizing her emotional states and signaling her fiery pursuit of justice. Traditionally, associated purposes, such as attracting power or enhancing intimacy, add layers of interpretation, metaphorically aligning with Ray's intentions in navigating the game's challenges. The pervasive presence of the red candle in Ray's chapter becomes a dynamic symbol, weaving emotion, determination, and symbolism. It serves as a visual metaphor, inviting players to delve into Ray's character, mood shifts, and the evolving dynamics of the narrative landscape.

Mirror

Mirrors, defined as polished surfaces forming reflections, were luxuries for the wealthy in the 16th century. Before their invention, people used water, metal, and polished obsidian to see their reflections. Mirrors symbolize truth, offering an honest reflection. They represent knowledge, revealing aspects unseen to the naked eye, and embody wisdom by providing a deeper self-awareness. However, mirrors can also symbolize vanity, as seen in the myth of Narcissus. They signify deception in art and literature, portraying the risk of falling in love with a false image. Mirrors have magical connotations, are believed to hold souls or concentrate energy, and are considered portals to the soul and other realms in various cultures. Psychologically, mirrors serve as gateways between the conscious and subconscious, triggering self-awareness and revealing personas (Mulu, 2023).



Figure 3. Ray is having an internal dialogue in front of a mirror in the bathroom
(Source: *Detention*, 2017)



Figure 4. Ray is having internal dialogue in her room
(Source: *Detention*, 2017)

In Figure 3 and Figure 4, Ray is depicted engaging in profound self-reflection and internal dialogue. Each scene, however, offers a distinct context and meaning. Ray introduces the motif of a white deer, a symbol rich in cultural and spiritual significance, particularly in Buddhism. The white deer, considered a mythical creature associated with compassion and spiritual awakening, carries connotations of luck and the ability to grant wishes. Ray's mention of the white deer in her self-reflection adds layers of meaning, symbolizing spirituality, higher consciousness, and the interconnectedness of all beings, aligning with Buddhist principles (Bryant, 2023).

As Ray gazes deep into the mirror in Figure 3, a voice responds with a haunting query, "Forgotten? Or just too afraid to remember???" The subsequent distortion and aberration of the mirror's reflection suggest that Ray's internal dialogue delves into forgotten or repressed memories. The symbolic distortion may signify the inner turmoil associated with these suppressed thoughts. Notably, in Buddhist beliefs, breaking mirrors is cautioned against, as it is thought to induce suffering in the current and future lives. The shattered glass is a metaphor for fragmented souls, impeding spiritual healing and progress. Practices like meditation are advocated to restore spiritual wholeness (Kash, nd).

In contrast, Figure 4 unfolds with a more direct and poignant meaning. The reflection captures the raw truth of Ray's emotions in that particular moment, vividly portraying her contemplation on life and the future. The nuances in her expressions seamlessly shift with the topics she reminisces about, offering a nuanced and reflective glimpse into Ray's inner world.



Figure 5. Ray having a conversation with Ms. Yin (The lady sitting on the chair)
(Source: *Detention*, 2017)

In Figure 5, the profound narrative intricacies unfold as Ray converses with her teacher, Ms. Yin. The mirror's reflective surface, however, goes beyond a mere visual representation. It transforms into a narrative hub within the overarching storyline, symbolizing the depth of Ray's guilt. The chilling image within the reflection, portraying Ray shooting an unidentified figure with a sack over their head, becomes a powerful symbol of the consequences triggered by Ray's revelation of illicit activities. This is not a frozen tableau but a dynamic encapsulation of betrayal and the irreversible damage caused by Ray's decisions. The introduction of temporal layers adds complexity, implying that Ray's guilt is not fleeting but a haunting spectre. The reflective surface becomes a temporal continuum, where the repercussions of past events persist. Amidst this mirrored setting, character dynamics intensify. Ms. Yin, embodying authority and judgment, becomes a silent witness to Ray's internal turmoil. The mirrors, functioning as impartial observers, not only mirror Ray's actions but also capture Ms. Yin's gaze, emphasizing the inescapable nature of accountability in the intricate interplay of morality and consequences.

Light and Dark

In Buddhism, light symbolises enlightenment and spiritual awakening, often depicted as a halo around the Buddha to represent supreme wisdom. Additionally, light holds therapeutic significance in Buddhist meditation practices, where it is utilized for visualization to alleviate physical and mental suffering. Light and dark in visual art are fundamental for conveying meaning, creating mood, and establishing atmosphere. In visual art, these elements represent dualities, such as good and evil or positive and negative aspects of life. With its chiaroscuro technique, Renaissance art exemplifies the dramatic use of light and dark to emphasize contrasts. Artists use techniques like chiaroscuro, tenebrism, high-key lighting, and low-key lighting to manipulate the interplay of light and dark for various effects. Colour further enhances the interplay of light and dark in art. Warm colours like red and orange convey energy and passion, while cool colours like blue and green create calm or mysterious atmospheres. In essence, the symbolism of light and dark in both religion and visual art is rich and multifaceted, offering a means to convey complex spiritual and philosophical ideas vividly and poetically (Carnavon, 2023).



Figure 6. Ray visited Mr. Chang in his office
(Source: *Detention*, 2017)

Figure 6 shows symbolic elements, including the dead tree, bright blue water, shiny pinkish-red tall grass, and the glowing silhouette on a boat/raft, collectively convey a profound shift in Ray's emotional and psychological state. The dead tree symbolises her challenges or hardships, suggesting stagnation and the aftermath of difficult experiences. Contrasting this, the bright blue water signifies a potential renewal or cleansing, with water often associated with emotions and the colour blue evoking calmness. The shiny,

pinkish-red tall grass introduces vibrant and cheerful hues, possibly representing passion, love, and new beginnings. The glowing silhouette on the boat, adorned in yellow and blue, implies a journey of hope, optimism, and spiritual enlightenment—a metaphor for Ray navigating the waters of self-discovery or transitioning to a new phase in life. As the scene transitions from this surreal environment to the reality of Mr. Chang's office, it encapsulates Ray's perceptual and mindset shift. This moment may mark a symbolic transformation, where the dead tree represents challenges to overcome, and the vibrant elements signify a positive metamorphosis. It could signify a psychological breakthrough, indicating a positive shift in Ray's mental and emotional state. This turning point in the narrative might be when Ray confronts inner demons, accepts her past, or embraces a hopeful new beginning. Ultimately, the bright colours, water, and silhouette symbolize hope, presenting a pivotal moment where Ray envisions a path toward healing and renewal in the unfolding story of Detention.



Figure 7. Ray goes to the theatre with Mr. Chang
(Source: *Detention*, 2017)

In Figure 7, the scene unfolds as Ray enters a brilliantly coloured town, a striking departure from the game's prevailing dark and sombre ambience. The vivid red and pink hues, complemented by touches of blue and yellow, create a surreal and fantastical atmosphere, potentially symbolizing an escape from the harsh reality into a realm of emotional intensity. The subsequent shift to a theatre with Mr Chang introduces a wealth of semiotic symbolism. As Ray, initially alone, experiences a transition from a dark ambience to a soft pink glow, the semiotic interpretation of colour comes to the fore. Pink, associated with love and tenderness, signifies a change in emotional tone. The intensification of brightness, culminating in overwhelming whiteness as Ray and Mr. Chang hold hands, suggests a moment of unity, connection, or transcendence. This interplay of light and dark dynamics signifies a symbolic journey from isolation to a shared, illuminated space, possibly representing emotional or spiritual enlightenment. However, the subsequent shift to a dark room, with Ray sitting alone and an exit door as her sole company, implies a return to reality or a separation from the heightened emotional experience. Semiotically, the vibrant colours denote a departure from the ordinary into a realm of heightened emotion, with the theatre becoming a space for a profound connection between Ray and Mr Chang. The strategic use of light and dark acts as a visual language, narrating the emotional shifts—from isolation and obscurity to connection and illumination. This scene encapsulates a transformative and emotionally charged experience for Ray, employing the semiotic interplay of light, dark, and colour to convey a nuanced and evocative storyline within the game.



Figure 8. Ray interacting with her light and dark personality
(Source: *Detention*, 2017)

In Figure 8, the interactive dimension of the game takes centre stage as Ray confronts her dark side, necessitating players to discern the correct answers for the attainment of the true ending. This pivotal juncture introduces profound semiotic elements, particularly evident in the symbolic interplay of light and dark, the manipulation of colour, and the thematic exploration of accepting and confronting one's darker aspects. The longstanding motif of the duality between light and dark undergoes a transformative shift as Ray engages with her darker self, indicating an internal reconciliation and acceptance of her multifaceted nature. The inversion of colour, brightness, and contrast during the player's switches between the two sides visually represents this metamorphosis, suggesting that embracing one's darkness can yield a profound shift in perspective. The player's active role in choosing correct answers becomes a meaningful participation in Ray's psychological and emotional journey, guiding her towards self-acceptance and integrating her contrasting aspects. The repetition of this process, wherein Ray cyclically alternates between light and dark, mirrors the iterative nature of personal growth and self-discovery, emphasizing that understanding and accepting one's darker facets are ongoing processes. Notably, the fact that all questions originate from Ray's dark side, and successfully navigating through them leads to a switch, implies a symbolic acceptance of the darker facets of her personality. This acceptance transcends mere narrative development; it becomes a dynamic and player-guided journey, transforming Ray's trajectory into a unique and immersive exploration of the intricacies within oneself, ultimately steering her towards self-discovery and acceptance.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the exploration of semiotics in the narrative of video games, exemplified by the case study of *Detention*, reveals a profound and multi-layered significance. Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols and their interpretation, is an integral component that goes beyond the surface-level aesthetics of gameplay mechanics and visual storytelling. The semiotic elements in *Detention*, ranging from symbolic imagery like red candles, mirrors, and vibrant colors to the interactive dynamics involving light and dark choices, contribute significantly to the depth, meaning, and immersive quality of the gaming experience.

Firstly, symbols like red candles, mirrors, and colours serve as a visual language, conveying nuanced emotions, character states, and thematic nuances. The red candles, for instance, extend beyond mere aesthetic choices, embodying a spectrum of intense emotions and aligning with cultural and spiritual contexts. In various instances, mirrors serve as gateways to self-awareness, truth, and reflection, adding

layers of complexity to the narrative. The vibrant colours, strategically employed, become semiotic markers guiding players through emotional landscapes and transformative moments.

Secondly, the interactive dimension of semiotics in *Detention*, particularly in the final chapter, showcases players' dynamic role in shaping the narrative. The choices between light and dark, the manipulation of colours, and the repetitive cycles of self-confrontation all engage players in a participatory exploration of the protagonist's psyche. This adds a layer of agency to the gaming experience and emphasizes the importance of player-guided semiotic journeys in the overall narrative arc.

Lastly, the case study challenges the notion that video games should solely focus on gameplay and visual storytelling. *Detention* illustrates that semiotics enhance the narrative depth, offering players a unique and immersive journey into the intricacies of character development, emotional landscapes, and thematic exploration. By incorporating semiotic elements, video games can transcend mere entertainment, becoming powerful mediums for storytelling, self-reflection, and the communication of complex ideas.

Semiotics in video game narratives serve as a bridge between the tangible and the symbolic, offering players a rich and meaningful experience that goes beyond the immediate visual and interactive elements. The study of signs and symbols in video games, as exemplified by *Detention*, underscores the importance of narrative depth, emotional resonance, and player engagement in the evolving landscape of video game storytelling.

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