

Animation and Realism: A Review of *RPG Metanoia* (2010)

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The film exhibits two dimensions of realism, namely, the use of conventions of cinematic realism and reference to Filipino experience.

Conventions of Cinematic Realism

Armstrong (2005) describes realism's root as referring to the real – the thing represented – while its 'ism' affirms realism's status as a mode of representing; further, he asserts that just as expressionism and impressionism are modes and movements of representation, realism is as much about traditions, modes and strategies of representation as it is about what they represent. Lapsley and Westlake (2006) affirm that realism is far from being the faithful depiction of reality it is assumed to be, and through the various forms it has taken throughout its history, shows itself to be neither window nor mirror but a set of conventions. The approach of *RPG Metanoia* to cinematic realism is via its adherence to the aesthetics and conventions of the classical Hollywood narrative coupled with its use of cinematic continuity and verisimilitude.

Classical Hollywood Narrative

The classical Hollywood narrative is a set of conventions, developed within the larger cluster of audiovisual aesthetics and sensibilities during the so-called "golden age of Hollywood" from the 1930s to the 1950s. The narrative is structured with a clear sense of beginning, middle, and end, navigated

from the point-of-view of the protagonist with clearly definable traits, is active, and very goal-oriented. The main plot is driven by psychological motivations that are fleshed out in terms of character decisions that translate to narrative turning points that—following a causally oriented chain of events—eventually lead to character development and end with a clear sense of closure or resolution. It is also characterized by the use of subplots that serve the needs of the main plot, for example, the love subplot in an action film that follows a revenge theme. The classical Hollywood narrative remains to be the dominant in contemporary cinema around the world.

RPG Metanoia follows the three-act structure of the classical Hollywood narrative, each segment roughly approximating the following: setup, confrontation, and resolution. The film narrative begins with the setup, that is, a boy, Nico, who lives with his mother in a middle-class neighborhood in Philippines, while his father is an overseas migrant worker in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Nico has a group of friends—termed as *barkada* in Filipino, roughly translates to “clique”—with whom he spends a lot of time playing MMORPG (Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game) in a local internet shop named “Bomb Shelter” during the summer break. The narrative structure moves to the first major plot point, the inciting incident, when a couple of older kids who had been tormenting the younger group in their hangout give the *barkada* a wager, that is, if Nico and the rest of the gang win the world-wide tournament of the MMORPG named “Metanoia,” happening the next day (see Figure 1. Nico and his friends look at the Metanoia poster), the duo will stop bugging them; otherwise, the kids will be barred from playing at their hangout again. Nico and his team accept the challenge, thus, moving to the first turning point that concludes Act I (setup) and commences Act II (confrontation) where our protagonist deals with the narrative conflict (“self vs. others,” the dramatic conflict, and “self vs. self,” the character conflict) that sets the stage for character development.

True to form (i.e., of the classical Hollywood narrative structure), the film has two subplots. The first is between Nico and his parents—mother (major, physically present) and father (minor, virtually present)—while the second subplot is between Nico and his new friend, May. These two subplots serve to motivate the main character arc of the protagonist (Nico) who changes from a physically withdrawn boy (he takes refuge in his talent in online gaming to make up for his lack of aptitude in physical play or sports) in Act I to a more wholesome one—striking the balance in engagement between the physical and virtual—by the resolution, the end of Act III, of the movie. This links directly to the core theme of *RPG Metanoia*, that is, heroism that is motivated by love and achieved through a combination of values of self-reliance and teamwork.



Figure 1. Nico and his friends study the poster that advertises the worldwide Metanoia championship. Screenshot time codes: 00:09:50 (top) and 00:09:51 (bottom).

Act II starts on the day of the Metanoia championship. A phone call wakes Nico up. His friends are looking for him, as the game is about to start. Right before leaving the house, he realizes that he promised his mom that he will join her for a game of badminton at the park—the night before, his mom told him that he should get out more and enjoy the sun during the summer break instead of playing games all day. Nico decides to run to the Bomb Shelter to play the crucial game with his friends. Nico’s character flaw is revealed when, inside the game environment, his individualistic attempt at winning a crucial task—compromising the group’s gameplay—fails, giving the team a bad start and providing a critical advantage to the enemy. One of Nico’s friends tells him: *“Saan tayo maglalaro ngayon? Palibhasa kasi may computer kayo sa bahay.”* [Where are we going to play now? Not all of us have our own computers at home, you know.] This isolates Nico from the other boys for a while; however, this provides an opportunity for him to connect with a new member of the clique, a sporty girl, May, whom he—without his teammates—is surprised to encounter in Metanoia. May tries to encourage Nico to experience the “real” world more, in effect, in terms of the classical Hollywood narrative structure, spelling out the character arc of the protagonist:



Figure 2. In *Metanoia*, May encourages Nico to experience the “real” world more. Screenshot time codes 00:41:10 (top) and 00:46:13 (bottom).

Umalis ka kaya sa harap ng computer? Sumama ka sa amin maglaro bukas. Problema kasi, lahat ng experience mo, nandito lang sa game na ‘to. Bigyan mo naman yung totoong Nico nang kaunti. Gusto mo bang ganyan ka na lang lagi, takot sa mundo?

[Why don’t you try logging out of the game? We’re going to play on the streets tomorrow—you should join us. You know what’s wrong with you? All your experiences come just from this game. Give something to the real Nico. Do you really want to be like this—afraid of the world?] (00:46:24-00:46:40)

The Nico and May subplot reintegrates Nico to the *barkada*. Nico discovers that physical play is not so bad after all and that he actually enjoys it. This is the second turning point in the film and this propels the narrative’s entry into Act III where, in the final battle, the climax (when the online game morphs into a virus that endangers the world and the group gains access to internet shop again in an attempt to fight the enemy) Nico’s appreciation of

teamwork, coupled with his developing notion of heroism, save the day by winning not just the wager but delivering the world from the machinations of a powerful enemy. This resolves the dramatic arc of this coming-of-age film. In terms of the character arc, Nico comes out a better person, with more insight into how the world works; thus, the classical Hollywood narrative ends, with all the spectatorial pleasures with which it comes.



Figure 3. Simulating 3-point lighting and following the 180-degree rule in the mother and son dinner scene. Screenshot time codes: 00:17:58 (top) and 00:18:02 (bottom).

Cinematic Continuity and Verisimilitude

Wells' (1998) notion of the affinity of commercial animated films with realism as an aesthetic style and mode of representation—he observes that Disney uses techniques to come up with films that are “fundamentally *about* ‘realism’” (p. 25), that is, connoting “reality” by constructing the contexts within the film diegesis and necessarily aspiring for verisimilitude. Produced by a mainstream film outfit in the Philippines, Star Cinema, *RPG Metanoia* pursues a similar path.

Cinematic continuity in this film is expressed in its use of conventions of cinematography (lighting and camerawork) and continuity editing, which are both salient features of classical Hollywood cinema aesthetics. In the

dinner scene involving Nico and his mother, the conventional practice of 3-point lighting—a major feature of cinematography in classical Hollywood cinema—is used (see Figure 3). Observe how the scene simulates a live action lighting: the main source of light, the key light, is the lamp that hangs above the table; the light rays that bounce off the surface of the walls of the house comprise the fill light (eliminates strong shadows) and the backlight (ensures that the subjects—the people—do not seem to flat on the background). Coupled with the simulation of selective focus, all the said conventions add to the psychological realism of the characters, which is another feature of classical Hollywood cinema. The simulation of live-action camerawork and editing is also seen in Figure 1 wherein the successive top and bottom frames follow the rules on cutting two successive shots in continuity editing and Figure 3 wherein the coverage of the conversation between the two characters follow the cinematographic rule on the line-of-axis (180-degree rule). The film’s affinity towards verisimilitude is seen in Figure 4, where the coin at the top frame realistically resembles an actual five-peso Philippine coin and the design of the merchandise at the bottom frame resemble actual products currently sold in the market. Cinematic verisimilitude is also pursued by the auditory aspect of the film. The sound



Figure 4. Cinematic verisimilitude in the 5-peso coin (top) and the merchandise sold in the *sari-sari* (Filipino, means “variety store”) (bottom). Time codes: 00:39:33 (top) and 00:48:20 (bottom).

of dogs barking and local vehicles from the street are mixed in the aural landscape of the movie.

Reference to Filipino Experience

RPG Metanoia dramatizes and visualizes two threads from Filipino experience: growing up in a single-parent household because the other parent is an overseas migrant worker; and the dynamics between contemporary Filipino youth vis-à-vis technology.

Overseas Migrant Work and the Filipino Child

The Philippines, the world's twelfth most populous country, has an additional 12 percent of Filipinos living overseas, and that the story of Filipino global migration is twofold: that of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) and that of Filipino emigrants (Gutierrez, 2013). The article continues:

The Commission on Filipinos Overseas (CFO) data as of December 2009 reported that out of the 8,579,378 Filipinos overseas at that time, each of the two categories – (1) overseas workers or employees who were expected to return to the Philippines at the end of their work contracts, and (2) Filipino immigrants or legal permanent residents in other countries – accounted for around half of the total number. Of the total number of migrant workers in 2009, around 59 percent were in the Middle East (particularly Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain), 14 percent in neighboring Asian countries (especially Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan) . . . (p. 1)

The opening sequence of the film shows Nico's routine during the summer break. He wakes up, eats alone (see Figure 5, top frame—his mom is probably at work—does his chores, and goes to the internet shop. Young Filipinos like Nico are expected to be independent. The film shows how child-rearing is done in the context of a single-parent household because the other parent is abroad, working for the family. Nico's mother is quite strict—and she has a tendency to nag his son with her *pangaral* (life lessons, especially from parents), etc.—but the film poignantly shows the tender aspect of her love for Nico. The film also shows how Nico's father still contributes significantly to raising his son, that is, besides the financial aspect; Figure 5, bottom frame, shows a common ritual for overseas migrant workers and their children. This animated film portrays this contemporary social reality for many Filipinos. On a larger scale, a link between the

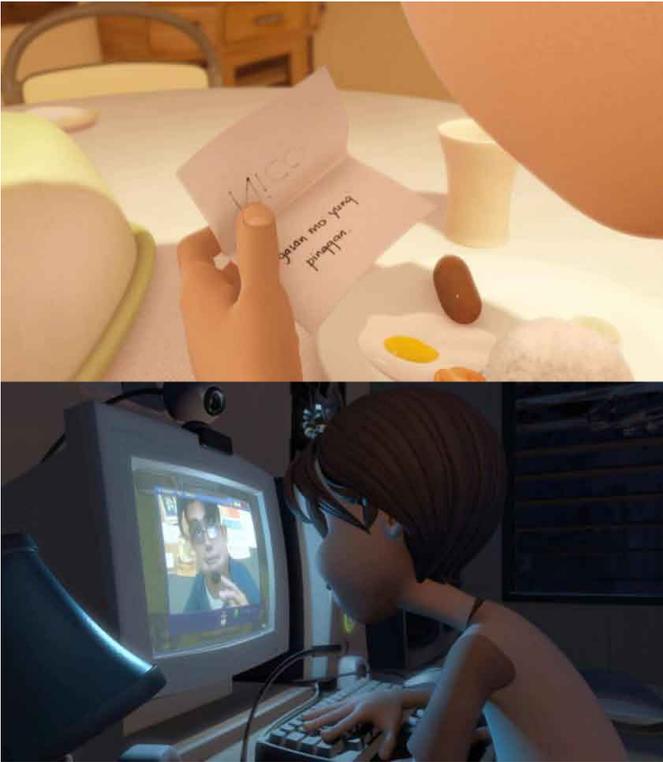


Figure 5. Top: At home, Nico eats breakfast alone. The note reads: “*Hugasan mo yung pinggan.*” [Wash the dishes.] Bottom: Nico communicates with his Dad, an overseas migrant worker, via online video streaming. Screenshot time codes: 00:07:08 (top) and 00:15:29 (bottom).

development of Philippine animation and Philippine society has been noted by Tolentino (2001), “Philippine animation can be read as analogous to the modernization of the nation-state, nation-being and its citizenry” (p. 167).

We see that Nico very easily opens up to his dad as they share stories, while, at the first quarter of the film, he does not open up as much to his mom. One of the narrative arcs of the film is Nico’s gradual opening up to his mom, as she fosters his holistic development, as described in an earlier section. Two-thirds into the film, we have a scene wherein one afternoon, Nico makes a peanut butter sandwich and gives it to his mom while she is budgeting. In addition, the film shows two conversations between husband and wife, also via webcam; here, we see how couples like them maintain a sense of normalcy in their relationship as husband and wife and parents raising their child. Towards the end of the narrative, another conversation between mother and son – about heroism – articulates a major statement made by the film. Nico’s mom tells him that a real hero does what is right for his loved ones, no matter what, and that one an example of a hero is his dad. At the climax of the film, during a critical time inside Metanoia, his father emerges, saves Nico and his friends from danger; thus, allowing them to continue and win their fight.



Figure 6. Nico and his friends playing online in Metanoia (top) and *patintero* on the street (bottom). Screenshot time codes: 01:14:57 (top) and 00:50:18 (bottom).

Technology, Culture, and the Filipino Youth

The phenomenon of the youth being drawn to playing online at the expense of actually having physical play and socialization is observed around the world. The film follows this theme but specifically fleshes it out in the context of contemporary Philippines, wherein the dynamic concept of Filipino cultural identity is continuously defined amidst an increasingly transnational world. The narrative highlights the importance of physical play and socialization among contemporary youth by translating its benefits to an enhanced sense of teamwork in the Metanoia championship. In the street games montage, various traditional Filipino games such as *tumbang preso*, *jolen*, *piko*, *taguan*, *shato*, *sipa*, and *patintero* (Figure 6, bottom frame shows the group playing this game) are featured. When they play online, elements of traditional Filipino culture are also seen. One example is the design of costumes of their avatars. Figure 6, top frame, shows Nico's friend, Bryan—at the foreground—wearing the traditional Filipino attire, *barong tagalog*, as Figure 2, bottom frame, shows May wearing a modern and youthful version of the traditional *terno*.

Settings from various servers in Metanoia (e.g., Korean, Japanese, and Scandinavian) are shown and counterpointed with two virtual locations from the Philippine server: “The Islands of Peace” (Figure 2, top frame), which

highlights the archipelago-paradise character of the country and “Metanoia Mejoria Grande” (Figure 7, top frame), which draws from images from Spanish colonial-era Philippines. In Mejoria Grande, elements of Filipino culture are prominently placed; for example, there is an establishment with the signboard, *hilot*, the traditional Filipino massage. In addition, one of Nico’s friends uses an *arnis* (a traditional Filipino martial arts) weapon and refers to *anting-anting*, a traditional concept of a supernatural amulet that makes the wearer invulnerable to harm.

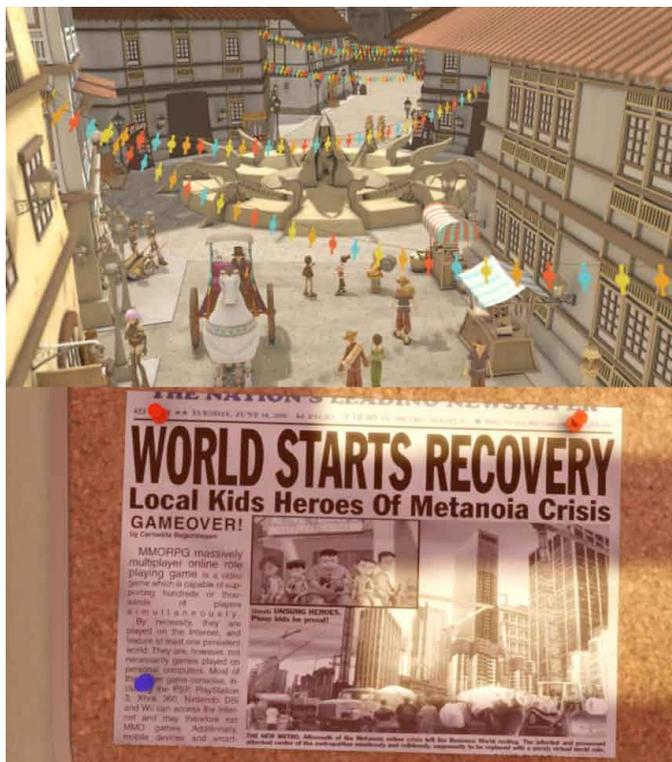


Figure 7. Top: “Metanoia Mejoria Grande” from the Philippine server, the site of the final battle; Bottom: Newspaper clipping about Nico and his friends saving the world. Screenshot time codes: 00:24:35 (top) and 01:36:36 (bottom).

In conclusion, *RPG Metanoia’s* approach to cinematic realism is via its adherence to the aesthetics of the classical Hollywood narrative coupled with its use of cinematic continuity and verisimilitude. It animates two threads from Filipino experience: growing up in a single-parent household because the other parent is an overseas migrant worker; and the dynamics between contemporary Filipino youth vis-à-vis technology. Finally, the film reveals an overarching tendency towards fleshing out Filipino cultural identity amidst an increasingly transnational world.

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